

Raising the Bar or Fixing Its Current Height?

by Dan Davidson

Much has been said these days in management circles about “raising the bar” in organizations. Simply put, this is understood to mean that we continuously strive to improve and innovate, to continually stretch our performance, quality, or other criteria to develop a better company, person, or standard. But our current social and business culture is geared to simply troubleshooting our daily problems, to “fix” and provide solutions to challenges which face companies daily. This is because our modern business climate is structured to reward those whose performance can easily be measured in terms of “repairing” a broken standard, or bar. The standard has been met before, and when it is not being met, we know the individual or employee has succeeded when he or she has provided a solution to an obvious challenge, that is “returning the bar to its original height.”

But innovation and improvement are not so easily measured. Fixing a problem is measurable—a deviation in quality is known, and when the standard is being met again, that deviation no longer exists. “Raising the bar” is a business mantra, something everybody wants and knows the company needs, but our behavior may not be rewarded for doing so. Management may not foster the environment for encouraging innovation; for instance failed new ideas are discouraged, those who have taken risks are chastised, key managers openly condemn new approaches, the best people are not mentored to “think outside of the box.” The current culture of change must also alter significantly for an organization to encourage the “raise the bar” mentality. Employees must be empowered to live a new way, to live in a culture of change where failure is allowed. But empowerment is not easily engaged—employees must be provided resources, given the training, acquire skills, provided the support systems for accountability and the boundaries under which specific decisions can be made. Finally, incentives for innovation should be established, which can be monetary, perks, or other encouragement to the employee. The entire culture of an organization dictates the environment for transformation from a company that seeks to try new approaches, not fix old ones.

Leadership, culture, reward, empowerment, perceptions, beliefs, and customer changes are all crucial to understanding the ways to create an atmosphere of business culture to live for “raising the bar,” not repairing its current height.

We at Kraft/ODA have demonstrated with many organizations that empowering (with accountability) employees are your best means of fostering change within your company from just being a “fixit” organization to an innovative one your customers will love. We provide the tools, procedures and

encouragement to key company leaders, and assist employees to manage for excellence and closing the loop. We encourage you to discuss with your Kraft/ODA business advisor how you may change the culture of your organization to “raising the bar”, rather than be satisfied with constantly “fixing” its current height.