



Hungry Consultants Feeding on Failure to Implement Change

By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

I've always been fascinated with social systems, which is what makes working in the field of Learning & Organizational Development so exciting. On a daily basis, I really get a kick out of watching human-beings working with the structure of mission driven organizations. Humans – who have the capacity to express free will, experience rich emotionality, think and decide, and find purpose and meaning that extends beyond this life; versus the organization, which does none of these things because it is really nothing more than a legal entity designed for housing commerce and service. Further yet, it is embodied in lifeless bricks and mortar. Such a strange relationship we have between human beings and organizations, which ironically we design, build, and manage.

Companies are well aware of this challenge now that more and better research supports the human side of the workplace, work engagement being a great example. It is hard to ignore that fact that when employees are more engaged, the work-groups are actually more profitable. Further, with the field of positive psychology taking a stronger foothold in performance management models, companies are finding greater perspective and confidence in unleashing the human side of the equation. This all sounds good, but the problem is that companies still struggle with implementation. Companies see the need for the human side of the equation but continually fall into the trap of hiring consultants that provide recommendation and training but lack any meaningful follow-through. Allow me to break down the challenges and traps to consultation, followed by a real and meaningful solutions.

About one year ago, I watched a company identify the

reality that they were in desperate need for people solutions. It started with company leaders attempting to define what the problems were, arguing over what the solutions should be, and eventually investing in a firm that looks sleek and sexy, and their website make it sound like they have all the answers. Mind you that all the leaders arrived to their position via their particular niche field. Financial leaders of course had finance and accounting backgrounds, operational leaders had operational backgrounds – no one in the room had a professional background in the field of social sciences. As a result, they found a consulting firm to build a homemade engagement survey, which turned out to have no predictive validity nor could it be normalized to peer data.

Once the first round of assessments were in, the consultant provided several pages of recommendation that would strengthen engagement. Next, the company spent additional money with another firm to build and deliver engagement training. The training didn't follow any of the assessment feedback, nor did it use any information about engagement that was already well articulated in the research literature about what does affect engagement – but I must admit, the training was jazzy and entertaining; but following all the training it was evident that there was no substantive value to the education.

This all lead up to a post-engagement survey by the first consultant, charging big bucks to re-assess the same questions, again, mind you with no predictive validity nor normalization. Since the company had spent upwards of \$150,000 on this endeavor to identify and solve their people challenges, there was a lot of pressure for leaders for the data to show improvement in engagement levels. Some leaders and project



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managers tried to intervene just before the post assessment was administered by reminding employees just how great it was to work for them. I remember one of the Executives suggesting that when the follow-up survey was sent out that they should accompany it with a document outlining all the great things the company does for its employees. This was Executive Presence at its finest – telegraphing and branding what they wanted others to perceive. But, when the final post-surveys came in (>90% participation rates), they showed that the company had gotten worse in every engagement scale, and a very large percentage of the employees had written negative narratives. Nothing came from the data; no action plans, no concerns, no accountability. Due to the fallout, the Executives decided to not use the “E” (engagement) word for a while until things cooled off a bit.

Now, three years since the original pre-assessment, the company has had some time to cool off, and employees are still dissatisfied with the work environment (recognized in the turnover of good employees leaving for similar paying jobs), the company is looking for other firms that help build morale, accountability, and must I say, engagement. The pattern will continue to repeat itself, and consulting firms know this, and will market themselves to be able to fix company culture. But we know this isn't working. As I pointed out in an earlier article titled “Misguided Branding & Executive Presence B.S.”, employee engagement levels remain

unchanged with 70% of the workforce disengaged (in which the supervisors has a high degree of control), despite the billions of dollars we spend on these types of training and consultation.

Two years ago, I witnessed another company spending big dollars on bringing in a consultant to assess the company for its strengths. Lots of fun and games to help people identify what their unique talents were, print out documents with each employee's top strengths, and taping them onto their office door. Again, the company failed with implementation. No one, including the consultant, knew how to help managers and leaders weave strengths into the work of the work or have conversations around strengths. Just like the earlier company I spoke of in this article, this company was also unable to implement real solutions to increase engagement. This company failed in understanding how to implement and follow-through with the large investment in consultation.

We need to follow-through with what we start. Consultants aren't usually going to do this for us – it is up to the company to follow-through and implement the changes that need to be had. To get there, I suggest three solutions that will help with follow-through.

First we need to hold managers and leaders accountable for their performance and implementation of feedback that may have resulted from the consulta-

tion. In a traditional tall hierarchy, information and accountability tends to flow in one direction; top down. While front line workers are held accountable for their performance, we are not moving accountability upwards. Managers and leaders need to be held accountable for their ability to create engaged teams since they have the most potential control over their team's work environment. All the sleek and sexy training in the world won't change actual behavior if we can't hold management and leadership accountable for performance, and more important, make meaningful changes for the benefit of their teams and company as a whole.

I am continually frustrated to see managers and leaders receive meaningful feedback from consultant surveys, but the feedback and accountability disappears into the abyss. A variety of surveys can be developed to gauge behavioral change once a training has taken place. The Gallup's Q12 is a great starting place because it is fast, low cost, validated, reliable, and all the items are controllable by the immediate manager. Next, use such data as a performance feedback mechanism; and if a manager or leader isn't demonstrating engagement, nor willing to make the changes necessary to get there, place them in performance improvement plans like you would any other employee.

Second, consultants and training companies need to demonstrate that they have legitimate backgrounds in social sciences. I think the field of "people management" is often characterized as soft and mushy, and invites everyone and their dog to have an opinion on what to do. It is critical that the consultants understand the field of research as to what has been proven to work and what hasn't. It makes no sense to deliver entertainment only value, when what companies really need is legitimate behavioral and organizational change. The reality is that "people management" is a legitimate scientific field, and outsourced companies need to demonstrate that they aren't only bringing fluff and entertainment to the table. The world has enough armchair leadership quarterbacks – we need people who add real value with subject matter expertise.

Last, companies need to get their Human Resource (HR) teams up to speed with the changing world of human dynamics in the workplace. Most HR professionals are trained in law, policy, hiring, performance management, progressive discipline, labor relations, compensation, and benefits. Few have backgrounds in employee development, and are often as confused about what to do as are the other company leaders. But the HR department is a natural place to house expertise on human psychology and organizational change. Companies need to invest in this talent and

expertise, so that after the consultant has come in and done their work, someone in-house can drive behavioral change home for the long-term.

I know companies always say that "people are our greatest assets", but I believe this is often said for no other reason than to appear progressive. I think it has become quite apparent that we need to continue building a balance between mission driven organizations and people, who have very unique and diverse needs. The more we become aware of this, and the more we look outside to professionals to help bridge this gap, we must be sure that we are making good investments with our money and time. If we don't, we will be caught in the vicious cycle of employees saying, "didn't we just bring in a company to help with this... here we go again...they just don't understand us"; and as a result, consultants lining up to feed on the company's failure to implement solutions.



Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of Education & Organizational Development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership & management, education, noetic sciences, and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, please visit:

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