

Bold initiatives can come from dismay

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I recently observed a team carrying out a typical day's work. It was a request from a leader who felt challenges in the workplace were having a negative effect on productivity. When asked for my observations, I couldn't ignore the level of frustration evident in the team; it seemed to permeate every minute of the day for most of the members.

Organisational leadership can be an opportunity to find new ways of achieving differing results. Its focus should be the future, bringing with it the opportunity to change. The fury that comes behind workplace frustration is liquid gold for change, and as there's more than a fair share of frustration in most corporate ranks today, corporations could be considered a learning or even research laboratory. If frustration is something that's easy enough to just fix, then aren't most adults smart enough to make that happen? There's clearly something a lot more complex that's bubbling away underneath corporate frustration. So what is the untapped gold mine that awaits discovery?

Three questions are relevant here for leaders to look into:

1. What unquestioned assumptions are embedded into the current system that may limit effectiveness?
2. How are existing systems guiding the staff towards frustration rather than intelligent and intentional work practices?
3. When frustration is observed, how is the new information that's at the core of the frustration being collated and applied by leaders?

Take performance management systems, for example. Performance management generally includes some form of appraisal, the process of two-way communication regarding expectations, measurement of performance along with desires for the future.

Managers commonly consider appraisals a time-consuming interruption to daily departmental duties rather than a great opportunity to officially reinforce or extend daily feedback, take stock and plan for the future. Subsequently, many shortcuts are introduced that act as a deterrent to the process, an interruption to its effectiveness and also a reason to complain about it once appraisal time comes around again. This is a great frustration to tap into for change.

By delving into assumptions, a workplace psychologist discovered that appraisals appear burdensome because they are all due at one time of the year. So what might happen if we intelligently linked the appraisal process to an annual cycle based on when a staff member actually joined the organisation, negating the bulk approach and thereby becoming less burdensome on time and focus. Do they really all need to be completed at the same time?

Another example may be reduced teamwork. Teamwork inefficiency is often tracked back to a certain individual who is interpreted as a source of

agitation. This assumes that the presence of this individual will restrict the performance of the whole team, limiting future possibility. Why is that so?

If you question this assumption, it could be considered that everyone has individual quirks. It may be discovered that the agitation caused by this individual's differing behaviour and attitude is not intentionally bad or disruptive. If something or someone is different, could that be an impetus for a team to change and evolve with this.

The liquid gold of frustration has been tapped into previously with great results. At some stage of corporate development, someone somewhere questioned these three assumptions:

- All people are happy with the same benefits
- All people are able to leave the house at the same time in the morning
- It is only the HR manager who decides promotions and increments

Could the questioning of these assumptions have been the birthplace of flexible benefit packages, flexible working hours and multiple level of system access?

Back at the workplace I was observing, I asked the leader listening to my feedback one further question. If you had a bucket of mud and you knew there were four nuggets of gold buried deep within it, what would you do? So too, with corporate frustration buried deep, don't hesitate to jump in deep to discover the riches it holds for us all.

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