

The New Rules of Engagement: Focusing Leaders on Collaboration and Engagement

Just a few short years ago, *The World is Flat* topped best-seller lists. Author Thomas Friedman interviewed dozens of global business leaders to formulate his argument that companies need to deal with the shifting sands of a flatter economy where many of the old rules no longer apply. Since then, the world has become even more flat. Collaboration and engagement – rather than command and control – are the new keys to business success. In this article, we'll take a look at how organizations need to better develop their leaders in the context of this new environment.

What has changed...and what hasn't?

The need for strong, smart leaders who know how to steer strategy and drive growth has not changed. Those at the helm must still exemplify many of the same skills and competencies that have always been the hallmarks of great leaders. Consider this example from Google, where the finest analytical minds were recently assigned to an internal project to identify the top leadership behaviors to help Google build better in-house bosses. The code-named "Project Oxygen" uncovered eight behaviors, unlikely to surprise anyone:

1. Be a good coach
2. Empower your team
3. Express interest in team members' well-being
4. Be results-oriented
5. Be a good communicator; listen
6. Focus on career development
7. Have a clear vision and strategy
8. Possess key technical skills so you can help the team

As "Project Oxygen" proves, the skills required of leaders have remained fairly constant and universal even as the world has flattened and experienced huge technological and economic changes. What has changed – however – is the context in which leaders must operate.



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Leaders Must Lead in a New Context

From our perspective, there are two inter-related forces that directly impact how leaders need to apply their skills in the new context of the workplace. First, a flatter world means there is a heightened need for collaboration. This need is also driven demographically by today's younger workers who are more comfortable operating in a collaborative environment. Collaboration, of course, is based on relationships. Simply put, if you don't have a relationship with someone, you aren't going to collaborate very well. Therefore, leaders today must develop skills to build and manage complex workplace relationships in order to be effective.

Secondly, organizations are operating in a much leaner, post-recession mode, which has flattened hierarchies and resulted in hyper-matrixed organizations. So leaders also need to learn how to lead more people without the traditional levers of control embedded in traditional corporate structures. This can be complicated, confusing and difficult to master. But it needs to be a key component of every leadership development program because, as study after study shows (see sidebar), collaboration is directly linked to employee engagement. And, in turn, employee engagement is almost directly tied to productivity.

In a Changing World, Change the Way You Develop Leaders

How do you help leaders navigate these new waters? How do you teach them – and the people they lead – to work effectively in team environments where the emphasis must be on collaboration, not control? What are the implications for the more traditional development programs? Our experience shows that such programs need to:

- Help leaders – and the teams they lead – develop a shared direction. Call it a common purpose, strategy or focus, but in order to build relationships, teams need a common direction and a set of shared goals.
- Increase connection, engagement and alignment among members. To do this effectively, you need to focus on developing skills on three levels: the personal, the interpersonal and the organizational.
- Improve collaboration by involving the manager and the team.
- Strengthen execution and accountability while tracking and measuring progress continually.
- Address challenges and obstacles. This, admittedly, is not always comfortable, but it's necessary to help people understand what the obstacles are and develop a personal plan to tackle them.

Summary

In a flat, competitive environment, organizations need to review and rethink how they develop to enable their teams to operate the most effectively and efficiently within this new reality. While the skills required of leaders have not changed, the environment in which they lead their teams has.

To learn more about BPI group's Leadership & Team Development solutions, contact us at info@bpigroupus.com.

Engagement:
More Critical
Now Than Ever

81%

of human resource managers who said that employee fatigue is a bigger problem than in years past.

-Workforce Management

2 M

of people who quit their jobs in Jan. 2011, while 1.75 M were laid off - the first time in 15 months that more employees left voluntarily than were dismissed.

-U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics