



Employer of Choice

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The primary objective of any business is (or should be) to create a high performance workplace and "high performance workplaces are characterised by their creativity, innovation, flexibility and competitiveness. Workplaces where people choose to work and give freely of their energies and feel a sense of personal achievement, satisfaction, individual purpose and security. Where there is synergy between personal missions and work challenges, and organisational achievement. And where the workplace sense of community contributes to overall social cohesion" (Business Council of Australia, "Managerial leadership in the workplace")

So what does "Employer of Choice" mean?

In simple terms it means that [quality] "people will choose to work for you and they will:

- Choose to dedicate themselves to your success.
- Choose to stay with you, even when they are being courted by recruiters from other employers - recruiters with exceptionally attractive inducements.

An employer of choice is one who inspires highly talented workers to join them and stay with them".

This definition comes from the book "Employer of Choice" by Herman & Gioia

The emphasis in the definition is on the word "choose".

The Best Workplaces in Australia

In 2001 the University of Sydney (acirrt) with support from the Business Council of Australia carried out research into excellent workplaces in Australia and drew some general conclusions concerning the nature of excellence at work. They produced a paper entitled "Simply the Best Workplaces in Australia" which can be read or downloaded at <http://www.acirrt.com/research/default.htm> (scroll down until you find paper 88 with the title mentioned above). This is both an interesting and informative read, if you have the time.

This section is my precise of the key aspects of that paper as I see them.

Excellence:

The paper identified 10 criteria of excellence in the workplace and these are reproduced below. A Workplace is not necessarily a company but could be a division or a part of a company – a workplace within a company.

1. World Class
2. High Performance
3. Competitive
4. Innovative
5. Flexible/Adaptable
6. Fair
7. Personal Achievement
8. Ethical
9. Knowledge Based



10. Individual, Team and Organisational Learning

Factors that create excellence:

The research also identified 15 significant factors that differentiated excellent workplaces from the generally good workplaces around the country:

1. The quality of working relationships – people relating to each other as friends, colleagues, and co-workers. Supporting each other, and helping to get the job done.
2. Workplace leadership – how the immediate supervisor, team leader, manager or coordinator presented himself or herself. Their focus of leadership and energy, not management and administration.
3. Having a say – participating in decisions that affect the day-to-day business of the workplace.
4. Clear values – the extent to which people could see and understand the overall purpose and individual behaviours expected in the place of work.
5. Being safe – high levels of personal safety, both physical and psychological. Emotional stability and a feeling of being protected by the system.
6. The built environment – a high standard of accommodation and fit out, with regard to the particular industry type.
7. Recruitment – getting the right people to work in the location is important, and they need to share the same values and approach to work as the rest of the group.
8. Pay and conditions – a place in which the level of income and the basic physical working conditions (hours, access, travel and the like) are met to a reasonable standard. At least to a level that the people who work there see as reasonable.
9. Getting Feedback – always knowing what people think of each other, their contribution to the success of the place, and their individual performance over time.
10. Autonomy and uniqueness – the capacity of the organisation to tolerate and encourage the sense of difference that excellent workplaces develop. Their sense of being the best at what they do.
11. A sense of ownership and identity – being seen to be different and special through pride in the place of work, knowing the business and controlling the technology.
12. Learning – being able to learn on the job, acquire skills and knowledge from everywhere, and develop a greater understanding of the whole workplace.
13. Passion – the energy and commitment to the workplaces, high levels of volunteering, excitement and a sense of well-being. Actually wanting to come to work.
14. Having fun – a psychologically secure workplace in which people can relax with each other and enjoy social interaction.
15. Community connections – being part of the local community, feeling as though the workplace is a valuable element of local affairs.

The paper went on to say: “In all our excellent workplaces the atmosphere of mutual trust and respect was overwhelming. We became convinced that central to every excellent workplace is an understanding that to produce quality work in Australia, one must have quality working relationships”.

