



CM Article

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New Times, New Heroes--Developing High Performance People and Organisations

Since the publication of Peter's and Waterman's *In Search Of Excellence* and the bestsellers *Built to Last* and *Good to Great* by Collins, there has been a lot of interest in the characteristics of High Performance Organisations (HPOs). This interest has increased strongly due to changes in the competitive environment of organisations over the last decade.

By identifying the characteristics of HPOs, board members expect to get the right focus for structural improvements in performance. Building on this business need, Dr. Jan den Breejen, CM wrote *The High Performance Organisation, an Integrated Approach (2009)*, a book based on scientific research of HPOs and scientific insight on how to develop people and change behaviour. Analysis of the HPO yielded qualifications regarding organizational design, structure, processes, technology, leadership, people, culture and the external environment--all of which influence the ability of organizations to achieve high performance. These qualifications guide managers to actions they can take to lead their organizations to superior results. The central theme of the book is the critical success factor for superior results--the High Performance Individual (HPI).

The new business world is faster, quicker, and more complex

We are entering new and exiting times. Modern society is increasingly dynamic, unpredictable, and even chaotic, which requires employees who are able to handle the rapidly changing, high demands of today's markets and workplaces. We need a new generation of employees. HPIs have the courage to continuously explore new horizons and learn by doing and experimenting. They get a lot out of work because they are masters in teamwork and creativity. They combine a rational business perspective with a passion for adding value. They are positively curious and creative with the ability to lead and start new projects; they have the endurance to achieve results. This HPI profile is usually associated with Generation Y, today's young generation of workers. With the aging of the workforce in Western countries, it is, however, quintessential to transform older generations into HPIs.

Managing personal growth

Recent research (2008) by the FNV (a Dutch trade union) shows that 30% of the workforce in the Netherlands is losing contact with the dynamic, fast changing and demanding environment, technology, work processes and communication styles. Approximately 50% of workers don't engage in professional development and 90% get little or no support from their managers regarding personal development. In boardrooms, complaints about inflexibility and lack of initiative and creativity have become more frequent. Employers try to buy high performance employees in the labour market, but can't find sufficient supply. The 'war on talent' has started and the need to revitalize current employees has become a priority.

Of course, employees are still likely to shop for better opportunities if they are not challenged on the job. A well-defined process for developing workers includes career enhancement and succession planning to show an employer is committed to long-term success. High Performance Organisations focus on developing rich content for their career development programs - content that improves the overall capabilities of the organisation. It is founded on the vision that learning is every employee's responsibility and is integrated in work and organisational development. And these foundational attributes will lead to a consistent culture of continuous improvement of the self, the organisation, and the environment.

Empowerment creates passion for performance

What is the best way to develop employees to realize organisational strategy and vision? Business processes in today's organisations are partitioned into small tasks and subtasks, which reduce the variety of work. Worker's behaviour is supported and often controlled by IT systems. Most employees are trained to perform a narrowly defined task and on a 'need to know' basis. This instrumental approach, sometimes even bureaucratic, seems to make organisations effective and efficient and gives managers a feeling of being in control. However, the economies of scale and division of labour of such production environments pay a price with today's workforce.

The root cause of inflexible, contrary, and risk avoiding behaviour is '*learned dependence*' and lack of vitality caused by limited scope of the work environment and lack of autonomy. The innovative potential in the workforce is wasted because high performance behaviour requires daily change in working conditions. Judith Quelette and Wendy Wood reviewed 64 different studies on the effect of old behaviour on new behaviour. They found that behaviour which is repeated daily and weekly is directly influenced by old behaviour. In a work environment that does not change, the influence of old behaviour on new behaviour remains very strong. Unconsciously and automatically workers repeat old behavioural patterns in a stable work situation. New challenges, adventure and some creative chaos in work is needed to change behaviour! This explains why classical training in classroom situations is not effective to evoke behavioural change.

Get them out of their comfort zone!

In order to revitalize the workforce and get them thinking "outside the box", we have to *free* employees from the box. We have to guide workers *out of their comfort zone* and into the exciting world of organisational change. Today's crisis in the economy presents an opportunity for change. It can be a refreshing experience for workers to escape the role of compliant implementers and assume the adventurous role of agents of change.

