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Page: 34
Size: 854
Value: 0

WHO CARES WINS

Something is changing in the boardroom. Where competitiveness used to be the byword for success, empathy and caring are starting to play an important role.

At Amazon's Seattle headquarters, people still talk fondly about Rufus, who used to drop in to the office from time to time to say hello.

He was entertaining and friendly, and whenever he appeared he made people feel better about themselves and their surroundings. Of course, Rufus didn't realize he was having such a positive effect because he was a dog: specifically, a Welsh corgi, owned by a husband-and-wife team who worked at the company.

But Amazon's managers did realize. Which is why, according to a blog on the Amazon website, as many as 6,000 dogs can now be found sharing a workspace with Amazon employees on any given day. Indeed, Lara Hirschfield, the company's "Woof Pack Manager," reveals that canines are ingrained in the corporate culture because they make people smile. "Our dogs add to the fun, dynamic energy of our workplace," she writes on the blog.

Feel good companies

Making every day a "bring your dog to work day" has been a good way for Amazon to demonstrate that it cares about its staff. Yet it's not the only business that has been showing a softer, human and more empathetic face. Some years ago, Netflix and certain parts of the Virgin Group shook up their annual leave policy to allow their people to have as much time off as they like. Others, such as global marketing and communications company Text100, introduced "duvet days" – a day off to be decided by individual staff members, at short or no notice, and with no questions asked.

Then there's the rise of the company "Feel Good Manager." For instance, Wooga, the German games designer, has an entire "Feelgood" team to arrange mystery lunches, run sports groups, quiz nights and more besides. Compassion doesn't always stop at a company's front door, either. Many organizations – such as San Francisco-based cloud computing specialist Salesforce.com and tech giant Cisco – give their staff time off to get involved with socially responsible activities outside of the workplace, such as beach cleanups and volunteering at refugee kitchens. They want to care for society as a whole, and have realized that employees value the opportunity to give back as well. At Deutsche Post DHL meanwhile, an annual "Global Volunteer Day" sees over 2,500 projects being completed by employees all over the world, from planting trees to helping out at food banks.

What's changing? Conventional wisdom suggests that big business can only succeed if it adopts a rational, IQ-driven ethos. In other words, it needs to be focused, hardworking, fiercely competitive and profit-driven. But increasing numbers of companies now adding an EQ-

12
PERCENT

The increase in productivity that occurs if workers are happy according, to the University of Warwick

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and empathy-driven approach that treats employees in a more caring way. One that sees them as individuals with their own hopes and dreams, both inside and outside of work.

Creating a caring culture

They certainly are, says Helen Wright, Head of Marketing and Communications at the U.K. arm of Great Place to Work®, a global research, consulting and training consultancy that helps organizations identify, create and sustain great workplaces. “This has become a serious issue now,” she says. “Enlightened companies know that if they don’t demonstrate their caring side, staff will vote with their feet and go to rival organizations that do.”

“Some organizations care intuitively,” she explains. “Others go out of their way to foster a feeling of ‘family’ within their workforce and create an openly caring culture. That’s because employees are more likely to respond to a company that treats them with kindness, interest and respect. It’s an approach that drives greater staff retention, less absence through sickness, greater

motivation, greater commitment and greater productivity.” It’s a recipe for success.

Take Thermotex, a thermal engineering business based in Derbyshire in the U.K., with a global client list and a growing reputation as a firm that genuinely cares for its people. In January, 25-year-old Chloe Watmore, its managing director, challenged her staff to listen to 12 business audiobooks in 12 weeks, which the company paid for. Watmore hoped that those involved would find it a life-enriching experience that they could bond over and enjoy – which they did. “I was happy to invest in the audiobooks,” she says. “I think it’s really important to help staff develop their skills and awareness and to grow as people, not just as employees.”

Attracting staff and customers

Yet this wasn’t simply an altruistic exercise on her part. “I need my team to be improving all the time,” she admits. “Since they took on the challenge I’ve seen them thinking more broadly and applying the things they have learned to situations in the workplace.” Watmore has also introduced a new absenteeism policy at Thermotex. “I want to change management’s mindset so that they don’t view it as a problem,” she says. “We’re not a school. I believe people with illnesses need support and that we need to help them de-stress, diet, exercise and reduce their workload.”

Watmore’s young age may not be entirely unconnected to her benevolent way of working. The old model of an impersonal business that mainly cares about hitting deadlines and making money doesn’t appeal to the members of Generation Z, who are now beginning to join the workforce. “Younger people view the world differently,” agrees Helen Wright. “They want to work for organizations that care about their staff and their communities. They want to see them taking their responsibilities more seriously.” There’s another important reason for companies to show they care, says Wright. Customers are more likely to be attracted to any business that has a reputation for treating its people well because, by extension, they reason that they stand a decent chance of being treated well, too. “The caring side of an organization’s culture is a key area to get right,” she insists. “It’s not a fluffy trend that will disappear in a few years. It’s an integral part of doing business in today’s world – and it’s here to stay.” ■ *Tony Greenway*

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