Are we biting off more than we can chew?

By Natasha Kesseler

2010 was a BIG year, in both my personal and professional life. I had navigated my way through two organisational restructures at work, underwent three job title changes, started my own business, travelled internationally several times and completed countless domestic flights for business. I was closely involved in helping a relative work through an illness, watched on in dismay as my home town suffered a damaging earthquake and most heartbreakingly observed one of my oldest and closest friend’s six year old daughter battle cancer. I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders and knew that I was starting to burn out, all because I was biting off more than I could chew.

In business we talk about busting the boundaries, (I definitely busted mine) diversifying our approach (I had a lot on my plate), stretch targets (absolutely), and the high performance zone. The definition of this and what we do to get there is what I would like to reflect upon.

It appears to me that human beings have an amazing ability to cope with life and we often push ourselves to interesting limits which may or may not be the most effective way to reach the outcomes we seek. I’m starting to wonder if in life and in business do we need to take a FRESH perspective? Do we need to nurture life so it can grow and flourish rather than force feed ourselves. Is modern day living really fostering growth or stifling it. Are our organisational cultures and work habits leading us to “bite off more than we can chew?” and as a consequence working against what we are trying to achieve. If so, what is this doing to us and what should we do?

A range of research shows that burnout is on the increase, stress leave claims are rising and the number of reported cases of depression has never been so prevalent. According to some organisational studies in Australia there is a trend towards a disengaged workforce. Satisfied and engaged workers in many organisations appear to be on the decline (Gallup, 2008). In 2008 Gallup research showed that 61% of employees fell into the ‘Compliant Group’ (those who do what they can to get by) and 21% were identified as the Subversives; the active un-doers or disengaged people. Its a scary concept to think that potentially 82% of our workforce is either just getting by or actively disengaged. I found this research interesting as back in 2004 I completed my Masters Thesis on the relationship between positive and negative perfectionism and workaholic types. The model I used distinguished work types into four different groups; Workaholic, Enthusiastic Workaholic, Relaxed Worker and Disengaged. Back then I remember my attention being drawn to the large number of participants falling into the disengaged worker group.
Seven years have now past, since I completed my research, there are more studies emerging that indicate that many people feel disengaged at work. So when I asked myself why do I think people are disengaged, I believe it for two reasons; we are either burnt out or we don’t believe in what we are doing anymore. Donald Trump summed it up nicely when he said “without passion there is no energy”. My extension of this is without belief there is no passion. It seems that our workforce habits and governing cultures appear to override anything we try to do to combat this. We just work through it. We just keep pushing.

So why do we continue to push through with things we don’t believe in? Well there is the obvious financial basic need we all have to consider. We cant just quit our jobs and run off to find ourselves to believe in what we do again; or can we? But on the other hand do we truly believe we are being productive and fulfilled by showing up and just doing enough to get by, so that at the end of the week we receive that all important pay cheque. Just getting by isn’t what I believe is achievement in life. In my experience it often leads to retail therapy which then kind of cancels out my cheque.

Do we believe that organisational cultures that encourage working through lunch breaks, and “squeezing” our people just that little bit further, to make the extra dollar, is really going to lead to the achievement of individual and company goals? Do we really agree with Alannis Morrisette when she said “I recommend biting off more than you can chew to anyone, I certainly do”. Because I certainly don’t. I think we need balance and belief. We need time to understand why we do what we do and time to restore and refocus our energy which in turn gives us the absolute commitment and focus to do what we need to do. Long term sustainability of our planet may be a hot topic right now, but long term sustainability of our people may need equal attention. We are by definition a “resource” as highlighted by our business departments appropriately named “Human Resources”. We need to be cared for and maintained or just like certain aeroplanes recently we may risk falling out of the sky, costing our ourselves and our companies a lot of money; or even worse our belief in ourselves.

The fact of the matter is if we don’t invest time in ourselves or our people to uncover their core belief or emotional connection to why they want to work in a certain industry, our efforts may be short lived and unsustainable. Don’t get me wrong, I believe in hard work and high achievement. However how we reach high performance is not about banging our heads against brick walls. The musician Passenger put it well in his lyrics when he said “we’re banging our heads against brick walls and our heads are hard and our heads are soft, its a painful way to get attention”. We should become mindful of what we persist with and what we should let go of, from an individual perspective and organisational perspective.