As a program manager with ISBW, Dr. den Breejen organized a series of *action learning projects* (work/learn projects). He discovered that non-managerial employees, when coached by a mentor, were perfectly capable of leading innovation projects which were previously led by managers or external consultants. He called this new and effective way to change the Personal Performance Method (PPM) with the key axiom to expose workers to new challenges inspired by the Japanese philosophy of kaizen or continuous improvement.

There is much untapped potential in the average employee. Once trained, all employees are engaged in kaizen events and policy deployment initiatives that underpin the organisation's productivity. Employees learn how to analyse a business challenge, think creatively about solutions, and build a business case for a project. The project essentially is a stretch assignment, triggered by a sense of urgency and personal passion. This adventurous and highly informal way of learning develops knowledge, skills and self-confidence. Work/learn projects enhance employee engagement and promote loyalty to the organisation.

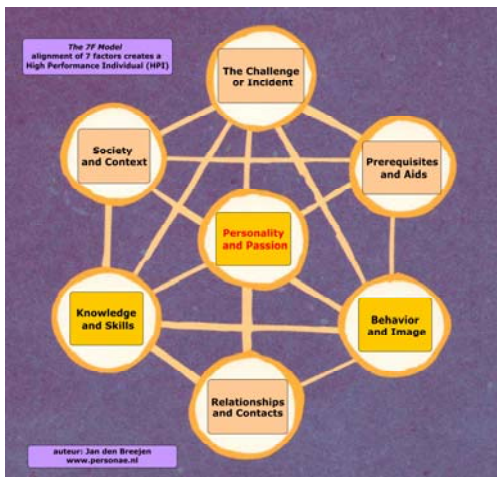
Crisis: a chance for change and personal development

One way to make employees understand the philosophy of learning by doing is by using Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*. Driven by passion, a hero deliberately and courageously overcomes obstacles for the benefit of others and society. His or her personal growth is facilitated by a mentor and happens mostly by trial and error. Campbell's model describes the plot of old and new stories, books, and movies in the world culture. It shows that the modern concept of action learning ('learning by doing') is a natural way of learning. The High Performance Worker is the modern incarnation of the classic hero.

A great movie which demonstrates the concept of learning and changing by leaving your comfort zone is *Finding Nemo*. This popular movie shows how a sense of urgency can transform aversion to risk and change into self-confidence, a pro-active attitude, and entrepreneurship. The hero's journey can create the mindset to:

- Develop passion for a goal
- Face obstacles and handle unexpected risks and opportunities
- Work effectively with people
- Employ creativity in finding solutions
- Be disciplined and social
- Handle new situations

In the end of *Finding Nemo*, the nervous father Marlin has been deeply changed by the adventure. At first he deals with life's problems by trying to control and calculate every moment. His passionate and unwavering search for his son, guided by mentor Dory, teach him that life – and therefore danger – need to be experienced. Marlin learns that his old risk-avoiding behaviour (carefully planning every moment and detail) is not the right approach to life. Marlin learns the value of trust, humour, risk and exploration. This knowledge saves Nemo. By saving his son and others, Marlin saves himself and his new found strength leads him to do take on new projects to help the community.



What makes a successful hero?

An organisation with highly employable workers needs to be both business and trainer. At the core of training are work/learn projects that represent real work challenges. Employee groups develop creative solutions that involve aligning seven key factors for success (see diagram at left). Exploring challenges in a team setting energizes employees and brings together workers of all generations.

Business benefits of work/learn projects

Based on experience gathered from conducting work/learning projects, the benefits of this type of adventurous learning include:

- Average investment/worker: €1700
- Average added revenue: €11.500
- % of projects reaching or surpassing goals: 85%
- Resistance to change: negligent (why being resistant to your own ideas?)
- Experience of incr employability/personal growth: 78% (strong/very strong), 12% (some growth)

A surprising insight is that innovation projects completed by employees on the work floor have significantly better results than projects led by middle managers, both in terms of innovative solutions and financial revenue.

Article by Jan den Breejen, CM, March 20, 2009. www.highperformanceorganisatie.nl. Contact Jan at info@personae.nl. Other readings on this topic include:

- For HR Professionals: *Rendement van Leren en Veranderen. Een Resultaatgerichte Aanpak in een Excelerende Organisatie* (Uitgeverij Thema, Zaltbomme, 2004)
- For senior managers: *De High Performance Organisatie. Een integrale aanpak* (Kluwer, 2009)