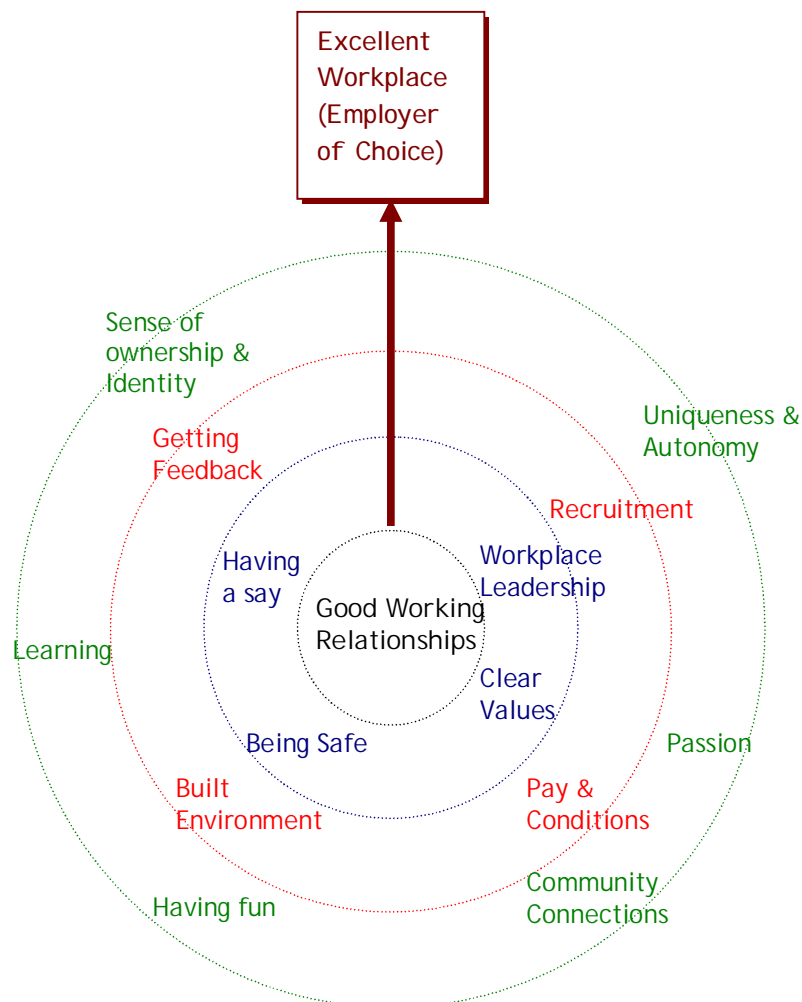
“It is very important to understand that when talking about relationships at work we are not talking about friendships alone. What mattered most was the quality of the working relationships, particularly with respect to key dimensions such as trust, respect, self-worth and

recognition. The fundamental relationships built on that magic word – trust – couldn't be over-estimated".

I tend to use the term 'productive relationships' rather than quality relationships as I think it is important to differentiate between friendly relationships (that may or may not be productive) as opposed to those that are truly productive. Excellence is, in my view (and I think that of the paper's), more about productive relationships.

"Good Quality for Australians is a relationship in which a person has a sense of secure identity and self-worth. Without appropriate recognition and identity the situation is not good Quality".

Placing Quality relationships at the centre of the model the paper attempts to link the fifteen 'drivers of excellence' as follows (this is my slightly simplified version of the diagram presented in the paper):



The glue that holds all this together and keeps it functioning (or allows it to function) seems to be "trust".

Accountability

Accountability is a concept that is used regularly when talking about improving people performance. The book "Accountability: Freedom and Responsibility without Control" by Rob Lebow and Randy Spitzer provides some interesting views on accountability that in many ways support the findings of the acirrt research (refer above). The basic thrust of the book is that "You cannot control people and ever expect them to be accountable". Or to put it positively "...to create personal accountability at every level, you need to establish a freedom-based workplace at every level".

