

Tipping Your Sacred Cows

At the national Society for Human Resources conference, one of their keynote speakers talked about one of the key strategies for achieving innovation in companies – “tipping their sacred cows.” This is something I ask clients every time I start a new relationship or new assignment. What are your “sacred cows?” The interesting thing is that about 90% of the time they tell me that they don’t have any – right before they tell me all the things we can’t change.

This particular speaker provided an explanation to that phenomena, he states “...it is next to impossible to recognize our own sacred cows, it is like our genes. When is the last time you saw your genes?”

Sacred cows are the mental models that we can’t break free from. In many cases when we attempt to track them back to their source, we can’t actually find it, but they preclude us from embracing real change. He also talked about another “truth”, most organizations require a crisis to truly embrace sweeping change or “rewrite” the rulebook.

He advised management to do two things if they truly want innovation. The first is to identify your own “sacred cows” and truly evaluate whether they are both accurate and relevant. The second is a process he called a “positive crisis.” He feels, and I agree, that in order to sustain change you need a positive crisis such as a new product or market or a competitive threat. Negative crisis like a layoff or closure does not create the same environment.

He also talks about the difference between informing employees about a change and getting their commitment to real change. It is up to management to explain the importance of the change and then enlist the energies of the entire workforce in developing the strategy. Typically, we announce the change and the strategy developed by a small group of senior managers, simultaneously. If we want meaningful, sustained change we need to provide opportunities for employees at all levels to contribute to the solution process.

Another flaw we have both observed is impatience with the process. He cites an example where a bank instituted a suggestion/problem solving initiative for all of its 300 employees. The first year yielded only 200 suggestions. Management was disappointed, but rather than shutting the process down they held a company wide meeting to share all the ideas, which would be implemented and the methodology for selecting why choices were made. The employees saw that management was actually listening and acting on their ideas. The second year this same employee group submitted over 1000 ideas. The third year there were over 10,000 ideas submitted! The net effect to the organization was that in a period of less than five years they moved from 40th to number 1 in their industry! Change takes time and commitment. Too often I see organizations abandon a strategy or adopt a new “program” before allowing a process to mature.

He closed his discussion with a comparison between capitalism and communism. Capitalism encourages experimentation, even though the odds of any one idea being successful are high. Experimentation may be inefficient, but you don’t get innovation without it and the accompanying inefficiency. If you have a small

group at the top making all the decisions, make sure you haven't created a "Politburo" whose role has become to protect doctrine or tradition.

In a highly competitive environment any of these concepts have risk associated with them. You should keep in mind however, that one of the key attributes cited in retention studies is that employees are looking for organizations where they can make a real contribution and understand the "big picture".

I am not suggesting that you abandon your core values or core competencies, but you might want to consider whether or not some of your "sacred cows" would better serve you at a barbeque than in your planning and strategy.

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