

Mutual common interest: a key to sustainable social and organizational performance improvement

David Robinson



David Robinson is based in Athens, Greece.

“What could I do to get people to go the extra mile?” This is the recurring question for many managers, but often a mere extra yard could generate much greater benefit than the effort required. How? Through using the focused power of mutual common interest, coupled with effective diffusion of management skills to lower levels. What do I mean by this?

The starting point

One usually starts with the team one has – which may not necessarily be ideal. So, to achieve the best possible functional dynamic, the task is to improve the team, individually and collectively; emphasizing achievement and inter-dependence, balancing strengths and weaknesses, and using even limited strengths to the full.

Instilling a sense of purpose for all is the starting point. The core principle of understanding the importance of the issue of purpose transcends all styles of management, and is fundamental to success. The answer to the question “What do we want to do, why, and how?” is the foundation of all good planning for individuals and organizations. Long-term purpose should always be clear in any organization. At a personal level, however, it may only be so to managers, scarcely at all to many at lower levels – and yet – it is here that results of performance are determined.

The enormous positive impact of performance improvement has particular significance in SME's, because a glance at World Bank/OECD statistics emphasizes the fact that the total of SME's (1-249 employees) provide by far the majority of jobs world-wide (Demirguc-Kunt *et al.*, 2011). Mostly, they rely on the staff available to them, unable to pay high salaries to attract high-flyers, or to retain their best when other opportunities are found. How, then, to achieve consistent high performance with limiting resources? The key is motivation, for which good communication is essential; listening, learning and understanding are vital; not just top down, but throughout.

The current context

The World Economic Forum (2011) defined “the new reality” as a key factor in business performance for the future. “The new reality” being no more than the paramount need for comprehensive stakeholder awareness. In fact, this is not at all a “new reality”. Stakeholder interest has been a constant factor of human interaction since Socrates pondered this fundamental issue some 2,500 years ago, but it is not at all just a matter of philosophical debate; it is one of direct, every day, hands-on management practice. Thus, taking time, occasionally, to step back, consider, and re-evaluate business processes and functions in a broader context has real practical value in improving performance – in other words – to

practice comprehensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) with equally strong focus within organizations as well as in the market.

The core idea of CSR is actually one of empathetic understanding between all stakeholders – market, corporate and individual and, above all, positive engagement. In my view, however, a more accurate description in plain English would be mutual common interest (MCI). It is a fundamentally significant nuance in facing “the new reality”, and an approach worthy of wide adoption and implementation. Winning cooperation through wide participation does not, however, mean accepting constraints of the lowest common denominator, it means the reverse – raising the bar for all through perceptive strong leadership. Better performance is not an impossible dream when the road to the “new reality” is seen as a matter of definition and pursuit of MCI, and, not least, such a consequence redounds to the credit and reputation of an organization and its management. Many companies and organizations who adopt this approach can testify to its effectiveness. The John Lewis Partnership in the UK is one example of MCI in practice. Some claim that their decision making is cumbersome, but this is a matter of management style. The partnership’s repeatedly excellent results over the long term, achieved with comprehensive participation of a happy staff, transcend theory and speak volumes.

MCI for both highly developed and socially deprived communities

In any management pyramid the greatest number of people involved is at the base level. Thus, those who, proportionately, make up the greatest number in an organization have the greatest influence on overall performance. Yet this group may include a high percentage with lesser skills and education, and often relatively low interest in overall performance unless linked to reward. The challenge is to change a culture of minimum performance to one of fully effective cooperation. Successful positive initiative is well reflected in the real world – not least by millions of poor people – notably women – in under developed societies. The key is motivation and determination – not just education – or even the total lack of it.

In promoting motivation, the diffusion of management skills is an effective concept of MCI easily spread through positive action – especially when it can be seen as a model which yields broadly based success. It is a concept of potential value regardless of the size or purpose of an organization. Whereas the impact of such an approach is vital for under developed economies, it is equally beneficial in developed economies, especially in communities of relative deprivation, or high cultural mix, where it is essential to change an outlook of “what’s in it for me?” to “what’s in it for us?”

Since technology is now a core component of all organizations, small and large, introducing these essential concepts to lesser educated people presents a challenge; but it is only that – a challenge – not an insurmountable difficulty. An unplanned positive factor in enhancing the learning process in IT is the explosive development of mobile telephony. In less developed regions, this has been driven by practical needs for essential communication – mostly by farmers and traders – coupled with aggressive business development by telecoms companies to meet these needs. This phenomenon encourages the development of basic literacy and also offers an introduction to technology in support of management processes. It can be exploited to the full for the diffusion of management skills in any environment.

At lower levels of organization, in all societies, the advancement of certain management concepts and skills can be independent of levels of formal education. Actions to promote a greater understanding of business and management processes gain further credibility if they also embrace principles of integrity and ethical conduct. Examples abound of

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self-made individuals from unprivileged backgrounds who achieve considerable success. It is a fact that, in some contexts, good learning in the practice, aims, and ethics of management acts as a significant spur to interest and incentive for individuals with natural ability, but limited formal education.

Conclusions

Focus on the wide concept of MCI within any organization is a positive spur to performance, especially when adding the diffusion of management education and training. This may not be a comprehensive solution in the advance from social deprivation to economically and socially sound communities, but positive and swift results can be achieved. Adoption of these concepts requires no significant change, only foresight, determination and action within an existing organization. A significant added benefit is that the commitment to MCI, and a consequently better performing work-force, where initiative and enterprise have been encouraged, also becomes a factor in promoting investment in long-term projects; by governments, international agencies and, above all, businesses.

Successful programs to promote MCI need only be modest in scope, but to be undertaken with persistence and determination. Prospects of steady employment, and advancement for those with ability, supports social stability – and in poorer societies, presents a clear counter to negative elements of any kind, whose pool of recruits among those with neither prospects nor hope can be significantly reduced.

References

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About the author

David Robinson has extensive international experience, and a record of success, at senior management level in both the public and private sector to CEO level. Following a career in UK public service involving loan service to support foreign government bodies, he has worked in the private sector for the international consultants PriceWaterhouseCoopers (Greece), as project coordinator, and as an independent consultant, where his services have been in demand for; business analysis, strategy development and implementation, and short-term interim management. From international experience in the GCC States, Europe and the Far East, he is well aware of the need to ensure that cultural issues are fully addressed to achieve success in the implementation of any project or business plan. Additionally, he has participated in academic research in key aspects of management for several years, and writes regularly on aspects of management. David Robinson can be contacted at: finlayrobinson.david@gmail.com