

December 3, 2012

**The Bulletin is back – and thankful** We assume you are all back from what we hope was a restful and satisfying Thanksgiving holiday and anticipating a little work before the next round of holidays. I want to thank the many friends and colleagues who sent such kind and generous notes in response to my discussion of a recent medical odyssey and sudden recovery in **FlexBulletin #71**. We had an unusually thankful holiday this year, and are happy to resume our continuing campaign to make our workplaces ever more flexible – including for those with sudden and chronic conditions. Today we start with getting leaders to lead on these critical issues.

**A time for leadership** The end of the year wind-down and hopes for the New Year take on added drama as we finish the long and grueling presidential campaign. Our political leaders, with our support and pressure, now take up daunting national challenges, starting with the Fiscal Cliff (or slope) and a host of issues beyond. Whether one is delighted that President Obama has been chosen to lead or had hoped there would be a President Romney, as in so much of life, we have the leaders we have. And it is their job to lead. And ours to support and pressure them in what we consider the right direction.

As in politics, so it is in business: we have the leaders we have.

- They are selected, not elected, and are often long time incumbents
- There is a need to collaborate yet their success has often come through competition
- It is essential that they take risks, but they are largely rewarded for caution
- They are often quick to assume, but slow to change.

As in politics, so it is in business. Leaders are not everything, but they are a significant thing. What they believe, how they use the bully pulpit, what they do and how they support change – all these matter. In times of transition, these facets of leadership are crucial.

Perhaps that explains why the three dozen corporate participants I facilitated in a recent half-day session on “Designing a Flexible Future” focused overwhelmingly on the vital role of leadership in achieving the flexible workplace. As many of you know, I have been advocating for flexibility and persuading reluctant leaders at all levels for several decades. Many of the clients I have worked with have included in one flip chart session or another some version of “Securing Senior Management Buy-in” as a priority. Yet this perennial desire seldom turns into a sustained campaign to get and maintain leadership attention, understanding and commitment.

**A time for leading leaders** What distinguished this Work-Life Congress “ThinkFest” session from other company or conference planning events I have seen was the intensity and consistency of the focus on leadership as the highest priority – and an insistence that without genuine leadership support, success would prove elusive. They also recognized that leadership support would come when organizations mobilized to make that happen. The following priorities flow from their conclusions with my input:

- ✓ **Leaders are culture changers – they ratify new habits and norms**
- ✓ **Leaders are responsive – they can be moved from the bottom up**
- ✓ **Leaders are complex decision-makers – they do more than accounting**
- ✓ **Leaders need coaching – their assumptions and perceptions need to be challenged**

**Leaders are culture changers – they ratify new habits and norms**

Leaders may not always be the initiators of cultural change. But they are the keepers of culture, the active or passive certifiers of the norms and habits that govern everyday company life. Without their sanction, it would be difficult to achieve the environments described in our session. The characteristics of these truly flexible workplaces would be:

- There is trust in getting your job done
- The trust of employees allows for greater loyalty and ability to act like an adult
- There is ownership of work & life schedules without retaliation and/or personal regret
- Management fully supports many forms of flexibility
- The environment is heavily results-oriented

Many a flexibility champion has envisioned this future – and years later, regretted that it hasn't been achieved. Often that is true because the leadership goal was never achieved, if seriously broached. Commitment to the outcome requires ongoing commitment to the analysis and strategy development necessary to fully engage and sustain leadership focus. This group made a start.

### **Leaders are responsive – *they can be moved from the bottom up***

Flexibility initiatives can be undertaken as program rollouts or as the business equivalent of political campaigns. Looking to presidential campaigns as an analog, one model is heavy on communication and advertising while another does these things while emphasizing a systematic community organizing approach. The former campaign outreach strategy may sprinkle messages across the organization, and may influence some leaders. But a flexibility campaign that focuses on moving leaders' positions will include such familiar tools as:

- Conducting a stakeholder analysis, starting at the top, that identifies the push and pull of flexibility
- Constituency-targeted surveys that further refine pathways to success with key groups
- Comprehensive and periodic focus and design groups to chart and refine the initiative
- Embark on the systematic message development and testing crucial to effective marketing
- Solicit and highlight opinion leader endorsements
- Electronically “door knock” to identify beneficiaries and supporters of existing informal flexibility
- Collect and widely distribute to all, and especially leaders, business-beneficial success stories
- Harness the support for flexibility in carefully controlled messaging to all levels of leaders

### **Leaders are complex decision-makers – *they do more than accounting***

All of us have been involved in one or more exercises to build the “business case” that will so clarify and quantify the many financial gains of flexibility to HR and business leaders that they will become champions of a long-term initiative. Participants in these discussions believed that it was important to develop such arguments, although they considered these to be necessary but not sufficient factors to secure leadership commitment. The proven financial gains they enumerated were:

- Reduced cost of turnover from the retention impact of flexible schedules
- Real estate savings from aggressive remote work initiatives
- Capture of lost time and productivity through business continuity applications
- “Softer” gains (those of value to the business, but harder to quantify) that were cited included:
  - A recruiting edge for highly talented prospects
  - Enhanced productivity in a variety of settings
  - Increased employee satisfaction and commitment

These necessary arguments must be made, but are they sufficient? Often the most persuasive case in a given company will have emerged from research: surveys, focus groups, senior interviews or stakeholder mapping. Recognizing that all senior managers were managers for most of their careers and wrestled with the problem of flexibility, an avenue worth exploring is the utility of organized flexibility in having helped them solve their own concrete business problems. In these cases, the gain is not largely financial, but mostly organizational. Examples of such approaches include:

- Working with leaders to identify situations in which flexibility served their people and the business

- Clarifying broader problems or opportunities that flexibility can address in a unique fashion
- Use research to create a compelling narrative for the value of change and dangers of stasis

### **Leaders need coaching – *their assumptions and perceptions need to be challenged***

In the end, campaigns are frequently won by the most aggressive, persistent advocates. There is often a tendency to be low-key and even passive in arguing for flexibility with leaders at all levels. If we believe that true flexibility entails a culture change and a major change in the way leaders think, hundreds of managers manage and thousands of employees take responsibility – then serious persuasion is in order. Nothing less than a vigorous campaign will secure the changes that have been talked about for a decade or more and seldom achieved. The broad requirements surfaced in these groups were

- Flexibility – or what we would call collaborative scheduling – needs to be positioned as a critical habit at the center of operations, one that controls costs and improves measurable productivity
- All levels of management need the appropriate amount of continuing training and coaching until their views of flexibility are transformed – a one-time, brushing contact is not enough
- Engaged leaders need to regularly inject themselves into the campaign, giving it validity, direction and energy

However you might choose to apply all or some of these elements to your own initiative, it is safe to say that without a viable leader strategy there will likely be only limited and programmatic flexibility.

***We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. If you write, please email me at:***  
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