Remember the movie “ground hog day”, that drone feeling. To me this seems like the quickest way to crush a persons spirit. When people start to feel like they are just chipping away at the day with no real purpose or connection to why they are doing the work we can often feel like “a mouse spinning on a wheel”. To uncover our motivation and regain belief, sometimes we just need to stop and gain some perspective. Well thats what I think anyway. So thats exactly what I did. I was running so fast that things around me felt blurred, I couldn’t see clearly. It took a while for me to acknowledge this but once I did I knew what I needed to do. Funnily enough it actually took someone else to tell me to take a holiday before I booked it. So I did. I stopped. I got on a plane and went to Bali to re-ignite my passion and purpose.

Research shows that motivation is often more important than our skill. "Ability is what you are capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do” (Lou Holtz and Tony Robbins). What gets you out of bed in the morning to apply those skills is your will. So I think will (motivation) comes first, skill comes next. Based on this premise I believe that we need to spend more time with our employees harnessing their motivation and creating that belief in what we do. That and a supportive, well balanced environment, I think, leads to sustained high performance.
Belief, Curiosity and Persistence. The 3 ways to be a winner

Perhaps the Buddhist monk I recently met on my travels to Bali put it better. He said to me, “there are three ways of thinking that lead to winning in life: belief, curiosity and persistence; and there are 101 reasons to be a loser”. None of which really have to do with skill but to me have a whole lot more to do with our will. I really liked this concept and it meshed well with other more scientific models of performance and motivation I have studied.

I think “Belief” in what we do breeds passion. “Curiosity” leads us to new experiences and ultimately creation, which often leads us to a fresh perspective. There is countless research out there in organisational psychology that suggests innovation leads to high performance and staff engagement. Finally there is the concept of “Persistence”. For me this about going the distance; following up and following through. Its the old story of diligence and working hard until that opportunity comes your way. It’s about planting the seed so that when it rains the seed will have a chance to grow, because if you don’t plant the seed, the water will fall on dead soil.

The lesson here for all of us is about acknowledging where we are, paying attention to the symptoms of our life and spending more time on the things that really count, continuously, with care and attention. I often think about the tree on my balcony that I forgot to water for weeks. This may sound silly to you but I was actually surprised when it died. The signs were slow and often the one or two leaves that started to dry up didn’t seem to be a big deal. One leaf after the other the tree became more barren. I just wasn’t paying attention.

From an organisational perspective I think we also need to take more time to nurture our workforce and create engaged workforces through belief and a balanced environment. “Its ripe for the picking”. Our old ways of working do not appear to foster the productivity we seek, the long term employment relationships we desire, and the growth and development employees want and companies seek to see in their employees. When the symptoms present themselves in companies, such as increased turnover, burnout, stress claims, and depression the call for new ways of thinking is right there. Albert Einstein once said “we can’t solve problems with the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”. We need new ways of thinking. I believe that organisations who provide nurturing and innovative environments, which focus on motivation, belief, balance will reap and sow the benefits of true productivity.

You only have to look at emerging studies that highlight some of the things we intuitively already know; such as, our current work habits are unsustainable. For example, lets take that sleepy feeling we all get mid afternoon, following a busy morning running from meeting to meeting. Our bodies cry out for a quick “cup of tea and a lie down”. But we deny it. Studies have shown that a nap in the afternoon for 20 minutes leads to increased productivity. Some of you may say we are a long way away from afternoon nana naps in the office but just look at Google and their sleep pods.

Its a paradigm shift, however it seems to make sense.

New age companies are likely to surpass others in ways never seen before as they harness motivation through balanced working environments that attract innovative people who are passionate about what they do. The symptoms of a fatigued workforce are all around us and point towards the need to adopt a fresh and balanced perspective to achieve our goals. Like winter to spring the leaves are changing. I believe its time to shed some new light on the old leaves so life can become peachy again. If we take the time to understand our core beliefs, create space for peoples minds to grow and nurture our bodies. I’d like to think we can cushion our workforce, protect their intelligence, create an engaged workforce and energise our most precious resource: me and you. I certainly will be adopting a fresh perspective to keep my healthy balance. Will you?

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