

Case study of how stories and interventions help turn around a staff morale issue

BUSINESS NEED

In September 2005 the staff morale indicator of IBM Australia dropped 20 points. Previous surveys showed a slight downward trend over the previous year but the September results were an unexpected and significant shock. The reverberations were felt in Tokyo, the Asia Pacific headquarters. The message from headquarters was clear: fix it and fix it fast.

KEY CHALLENGES

The culture change team had been working on these types of seemingly intractable problems for the last three years and with each passing quarter their effectiveness seemed to be waning. The traditional approach of conducting surveys, defining the ideal outcome, designing programmes and embarking on extensive communication efforts failed to gain traction and create any sustained change. The culture change team was experienced in dealing with complexity yet their efforts' impact appeared to be diminishing.

SOLUTION

The team leader sensed it was time for a new approach and this need serendipitously coincided with their team's learning business narrative techniques. With help from Anecdote, the culture team set about collecting stories from their major business lines. Each participant provided examples (stories) of how work really gets done in the workplace and contained within these stories were their underlying motives, values and assumptions.

A workshop was convened where senior managers and participants in the story collection activity worked together to make sense of the anecdotes. This involved group activities that extracted the themes, values and archetypes from all the stories collected. The aim here is to understand what's really happening in the workplace while generating conversations among key stakeholders in a way that helps them better understand how people make judgments and act the way they do.

The workshop participants completed their work by designing a set of interventions which could be put into practice immediately. Twenty interventions were designed that day. Senior management and other participants were involved in the process and therefore additional explanation was unnecessary to get approval for implementation.

The interventions ranged from small to large. One of the small interventions came from the observation that very few people talked in the hot desk areas because random seating often resulted in people sitting next to strangers. The intervention simply involved providing nameplates that staff could slide into their cubicle wall. Colleagues began looking up their neighbours on the staff directory and finding they had things in common and began talking. Before long groups were forming and the amount of conversation rose.

RESULTS

Six months after implementing the initiatives the staff morale index returned to its previous level. We can partly attribute this turnaround to the 20 initiatives that were designed and implemented based on staff stories of how they get their jobs done.

The success and positive outcomes of the staff morale project have garnered executive support and confidence, enabling a two new business narrative projects to start, one looking into client satisfaction and the other assessing the impact of a leadership development programme.

CLIENT PROFILE

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