

ARE YOU ANSWERING YOUR DUCKS WHEN THEY QUACK?

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There's an urban myth that says the noise a duck makes, its quack, has no echo. Whilst this has been scientifically proven to be false¹ in an acoustic research experiment conducted at the University of Salford in England in 2003, the myth continues, and so it provides an interesting analogy for this white paper, which will deal with a leaders' response to the "noise" that employees make.

If we start with that simple analogy -- your people are like ducks -- the point can be made that you may be so busy that you don't respond to their quacks even though you may hear them.

Your "ducks" are swimming around in your organizational ocean; they're looking like they're going somewhere and they're certainly looking busy. Above the water they are trying hard to appear calm, with feathers unruffled, business as usual; it seems like they're thinking, "Don't rock the boat" or "Don't do anything to get fired." Beneath the surface, however, they are paddling their feet like crazy trying to keep up with increased workload from staff reductions, heading in an uncertain direction and fearing failure and its consequences.

Occasionally they make a noise -- they quack. And they don't seem to have an echo. Nobody hears them. Their ideas and requests go unheard, unanswered. In the current tough, turbulent times, they have learned to accept that. However, the times, they are a'changing, albeit slowly.

Addressing recovery

In the United States this week, some economic indicators are strengthening. Markets are up. Home sales are up. Commentators are beginning to use positive tones and express some sense of an upturn.

It's time for industrial and commercial leaders like you to address recovery rather than recession. If, by now, you are still wrestling with the reductions of recession you may be, unwittingly, committing yourself to an inescapable downward spiral. The "gloom and doom" that you have had to broadcast may have become a self-fulfilling prophesy so sooner or later your business could fail.

It's time to move on to the ramping up of recovery. Countering the slightly better economic news in the United States is the cautionary news globally about still-increasing unemployment figures. Some commentators are describing this factor as the true indicator of the state of recovery, saying it will still take time before things fully turn around.

With employment seen as the key to recovery, the intelligent leader looks to people as the key to business success. Let me clarify that I'm not advocating uncontrolled and expensive hiring of new staff, but rather I think it's now time to focus attention on the staff that you have retained through these turbulent times. It's time to listen to your ducks' quack -- and to answer it.

¹<http://www.snopes.com/critters/wild/duckecho.asp>

Listening and learning

Leaders will need enhanced listening skills to hear the new noises that their employees are making. Over the last 20 years, much has been written in business school texts and in company annual reports about “human capital” and how “our people are our greatest asset.”

In keeping with the competitive and aggressive nature of the “old economy,” human capital was seen as an asset to exploit, as a renewable asset, with each generation bringing more people to be brought onboard and made to work for the good of the organization and its investors. Superficially much was made of being a “people-oriented” company or team; but throughout this period the metrics of company, team and individual performance have remained focused on tangible, numerical and financial factors. This has left people feeling, at best, disconnected, de-valued and de-motivated and, at worst, used and abused “as always.”

Taking a hit for the team

This phenomenon was expressed well in a piece Mike Hendricks wrote in my local newspaper *The Kansas City Star* a few months ago. He explored the use of sporting team language in dealing with staff in times of recession; he said that people being fired from companies were being described as “cut from the team.”

That’s how some corporations have come to think of themselves. As teams up against a lot of other teams in a never-ending season of profit and loss. And those on the payroll, why, they’re members of the team. Remember when the worker bees were simply referred to as employees, whereas everyone else was in management? The relationships haven’t changed. Only the terminology. And I would have to agree that “teammates” is a friendlier way to refer to one’s co-workers and subordinates.²

He quoted from a copy of a letter sent by the CEO of a locally based corporate giant announcing to its employees that in the next month 8,000 would be out of a job. The letter began “Dear Teammates.” Hendricks went on to explain the origins of this use of familiar language writing:

The team philosophy is part of the corporate culture at many companies. It started catching on in the 1970s and 1980s, when American companies tried to emulate Japanese automakers, which credited the “team concept” for their success in making cars people wanted to buy.” The practice has evolved and spread over the years to the present day global use of words such as “professional”, “associates” and even “members of the (fill in company name) family”!³

²Mike Hendricks, *The Kansas City Star*, February 3, 2009.
<http://www.kansascity.com/798/story/1016591.html>

³ *Ibid.*

Hendricks sees this as artificial, quoting an academic's view:

“Workers aren’t stupid. They know this is a gloss,” says University of Missouri-Kansas City sociology professor Deborah Smith. Smith’s focus is family life, including how it relates to the work world. As a favor, she searched the academic record and turned up several studies showing how team spirit builds cohesiveness in small groups.

