

Take 5



A five minute read that could change the way you do business

Pyramids are History

Nowadays it's all about the Engine room

It seems that more and more my professional pathway is leading me to help others achieve optimum personal performance in a business setting. And, I'm discovering a few common themes about this type of performance at all levels in the organisational setting. First, the principles and rules for success don't seem to change whether you're an apprentice, an administrator or the boss. The other thing that I am starting to come to grips with is the fact that optimum personal performance is a two way street. We can't expect staff to consistently make an effective contribution if they aren't given the support they need, and deserve. I'll get to the pyramid shortly.

"Structure follows Strategy"

When we think about supporting our staff we tend to think about the tangible things; tools and equipment, facilities and computer systems. Sometimes, it's more difficult to understand the intangibles that are essential to their successful contribution; things such as processes, procedures and the organisational structure in which they must operate and be supported, yes be supported; which brings me to this month's topic, pyramids.

As most of us who have worked in organisations know, most structures resemble a pyramid, the leader at the top, supported by a number of layers each bigger than the one above. As best as I can discover this arrangement dates back to the Roman Army. The arrangement went something like this; a contubernium consisted of eight legionarii or soldiers, 10 centubernia formed a centuria (80 men), 6 centuriae formed a cohort of 480 men, 10 cohorts were a legion (4800 men). The leader of a legion was the legatus. So, using just 4 levels, one man could command, control and communicate with a force of nearly 5000. It all seems pretty sensible to me. If we look around our corporate landscape we might conclude that not much has changed in the science of organisational structures, there are still plenty of legatii out there bellowing orders and driving the legionarii nuts with their never ending stream of good ideas. It seems that the hierarchical pyramid concept still provides pretty effective command, control and communications. The problem is it doesn't necessarily equate to a healthy bottom line.



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These days I am privileged to have as clients a number of young and very successful businesses in the private sector and I am noticing that their organisational structure doesn't much resemble the traditional pyramid approach. These days it seems that structures are developed around the point of value add with the client. Rather than the traditional pyramid approach, high performance companies are identifying their "engine room" of value add and forming the company around that.



Let me give you a couple of real examples. I have a client whose core business is buying and selling fast moving consumer goods. We identified the engine room of that company as his 'on the road' and 'in office' sales team. We have now reworked his organisational structure so that the sharp end is the sales team and the other functions such as procurement, warehousing, distribution and administration provide effective backup. Another client is a reasonably large building company. Here, it is fairly obvious that the engine room is the construction sites and the drivers of these are the project managers. By identifying this we are able to develop a structure which directly supports these key players.

There is one very important point that needs to be made if you are considering a less traditional structure. Leadership and personal accountability must not be compromised. Our Roman friends were big on these two aspects of organisational

performance and that's probably one reason that even back then people never had too many direct reports. Regardless of the structure that is used within an organisation, every person must know their responsibilities and how their performance is measured and to whom they report.

There is an old business adage that "structure follows strategy" which to me is bordering on the bleedingly obvious, after all, we have to know where we are going before we build the vehicle to withstand the journey. I would add that structure should also support the day to day value add operations of the business.

As I've said, my work these days focuses on sustainable personal performance in the corporate environment. I'm coming to understand that the only way people can only achieve this is by performing in an organisational structure that allows them to give their best.

It's interesting that those of us in business can relate to the soldiers of Roman times. They were paid very little and were rewarded with the spoils of war which depended on their success in everyday battle; and like our everyday business battles this comes through effective leadership, loyal troops and consistent and focused effort.

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