

How to run the Talent Show

The employment proposition these days is not unlike running a variety show – if you can't keep the audience glued to their seats, there's a risk the whole enterprise could flop.

Engagement is something Harold Hillman is pretty good at. The American-born director of organisation development and talent management for Fonterra certainly kept those attending a recent NZIM breakfast presentation on full alert as he explained how to “hold onto and develop your best talent”.

Even Hillman's job title is a sign of the times – traditional HR just doesn't cut it in a world that's having to try much harder to attract and retain the talent needed to sustain competitive advantage. His recipe for getting it right involves reprogramming the entire cultural DNA of an organisation – something he's excited to be part of in a “visionary” company like Fonterra.

“Organisations,” he notes, “are a reflection of the people who work in them.”

That's why creating a learning organisation is a vital aspect of the talent retention mix.

“If you're going to have an organisation where leaders thrive, you have to be explicit about building a learning organisation,” says Hillman. “Good leaders are good learners so building capability is imperative.”

A fan of organisational development authors Chris Argyris and Peter Senge, Hillman points out that hiring smart people is only the start point – unless they're working in an environment where questioning is encouraged, they can be pretty good at making dumb decisions.

It's all about encouraging quality conversation and minimising the impact of what he refers to as the “left-hand column” effect. That's what's in your head and influencing the discussion – but is not what is overtly discussed (that's in the right-hand column). So for

every two people, there are really three conversations which can add up to a lot of unexpressed decision influencers when it comes to team decision making. More worryingly, the left-hand component rises exponentially around the boardroom table, says Hillman.

“Where they're making multi-million dollar decisions, people tend to have bigger left-hand columns and their decisions get dumber.”

One of the problems is that the more senior people get, the more they impose unrealistic expectations around what they're supposed to know – and may even worry about being exposed as frauds.

“You need to position leaders as effective questioners,” says Hillman. That leads to more open and productive conversation – and the quality of conversation is important to the quality of decisions emerging from it.

At most board tables, the ratio of advocacy to enquiry is about 9:1 – and that needs to change, says Hillman.

A learning organisation also encourages a greater sense of engagement – and employees (particularly in the Gen Y category) need to feel they're in a role and a company where they can contribute, where their efforts make a difference. That's not a hard thing to achieve, says Hillman.

His three drivers for generating engagement are *line of sight* – can employees see how their individual effort contributes to organisational goals; *personal growth* – how are they getting smarter in that role and in that

business; and *perspective* – they're entitled to have an opinion about the work they do. Employers whose attitude to shopfloor or junior workers is “we don't pay you to think” is a mentality that needs to be shaken off, says Hillman as it leads to employee disengagement – and there's already too much of that about.

Surveys show that around 70 percent of the workforce doesn't look forward to coming to work – that, he says, is a concerning figure.

Hillman also spoke about the relationship between leadership and change – and the need to understand the dynamics of change, as represented by the “sigmoid curve” (a tool popularised by management guru Charles Handy). Simply put, it is being able to recognise when a natural growth cycle is close to peaking – and before it starts declining.

“The trick is getting people to do something different just at the moment when everything seems to be working really well,” says Hillman.

That's when reinvention is needed to jump on the next growth cycle – and these cycles keep getting shorter.

“Every 18 months, you need to look at something to sustain momentum – this is where engagement is vital.” M

(The NZIM breakfast was just one event in last month's inaugural leadership week – a joint initiative by Leadership NZ, Excelerator, the Sir Peter Blake Trust and NZIM).