“But the larger the team, the more you feel like a number,” she said. And sometimes your number comes up. You’re fired. Only nowadays, it’s called taking one for the team.⁴

The key phrase, for me, in Hendricks article was “The relationships haven’t changed. Only the terminology.” Now, in times of trouble, the relationship has to change. A genuine, deep focus on people is required if an organization wants to keep the talent it will need to move beyond survival into growth in the recovering economy. “New rules” to how employees are engaged will apply. Changed attitudes to engagement and motivation are crucial not just to address the wrongs of the past. There is a new configuration in the workforce that demands a new approach, too.

Changing employee expectations

One often-discussed recent challenge to those who deal with employment was the contrast in the work cultures of the older generation and the new hires of what’s called Generation X. Now there is a seismic shift in the terrain of employment with the arrival in the workplace of Generation Y, whose needs and attitudes are another step away from conventional thinking and indeed are a step away from their predecessors in Gen X.

What we bundled together as “the older generation” is also undergoing change. The majority of this group is now composed of “Baby Boomers” who are less likely to retire, who want to stay gainfully active in their work environment and who, somewhat surprisingly, share many of the core values, beliefs and demands of their polar opposites on the age continuum – the Gen Y workers.

This convergence, rather than separation, of the “experience extremes” of the workforce gives a rare opportunity for employers and leaders to focus on people with a greater chance of getting it right and dealing with the “people-orientation” strategy in a genuine way.

Understanding Generation Range

A recent *Harvard Business Review* article by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Laura Sherbin and Karen Sumberg explores this interesting and exciting concept. The article explains that both groups want similar things. They both want their work to add value to society at large, see flexibility in working arrangements as desirable, use and expect social networks to be a key component of their work lives, are comfortable with loyalty to an employer and see financial remuneration as a less important motivator than other intangible factors.

⁴ *Ibid.*

What the *Harvard Business Review* article authors determined, from a pair of large-scale quantitative surveys plus qualitative input through focus groups and interviews, was a set of motivation factors that represent the new preferences of the bulk of employees in most organizations.

The shift away from tangible rewards (cash) to intangible benefits, the authors say, presents both a challenge and a liberating opportunity. They wrote:

It's a challenge because it means letting go of cash as the prime motivator and tangling with the difficult task of re-designing incentives. It's liberation because if nonfinancial rewards are less expensive to fund, companies can lay out more plentiful options.⁵

The article gives an example of what it calls a “new breed of employer” who “respects educated workers’ increasing desire for flexibility, personal growth, connectivity and a chance to give back.”

That the Gen Y group (born 1979 to 1994), not the Gen X group (born 1965 to 1978), are the children of Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) adds to this commonality. Mentoring, in both directions, trust and comfort in this “parent-child” relationship is common. These will be the driving forces in how work happens within organizations as we go forward, and companies and people managers need to embrace this trend if they are to motivate and retain their talented, but spirited, employees.

Navigating the new landscape

What much of the new landscape represents is the individual’s need for a degree of self-direction within an organization’s workplace – the determination of one’s own destiny, particularly in these turbulent times. This, to an innovative leader, is something in people that can be harnessed and turned into corporate “energy” in the way that the motion of the waves of an ocean can be used to generate electricity.

Key elements of the organization’s functionality, such as performance measurement, decision-making and even leadership itself, can be devolved out into the organization. It can be divided into smaller, separate activities closer to the work itself and “owned” by the people who are doing the work and therefore understand and value it best.

The model that I have in mind for this is open-source software development where the community works independently on what interests them and is appropriate to their talents and abilities. The cohesive element for all engaged in this network is the wider purpose of the software and its usability. The process is not uncontrolled and accidental. There is “leadership” of a kind in the form of “moderators” who ensure the cohesion and flow of work by handling the elements that enable the work, such as version control, rather than traditional leadership responsibilities, such as strategy and direction.

⁵ Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Laura Sherbin and Karen Sumberg, *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 2009. <http://hbr.harvardbusiness.org/2009/07/how-gen-y--boomers-will-reshape-your-agenda/ar/1>

Transcending the traditional

The word “traditional” is something to think about and to test yourself against. Maybe it’s just the terminology, but the economic downturn has undermined and even destroyed many long-established “traditional” companies who set the standards for successful business practices. Those who have survived need to ask themselves whether a return to those practices is a wise move as the recovery eases the pressure on businesses and teams. Or is it time to address the true capabilities and needs of the employees and create a new way of working that embraces suggestions in this white paper?

You can be sure that as the pressure reduces and the brakes come off the economy, your employee “ducks” will begin to feel confident enough to start making noisy demands about their working environment – and these are the things they’ll be quacking about.

How will you respond, or will you even hear the echo? My advice is – answer your ducks’ quacks!

If you need help doing so, please contact me at david.ward@wardconsultants.com.