

# HRD

The only independent strategic HR publication

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## ROUNDTABLE

CRACKING THE CULTURE  
CODE TO TRANSFORM  
BUSINESS PERFORMANCE -  
THE CRITICAL LINK  
BETWEEN YOUR  
EMPLOYEES AND YOUR  
CUSTOMERS

LIZ ELLIS, HR DIRECTOR - DANONE EARLY LIFE NUTRITION

## { CULTURE CLUB }

“LOOKING AFTER YOUR PEOPLE SHOULD RUN THROUGH  
A BUSINESS LIKE A STICK OF ROCK”

### ALSO FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE** To be recognised as on-par with their human counterparts in work, robots will have to pass the "Turing Test"

**FLEXIBILITY & AGILITY** Surely enough agile water has flowed under the flexible bridge for us to take a call on the pros and cons?

**BRIDGING KNOWLEDGE & PERFORMANCE** Organisations are all about knowledge. Take this away and there is no organisation

**LEADERSHIP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY** Leaders fall short and lack integrity when the going gets tough and they feel their necks are on the block



# TIME FOR REFLEXION

*Enough agile water has flowed under the flexible bridge for us to take a call on the positives and negatives. All that informality and freedom, something had to give and, sure enough, it's the obvious one - that success is wholly-reliant on self-discipline. So what if your agile ways of working are creating a culture of firefighting; with no rattle space to reflect on how it works, let alone change how it works?*



ARTICLE BY MIKE ROBINSON, MANAGING DIRECTOR - BERKSHIRE CONSULTANCY

We have 'overshot' from too much control, to too much 'lifestyle' working, and a balance must be found. Agility is too often seen as speed of reflex rather than being able to adapt to new circumstances, so we must think chameleon rather than cheetah. It can also become the byword for recovering project slippage, changing focus of a campaign, or simply reacting to customer demands, and it often covers for poor planning, and, in OD terms, poor organisational health. Simply switching resource to a failing project or campaign fails to address the underlying issues. The building may go on 'tilt', as staff rush from one side of the office to another to tackle the latest priority project. Organisations become good at encouraging fire-fighters and rewarding them: annual staff recognition events and bonuses cite those who turned the ship around at the last minute, rather than those who quietly

spotted the crisis coming and took evasive action early.

Flexibility is hopelessly misconstrued in a large swathe of UK organisations, often it is seen as merely diary flex, accommodating a client or internal customer, or how 'ways of working' can accommodate staff lifestyle choices to entice and retain millennials and Gen Y, rather than a more fundamental approach to organisational life. Young people are not so different to previous generations: if they are valued, respected, invested-in with high quality training and given appropriate freedoms, responsibilities and empowerment, they will be engaged, flexible and committed employees. Flexi-time and 'working from home' can be distractions that focus on the inputs or the means, rather than the outputs and outcomes, so there needs to be purpose underpinning the flexible and agile working.


The real challenge is how to build inherent agility and flexible processes into the system in a way that adds value to the individuals and the organisation. Effective flexibility provides the organisation with the ability to be agile, responding to or even anticipating new situations, and it can include choices over approach, speed of delivery, selection and use of team, plus many nuances driven by customer values and preferences. At best, it is effortless 'chameleon-like' change, where energy, power and information flow to where they are needed. Organisations that achieve this have not imposed new ways of working, but built them upon a solid cultural foundation that allows new ways to flourish. The focus is on the right culture and the right outputs, where the workforce has high levels of trust, collaboration and resilience, and leaders seek to empower them. If these are not already part of your

culture you could be building on shifting sands. Without the right working culture in place, flexible working and agile working models can have a hugely negative impact on your organisation and your employees.

Both agile and flexible ways of working need to be built in gradually, using the right foundations as the starting place. To this end, the concept of 'wirearchies' can help us understand how to build this more fluid organisational structure. Coined in 1999 by Jon Husband, he defined it as "a dynamic flow of power and authority, based on information, trust, credibility, and a focus on results, enabled by interconnected technology and people". This is not flexibility or agility for its own sake, teams naturally morph to redirect resource and skills to where they are most needed. As the flow of power and authority is based on results, credibility and trust, the more responsibility the employee and team take for the outputs they deliver the more flexibility is given to them by the organisation. It is a two-way trust building relationship with flexibility and freedom for the employee and in-built agility and low levels of bureaucracy for the organisation.

As the organisation evolves and its operating environment changes, it needs to work constantly at getting the balance right, between where standardisation and efficiency, and where individualisation and difference can add value. This does not have to be an all-encompassing programme but should allow small scale changes to happen at a local level, where flex and autonomy are shown to add value. Organisations need to make time to assess how these local initiatives are working and the benefits they are delivering. Before starting to introduce different working models and ways of working, it is vital that organisations know themselves, and understand not just their strengths and weaknesses from a strategic point of view, but the real working culture of the organisation. An 'under the table' view of an organisation can be far more enlightening than what staff surveys or leaders tell us. So why not start by asking your staff how flexible and agile they are, how do they know, how is it measured, and in how many ways / with which micro-skills do they demonstrate this every month?

The World Health Organisation defines health as "health is the state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not only the absence of disease or disability." In a similar way, Organisational Health looks at complete and unimpeded operation of all formal and informal processes, considering not just the absence of problems but the full wellbeing of the organisation. Just as in human health, the critical issues are the root causes or triggering events that underlie the wider symptoms visible in the workplace. To protect the organisation's health, it is imperative to identify sources of potential malfunctions at the most foundational level. Such organisational self-awareness can help you think differently about ways of working and processes, and deters initiatives and policies being implemented for their own sake. One approach



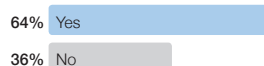
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draws on the spirit enshrined in the classic Johari Window (Ingram and Luft 1955). This considers relationships between self and others, but it also helps us navigate communications between different groups within an organisation. Most powerfully, it can be applied to 'leaders' and 'staff' to help surface and share knowledge and identify scope for change. The shared arena represents what can be openly and actively managed, communicated, discussed and negotiated in the normal course of business. The more there is in the Arena, the more open the culture, the more trusting the staff, the more efficient and effective the leaders. We all know that mobile devices can be a powerful tool for business, boosting productivity and flexibility, but they may be a threat as much as an opportunity. There have always been informal information flows around an organisation, but mobile technology has provided additional potency, reaching many more people inside and outside the organisation in the blink of an eye. At best, this makes both flexibility and agility practical and achievable in organisations and allows employees to achieve outputs in a variety of different ways, to suit both them and the situation. At its worst, it can spread a toxic culture, means employees never feel away from work, so half-engaging with problems and sometimes making them worse. The result can be a graveyard of under-used technology and the organisation missing out on its full potential. The new edge will be gained by those who use technology in a way which enhances the cultural glue of the organisation, rather than simply automating it. Having everyone on What's App is not the answer: each organisation needs to work out how it might be used in their particular situation to create greater fluidity and dynamism. You must let the value sets drive the application of the technology, not vice-versa. The benefits of flexible working in the quest for agility are clear, but the risks are high: without the foundations of trust, responsibility, collaboration, empowerment and resilience, chaos may result. As trust grows in both directions, step by step the wirearchies will start to be formed and as the benefits of small-scale initiatives are demonstrated and the learning captured, the more flexible and agile way of working becomes embedded into your organisation and the self-awareness of ways of working will enable staff to design their own flexibility. ●

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Is your organisation capable of coping with the flexible needs of the modern workforce?



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