

ARTICLE QoL – Lesson 2

Title

Employee engagement masterclass

Lesson 2: Innovation should be an evolution, not a revolution

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Silicon Valley is often used as *the* case study for engaged employees. Whether it's the unlimited vacation, fancy employee dining rooms or nap and relaxation zones, "campuses" in the Valley foster engagement in many out-of-the-box ways -- they even celebrate failure! Why? Because here, in the land of new ideas, risk taking (when done right!) is the precursor to innovation.

Paralyzed by a fear of failure

When it comes to generating a bump in employee engagement, organizations need to build an environment which fosters constant experimentation and continuous learning, even if those experiments lead to failure. Today, outside of the shiny world of Silicon Valley, that's not necessarily the case. In fact, people tend to shy away from experimentation and risk because we have been hardwired to view failure as the worst possible outcome.

Research¹ shows that the single biggest reason people don't take on more responsibility at work is the fear of being held responsible for mistakes or failures. Moreover, more than one in four employees say making a mistake is their biggest workplace fear².

"When companies grow up, they stop experimenting--just like adults," says David Gram, Co-founder of Diplomatic Rebels and Head of ventures, Europe at LEGO Ventures, in Denmark. "It's strange, because as kids we did nothing but experiment. But we've become afraid of misstepping or doing something that embarrasses ourselves or makes us look like a failure."

What's worse is that this fear is costing companies dearly. Work-related stress has been linked to serious health problems and diseases and is the cause of 60-80% of workplace accidents. In the US, stress leads to the loss of 550 million workdays each year, with related health care expenditures totaling more than \$500 billion³.

Destigmatizing failure

So, how do we get out of this culture of fear and move into the light of innovation--and the resulting engaged workplace? According to Gram, a massive paradigm shift needs to happen. Today, if corporations want to solve a problem, they start by throwing lots of resources and cash at it. That investment brings steering committees, endless meetings, budget reports, and suddenly you have a project that is too big to fail. "Instead of these revolutions," Gram says, "we want it to be an evolution; meaning small, agile pilots that get back to the source that we all have within ourselves to experiment, explore and play."

¹ <https://www.kansascity.com/news/business/workplace/article329750/Fear-of-failure-is-stifling-workplaces.html>

² <http://www.tempay.com/2012/11/02/survey-reveals-workers-most-afraid-of-making-mistakes/>

³ <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>

Industry experts agree that breakthroughs cannot be made if a company is not willing to take on the risk of failure. For that mindset to spread throughout the company and create an engaged workforce, it has to start at the top.

A survey published by the American Management Association⁴ shows that 53 percent of employees would be encouraged to take on greater responsibility in the workforce if that workforce supported a culture where reasonable risk-taking was encouraged. Furthermore, 51 percent said they would be more daring if this behavior was demonstrated at the most senior level. In short, failure-tolerant leaders who, through their actions and their words, nourish a risk-taking culture will help their company move away from a culture of fear.

⁴ <https://hbr.org/2015/11/the-easiest-thing-you-can-do-to-be-a-great-boss>