

IGNITING THE STRENGTHS OF YOUR PEOPLE REQUIRES MORE THAN A SPARK; YOU NEED TO CREATE THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH THEY CAN GROW

By Martin Coburn, Founder and MD of Natural Direction

The world in which we work is changing rapidly, as is the way we go about our work. Seismic shifts in workforce demographics - coupled with new advances in technology, robotics, AI and AR - are beginning to impact every sector of the economy, and society at large. But the more one talks to people from large organisations, the clearer it becomes that many of the structural and internal HR systems and processes in those organisations; hierarchies, learning and development, appraisals and more; are running counter to the realities of our working lives. If companies are to become more agile, they need to acknowledge the changes to the working lives of their people and offer a structure in which their workforce can thrive.

Strong leading businesses know how to work to the strengths of their people. However, before we can ignite those strengths, we first need to understand the values and drives of our workforce, and then create the perfect environment in which they can pursue their passions, and the right systems with which to support their growth.

The Generation Game

When the basic state pension was created, it was done so with the expectation that people would need it for only two years. These days, people are not only living longer, but they're working longer too, and many companies can find up to five generations making up their workforce. Naturally, these vastly different generations think about their careers differently; someone in their early- to mid-20s are just setting out on theirs, whereas someone at 45 may be thinking about making a change to set themselves up for later life.

There's no 'one size fits all' solution to learning and development for such a diverse workforce, nor are there a set of benefits that suit every employee; but one thing that does unite workers across the age ranges is the growing desire for intangible assets; knowledge, reputation, balanced lives, relationships; as opposed to tangible assets like savings, property and pensions. For today's workers, the highest order motivating factors aren't higher wages or progression through large organisations; but meaningful work, flexibility, mobility, growth and learning.

Tours of duty

The age of the 'lifelong company man' have been and gone, with more and more employees happily jumping between employers, and even vocations. Young workers in particular see their jobs less as a long-term commitment, and more as someone in the military might; as a 'tour of duty' lasting three to five years. Instead of asking

'How far can I go in this company?' They're asking 'What can this job do for *me* over the next few years?'

With the rise of the 'gig economy', more and more workers are willing to create 'portfolio careers' for themselves, something that used to be more prevalent in people coming to the end of their working lives. There are multiple ways that employers can respond; either discover ways to hold on to the best people for longer, or make peace with the idea of being a 'tour of duty' and figure out how to align the organisation's goals with the goals of a workforce that may not be there for the long run.

Lifelong learning

With so many changes to the makeup and drives of the workforce, we need to change the way we think about learning to meet an evolving set of needs. Learning is key to becoming part of an agile squad, but too often companies place people within rigid structures that stymie any sense of responsibility for their own development.

These days, when we want to learn something, we don't go to a class or course; we look up a video on YouTube or go to an online tutorial and get stuck in. The digital age has made us all self-directed learners, driven by a desire to improve ourselves and follow our passions. ASOS clearly understand this; the online retailer is run by millennials, for millennials, and in a bid to create a learning culture befitting their employees they've made a drive to offer 90% 'on demand' learning.

Organisations need to decouple and truly understand the difference between learning and development, creating an approach in which learning is defined as competencies and capabilities, and development is defined as more of a mindset, encompassing both emotional and mental maturity. Investing in both aspects is crucial to creating a passionate, enthusiastic workforce.

Rapid technological and marketplace change is shrinking the useful lifespan of any given skillset. Software moves on, best practice changes, automation replaces certain roles or tasks. These days, the estimated half life of a skill is now around five years. To combat this, workers will need to shift from acquiring skills and credentials, to pursuing the essential skills for lifelong learning. The challenge for employers is to create a culture for self-driven learning, aligned with the goals of the wider organisation. It's up to the organisation's leaders to inspire that curiosity to learn and grow.

Don't just feed back, feed forward

Feedback is critical for the growth of an organisation's people, but many companies are set in their ways with biannual or quarterly reviews and numbered ratings. While appraisal programmes have become something of a cottage industry, there's been little qualitative work done around it. Employees can often spend more time arguing over decimal points than taking comments on board, and many believe the rating system discourages high performers instead of inspiring them.

Companies need to change their culture surrounding feedback, switching from cumbersome review sessions to quick, regular hits. Thanks to the hyper-connected age in which we live, we have the tools at our fingertips to turn the process into something as quick and intuitive as sending a text message or posting a status update. Feedback can become a habit, not a chore.

It may also help to stop 'feeding back', and start 'feeding forwards'. We often place too much importance on how an employee performed in one specific situation. Instead we could focus on how a person might work in the future; how could the organisation make better use of their skills? What strengths if developed would make them more productive? What would make them an invaluable team member on other projects?

Courageous conversations

In work, people need some degree of hierarchy in order to do their jobs, but rigid hierarchies can often be constraining when it comes to discovering new ideas and ways of thinking. Despite the best of intentions, organisations and hierarchies can often suppress courage in individuals. But courage is such a vital element in any successful business; having the courage to challenge conventions and force through opinions is the first step to bringing around disruptive new ideas, and disruption brings around change in the market.

Business leaders and their employees need to be willing and able to have 'courageous conversations'; to acknowledge failures without dwelling on them, to make bold choices and back them up with confidence, to face off against investors who may only be interested in short term results.

What role can business leaders play?

People can only succeed and flourish to the extent that the systems around them allow them to do so, and those systems are decided by a business's leaders. The systems that those leaders choose have to be based on the core philosophy of the business and a true value needs to be placed on them in order to succeed.

Natural Direction's ethos is all about finding out what people are good at, and then letting that guide what they do in their work. This focus on strengths can be a real accelerator for ambitious businesses looking to find an edge on the competition. We believe that the biggest differentiator for strong businesses will always be leadership; the right leaders can make or break an organisation, and strong leadership is crucial to fuelling learning and igniting the desire to grow.