The book warns that many traditionally-accepted ideas for getting accountability actually reduce accountability and destroy initiative or focus it in a destructive direction. These ideas include:

- Incentive schemes
- Performance reviews
- Employee recognition schemes
- Traditional job descriptions
- Internal competition

These, the book say, are all parts of a control-based workplace. It goes on to contrast control and freedom based workplaces by the way they attempt to motivate people:

- Control based workplaces rely on extrinsic motivators
- Freedom based workplaces rely on intrinsic motivators

...and the different approaches are largely explained by the different beliefs the leaders hold about their people and about human nature.

Values and principles are the "bedrock" of freedom based organisations whereas policies and procedures are at the core of control based organisations. The book makes the point that "As much as we'd like to believe we control people's behaviour, in truth we can't. Furthermore control systems allow people to 'cop out' on accountability. You hear people say, 'I have no choice; the system won't let me do anything else'". The only thing a control based workplace can generate accountability for is to the controls, quotas, policies and procedures and that is not true accountability. "Getting staff members to be accountable starts by giving them the individual freedom to own their jobs".



Although not presented in the book, the Lebow organisation in the USA has put together a model that attempts to represent some of the key points above. This is reproduced below:

	The Evolution of Control-Based Thinking →			Freedom-Based
Work Environment	Quadrant 1 "Authority Driven"	Quadrant 2 "Incentive Driven"	Quadrant 3 "Measurement Driven"	Quadrant 4 "Accountability Driven"
Beliefs About People How people perform best	People can't be trusted, they need policies and procedures	People are selfish & lazy... they need incentives	People can only be trusted when performance is measured	People are trustworthy; those who are not, can't stay
Leadership Approach How goals are set	SUPERVISOR Supervisors set goals, delegate the work	MOTIVATOR Motivators set goals and offer incentives	EVALUATOR Leaders "allow" people to participate	WISE COUNSEL People set own goals, leaders "wait to be asked"
Accountability Approach How to get people to be accountable	People are accountable for following policies and procedures	People are accountable for achieving quotas & goals	People are accountable for meeting agreed standards	People own their own jobs and are accountable for performance
Kinds of People Needed How people need to behave	COMPLIANT People do what they're told, not adventurous	COMPETITORS People respond to competition and incentives	COACHABLE People adapt behavior based on feedback	SELF-STARTING People are open, creative, proactive and accountable

You will, no doubt, notice some interesting parallels with the acirtt paper (refer above). The signposts seem to be pointing in the same direction.

Another very interesting parallel is when you pose the question "How do we move from being a quadrant 1, 2 or 3 company to being a quadrant 4 company?" Because, if I have been a quadrant 1 leader and now 'see the light', how can I move to quadrant 4 when I have recruited and retained quadrant 1 people? Or conversely, how am I going to recruit and retain quadrant 4 people when we have quadrant 1 leadership? This becomes the proverbial "catch 22". Their answer to this dilemma comes from asking the question: What is missing in the lower quadrants (to varying degrees), that is present in abundance in quadrant 4?

The answer, very simply, is TRUST.

Trust, from my experience and readings, seems to be the vital and fundamental building block for creating excellent workplaces and becoming an employer of choice. It is the foundation of good working (productive) relationships and true accountability.

Trust

What is trust and how do I develop it in my organisation?

A model I came across, several years ago, from an organisation called Integro identifies four major components of trust and these are shown below:

Openness – “I give and ask for feedback freely”

- Being non secretive
- Volunteering information
- Keeping people informed – no surprises
- Sharing your feelings, good & bad
- Asking for feedback
- Adequate access to each other

Congruence – “What I say is what I mean”

- Being direct with people
- Saying no when you mean no
- Clarifying expectations of others
- Practicing what you preach
- Facing up to conflict
- Honesty

Reliability – “I’ll do what I say I’ll do”

