

ATN Business Sense
September 2011

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“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change” wrote Charles Darwin and the same applies to businesses. That has always been the case but is particularly important in these challenging times. Businesses which did not adapt were the Wright Brothers who got bogged down in patent disputes and were quickly passed by other aircraft builders. More recently, Kodak were too slow to adapt to digital cameras and smartphone manufacturer Nokia was attacked by an entirely different kind of competitor – Apple. So, what does a business need to do to become the most adaptable to change?

Have a philosophy of and process for continuous improvement. That can be having a written, succinct Strategic Business Plan with many people, especially teams, involved in implementation. Teams are a good way to improve businesses as two heads are better than one, three better than two etc. and they boost morale. They also break down barriers between people, departments, offices and expertise.

Best practice has been described as “At many leading-edge enterprises, a new form of organization is emerging – one that is simultaneously innovative and efficient, agile and scalable” wrote Adler, Heckscher and Prusak in the July-August 2011 Harvard Business Review. They added that the skills to be mastered are to: “define and build a shared purpose; cultivate an ethic of contribution; develop scalable processes for coordinating people’s efforts and create an infrastructure in which collaboration is valued and rewarded.”

These four skills should be built into your Strategic Business Planning process and made part of your culture. As your people copy your bad and good habits you need to set a good example. This includes providing a comfortable, safe and thoughtfully designed work environment including an area where people can relax and chat informally. Casual conversation should be encouraged and a coffee machine often provides a suitable location. Coffee breaks can often provide a good opportunity for collaboration.

Good employers also provide alcoves or similar areas that facilitate employees having private conversations in public spaces. The mixing of senior managers and rank and file people around say coffee machines should be encouraged

Writing and maintaining a Strategic Business Plan is the best way to create a shared purpose. Do that by involving your key people regularly and include even relatively junior people when appropriate. Remember, if your people are not involved in the solution they remain part of the problem. The planning process also cultivates an ethic of contribution. The best way is to establish teams to tackle issues over an eight week period with an interim report back after four weeks. When the issue is solved the team is dissolved and new teams created to work on new issues. The process is scalable by teaching how to prepare one page plans for the business, business units or individuals.

This process can create an infrastructure in which collaboration is valued and rewarded.

What are you going to do now about making your business adaptable to change? If a managing director how are you going to lead your people to quickly adapt and change? If less senior you can also take action. Write a One Page Plan for yourself or your business unit and show it to your superiors. Set them an example. Give them ideas on how to avoid ending up like the many businesses over history which have failed to adapt.

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