

MANAGEMENT – WHAT DOES YOUR COMPANY EXPECT

“And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”

(John F Kennedy (1917 – 1963), 35th President of the USA. Inaugural speech, January 1961)

Those words, spoken by President John F Kennedy at his inaugural address in January 1961, are a rallying cry to a nation to pull together and be prepared to defend national social, moral, ethical and economic values and principles, in the face of a possible external threat, and as a means of re-enforcing nationhood in the pursuit of national foreign policy and global influence.

As such they are not only commendable, as a baseline for national unity, but also a rallying cry encouraging the notion of the nation state based on widely accepted laws, rules, regulations and guidelines that form parts of an accepted national constitution. Further, it signifies, to the American people and also to the rest of the world, the concept of a two-way covenant, based on integrity, openness and communication, between government and the people which, to my mind should be the baseline applied in any democratic society.

Similar attitudes could, or should, perhaps, prevail throughout any organization that employs people in a variety of circumstances, situations and positions of responsibility and accountability to meet a particular need or to fulfil a particular demand. But, so often it does not happen nowadays because companies have come to expect, demand even, loyalty and commitment without reciprocating. In other words, any covenants that may have existed say three or four decades ago, between those that lead and manage and those that are managed and lead has, mainly through such management programmes as downsizing and delayering followed by business process re-engineering, resource re-allocation and outsourcing jobs to other parts of the globe, led to the loss of any notion of trust between employer and employees in many organizations.

That may be because in the growing global stage, where competition in most areas of industry and business, manufacturing and the service sectors, appears to be increasing on a regular basis as more and more countries join in with the notion of open markets between countries and trading blocs, competitiveness and the demand for greater employee flexibility, is the order of the day.

That is because directors and senior managers are in the business of not only making but increasing profit margins, so that they can encourage greater investment from shareholders and investors, and they can only do that either by selling more goods or services or manufacturing products or offering services more cheaply, but just as effectively and efficiently, than the competition and in many instances they can only do this by reducing overheads either by cutting the level of manpower or reducing wage levels. And, any and all of these programmes, necessarily, place increasing pressure on the employees to deliver or be removed.

It begs the questions, what do companies expect from their employees, what are the consequences of not achieving or realizing those expectations and is there a 'quid pro quo' in the process such that any covenants or terms and conditions are not totally one-sided?

According to some human resource managers and of course some human resource management consultants, employers are not only looking for people with the right background and previous relevant experience as well as vocational, professional and academic ability but they are looking for employees who, at least on the surface, are prepared to spend longer and longer than their colleagues at their desk on company business and often without any extra reward.

As such these people then become part of that breed of alleged higher-valued employees who have learned to make themselves indispensable to a section, a group, a division or even to an organization as a whole. However, whilst there are some who are totally enthusiastic and committed to their job and prepared to give 100 per cent all of the time and others who are prepared to volunteer to take on extra tasks I remain unconvinced that every 'indispensable' employee is in the same category; indeed, there are some who, because of their character, attitude and approach have learned to play the system and in fact cause bad-feeling and a breakdown in teamwork.

Managers, good, experienced managers, know perfectly well who on their team are the main contributors who do carry out their tasks to the best of their ability, those who meet their targets or objectives and they should know the order of reliability and efficiency of the people in the group and this should be clearly reflected in annual reports and the six-monthly assessments.

However, that is the human resource managers perspective but how should one view the situation of work and employment opportunities from the viewpoint of human beings and should there not be allowances for achieving a much better life/work balance, in that order, for all employees in any organization?

Because there is an abundance of labour across many if not all sections of industry and commerce, in most countries, it means that companies are in a position to dictate the pace and terms of conditions of employment even to the extent of hiring and firing at will as a means of reducing levels of remuneration, closing company pension schemes and holding down wage increases.

Digressing slightly, this scenario is particularly prevalent in the United Kingdom where the availability of manpower for all forms of employment has been exacerbated not only through the loss of industry and manufacturing by outsourcing jobs to, for example, India and China and also to Eastern Europe, but also through a deliberate policy of allowing unfettered immigration, which is designed to encourage younger people from parts of the globe to emigrate to UK.

The result is that with an influx of approximately 6 million legal immigrants during the last decade, there are no figures to account for the number of illegal immigrants who have entered the UK and remain within this country and the system, that not only are there almost 1 million unemployed people claiming unemployment benefit in UK but there are approximately 8 million people who are classed, according to jargon, as being 'economically inactive', in other words they are unemployed for one reason or another.

For some, especially older people, the excuse used in response to job applications is that unemployed people do not have the skills, knowledge or academic or vocational qualifications necessary to fill the demands of a particular position, and I sometimes wonder if the real case is that many older people are more qualified, professionally, vocationally and academically, than a majority of younger applicants. But for others it appears to be a case of widespread ageism, despite government legislation that took almost 6 years to introduce, that allows companies and organizations to deliberately choose not to employ people over age 55 and in some cases and professions over age 50.

But, to return to the subject in hand, companies are not only in the position of being ultra-selective but they can choose not only those who appear to fit the company culture including age, profile, reputation and attitude to social, ethical and environmental issues but they can choose those who, from the outset, appear more determined, perhaps even aggressive, than other applicants.

However, for any employee to be seen to go the extra mile and beyond the basic requirements and demands of a particular job or employment opportunity it is paramount that every position within an organization has clearly defined parameters. Otherwise you simply cannot be seen to be more effective, efficient or do more than is required of you. Unfortunately in this era of increased flexibility, associated with the notion that change is imperative and programmes of re-organization, resource re-allocation and outsourcing seem to happen on a regular basis, very few companies appear to have terms of reference for their employees because they change so often. As Benjamin Franklin observed,

“All human situations have their inconveniences. We feel those of the present but neither see nor feel those of the future; and hence we often make troublesome changes without amendment, and often for the worse.”

(Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790), US Author, politician, diplomat, physicist and inventor)

Ergo, unless you ask for more work, volunteer to accept additional duties and responsibilities or take on extra tasks then you do not really know if you are likely to become one of those ‘higher valued’ employees and perhaps that is the name of the game, keep people guessing and keep changing their jobs as part of the need for increased flexibility. Of course, the flip side of the coin is that you are also more likely to be perceived by your colleagues as someone who is prepared to ‘rock the boat’ in order to ensure your place within the organization and, again, that could lead to a breakdown in the notion of teamwork.

However, it is not governments but companies and organizations who create and provide real employment opportunities, and, surely there is a need for much greater understanding and acceptance, on the part of employers, that we all need time for our personal life and that demanding too much effort, too much time and too often is not the optimum way of getting the best out of your employees?

(1575 words including quotation)

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