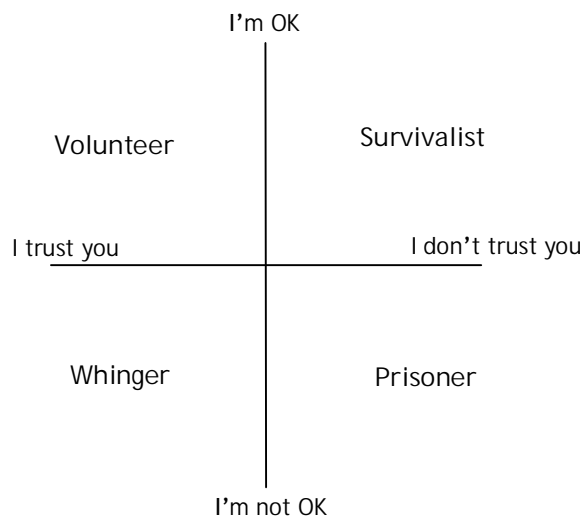
- Keeping promises
- Being dependable
- Maintaining confidences
- Being punctual
- Following through on detail
- Accepting responsibility
- Competence

Acceptance – “Who you are is OK with me”

- Being non judgemental of the person
- Being non critical of people’s differences
- Not talking down to people (jargon)
- Mutual respect
- Giving others permission to make mistakes
- Listening

Trust, Self-worth & Motivation

The acirrt paper (refer above) does, toward the end of the report, refer to an interesting model developed by one John Evans, a Melbourne researcher, that combines the two dimensions trust and self-worth in understanding peoples attitudes and behaviours at work. That model is reproduced here:



Volunteers have high levels of trust and self worth – they will give everything for their job, their workmates and the business. They both engender leadership, and energise people to follow them.

Survivalists are those people who have high levels of self worth, but for whatever reason do not have a high regard for those who work with them and/or their supervisors and/or the image of their organisation. They will follow all published rules, appear as Volunteers, but at the moment of Truth will fall away and look after their own interests before everything else.

Whingers are people with low levels of self worth, created from whatever reasons – personal, family, peers or environment. They have high levels of trust in those around them and thus become dependent on those people. In the case of the manager or supervisor, this often emerges as complaints, demands, cries for help and criticism of others to the boss.

Prisoners - At the darkest end of the Australian workplace lives the Prisoner. This person has low self worth and also hates the organisation, the supervisor and their workmates. They act as though they are in a jail, with all the appropriate language: "I have to get out of here", and "I can't wait to escape on Friday".



Some other comments worth reflecting on from the acirrt paper are:

- “The top five factors that will positively influence improvements in performance among employees were located in the study as:
 - Being entrusted with responsibility/independence
 - Interesting and challenging work
 - A good relationship
 - Receiving feedback and good communication
 - Good relationships with other staff”



- “High performers tend to:
 - Place great value on freedom.
 - Are self directed
 - Could be classified as nerds or weirdos but are happy to stay that way; and
 - Have strong need for flexibility”
- “In the best workplaces we visited, the values of the organisation were part of every aspect of the way business was done. These values also influenced the way people related to each other thereby in turn helping to generate the quality working relationships that we found to be the key to the entire equation”.
- “Excellent workplaces must be competent workplaces”.

It is my view that leaders cannot motivate their people, they can only engage them. But it through engagement that trust is built and motivation grows. And it is through motivation that true accountability develops.

Getting Started

From reading through the acirrt paper, I think the starting point needs to be built around [improving]:

- Trust
- Workplace leadership (at all levels)
- Clear values
- Safe environments
- Engaging people, of which allowing people to have a say and allowing them to own their jobs forms part.

All of the above create the context for more productive (quality) relationships.

What does this all mean for business?

- Firstly, it means that business leaders need to particularly see “Employer of Choice” as integral part of the way they do business, not simply a ‘nice-to-do add on’. Leaders must learn how to lead in such an environment.
- Secondly, create some clear business values.
- Thirdly, improve trust at all levels of the organisation.
- Fourthly, learn how to engage people and develop them owning their jobs.

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