

FlexBulletin #49: Why the Fear of “Floodgates” Persists

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[One can argue that language affects or determines thought – or not. In the realm of flexibility, I am increasingly convinced that language is as much a barrier to, as an enabler of companies’ thoughtful embrace of different ways of working. A case in point is what we have called over the years the “Top Five Myths and Realities of Flexible Work Arrangements” [\[Flex Bulletin #4 – Top 5 Myths about FWAs—October 2008.\]](#)

In our writing and speaking on this topic for the last decade, the opening myth has always been:

“MYTH #1 – Offer FWAs and the floodgates will open. (Variations on this theme are “If we let some people do it, everyone will want to,” “You can never put the genie back in the bottle,” etc.)

We’ve joined our clients and others in using the following response successfully. Many people found it compelling, copied it, integrated it into PowerPoints and otherwise took it to the skeptics:

REALITY #1 – Common fear, uncommon phenomenon. Hundreds of companies rolling out FWAs have reported no surge in initial requests. Why? Most employees greet sudden policy changes by observing the fate of early adopters. Some can’t adjust to new schedules quickly and easily. Most like their traditional way of working. But those who need flexibility value it enormously. And the fact that it’s available pleases non-users.”

*Good points, and they sound both practical and convincing. But in one of our recent reader conversations in which we asked what issues we might address in future **Bulletins**, I was asked to try to explain why this myth persists so strongly in the face of such persuasive evidence to the contrary. This leads me to the power of myth, the slipperiness of language and some rethinking about how we might build better campaigns of persuasion.]*

IF FLEX WERE A MATHEMATICAL PROOF, we’d all be laboring in a flexible workplace

When we look at so much writing on behalf of Flexible Work Arrangements – from guidelines and training scripts to leadership messages and case studies – we are struck by the very rational tone of these messages. But we all know that the change process is not wholly rational, and some of the most powerful sources of resistance and doubt are unspoken – and not fully business-like. Consider some of the more salient objections we have heard lurking beneath the “floodgate” concern:

- Flexibility really means a loss of control for managers – and who knows what will happen?
- Sadly, people cannot be trusted to meet their commitments – no matter what they say
- Left to their own devices people would rather not work too hard
- We are a “monkey see, monkey do” culture – what you do and have I want to do and have

Three strong truths emerge from these listings:

1. It’s more acceptable to warn of floodgates than to offer a negative view of one’s employees
2. If the concern of an audience is untrustworthy employees, statistics on likely use mean little
3. It is possible to address the real concerns of skeptics, but they must be surfaced first

[DISCLAIMER: We are not saying that most managers hold these views nor that they are as strong and well-formed as presented. From experience, some do – and many are somewhere on a continuum. And a little suspicion of employees goes a long way toward slowing flex.]

If we assume that these negative views pose a challenge to the greater practice of flexibility, how might they be addressed by flex champions?

FLEXIBILITY REALLY MEANS A LOSS OF CONTROL for managers – and who knows what will happen

- ◆ It's vital to reassure those who fear loss of control that this won't be allowed to happen
- ◆ It's important to downplay "freedom" and "autonomy", and stress creative forms of control
- ◆ Ironically, the tighter the making and monitoring of goals and outcomes, the greater the flex

SADLY, PEOPLE CANNOT BE TRUSTED to meet their commitments – no matter what they say

- ◆ It may be a stretch to make the distrustful trusting – results management is easier to achieve
- ◆ But it is easy to use phrases like "managing for results" too cavalierly – digging deeper helps
- ◆ It's hard to build trust without understanding the unique nature and depth of distrust

LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES people would rather not work too hard

- ◆ This attitude is the source of "How will I know they're working if I can't see them?"
- ◆ A focus on managing for results can help here, especially if work incentives exist
- ◆ Typically this is both a global view and a matter of individual takes; identify the latter

WE ARE A "MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO" CULTURE – what you do and have I want to do and have

- ◆ Halting this contagious or viral view of flex is a crucial step against the floodgate
- ◆ This is one concern that can possibly be diminished by usage data – low use is everywhere
- ◆ Managers can canvass – or see the results of a canvass – of their staffs, and be reassured

Our perception of this element of manager skepticism toward flexibility suggests broader, more underground skepticism or resistance in organizations. Training and communication efforts need to be better grounded and refined to offset them. It is also the case that there needs to be a powerful business argument for flexibility to offset such continuing lack of enthusiasm.

In the next ***FlexBulletin*** we will address such focused business arguments.

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DIALING FOR DATA *Stacey Gibson and I will continue calling many of you over the next few weeks for brief chats to understand if and where you are in the remodeling adventure. We can discretely share the results with all of you in the next issue or two. (And on the same call we will seek, and happily accept, your suggestions for other issues that the **Bulletin** might take up.) The calls have been quite productive so far, and we look forward to your continued cooperation.*

Best regards,
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*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements. To see our Bulletin Archive, approach, services and client stories go to:*
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