

Turning Employees into Leaders and Entrepreneurs in their own jobs

*A lesson from an extraordinary European
company*

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I have just returned from TMI's World Congress in Athens. This is an annual event where people from the TMI offices around the world get together and share experiences and know-how to bring back to their respective countries. One of the guest speakers at the Congress runs a company that has been voted Best Place to Work in Greece (in the category of 50 to 500 employees) for the last 3 years. It was most recently voted Europe's best place to work in the same category of small to medium size. Stelios Stavridis, the Managing Director of swimming pool manufacturer, Piscines Ideales, shared his thoughts on business. I'd like to share his thoughts with you.

Piscines Ideales is the largest manufacturer of swimming pools in Europe. It employs 220 people and operates on a franchise basis throughout Europe. The company has won many awards. A core philosophy behind the company's success is that "happy employees means happy customers." Stelios said, "It is human relations that makes our company the best SME to work for in Europe." Stelios wants people to enjoy coming to work. "If people think, life starts at 6pm, then they won't be creative and adaptable to change," he said.

I'm pretty sure that if you are an employee working at Piscines Ideales, you will definitely tell your friends. It is not uncommon for people in Greece to have pet dogs. The company allows them to bring their dogs to work! People come to work in casual clothes. This is definitely a "no-tie" workplace! If people want to think, meet or relax at one of the pools at the company's office, they can. After all, this is a swimming pool company! The company promotes fitness among its employees. It gives employees who lose 12% of their body weight a 2% pay rise.

**Each
employee can
act like a
leader in their
own roles**

Piscines Ideales focuses a lot of effort on building the company by creating an environment where people enjoy coming to work and feel that they can make a difference. Stelios gave his simple logic. "The client is served by the individual. The brand is here to support the individual to serve the client," he said. "99% of the decisions made in our company are made by people, not management," he said. Stelios believes that, for each employee to effectively contribute to the company, he or she must act like a leader and an entrepreneur. The role of the company is therefore to bring the leader and the entrepreneur out of each person. Stelios said, "People can show leadership at their own levels in the company when they ask the question, 'how can I do this better?' And they act entrepreneurially when they understand the impact of their decisions on the bottom line." I find his comment on creating a direct line-of-sight with the bottom line an interesting and valuable one. It is not uncommon for employees to come up with all sorts of interesting and well meaning ideas. But, because they do not have an understanding of how the financials in the company work, the ideas are simply not workable.

The company encourages “constructive conflict”

Stelios focused on a small number of key elements that have built the culture of “everyone is a leader” in the company. First, he says, people must have knowledge. This involves investments in training and development of his people. He also has hired consultants, in this case, TMI in Greece, who he says has expanded his thinking and that of the people in his company. Second, the company aims to foster a culture where people feel free to be creative. “We want people to develop a winner’s mentality and to become creative. Piscines Ideales fosters a culture of “constructive conflict” where people feel free to debate and express their opinions. “When they challenge and argue, and feel free to do so, they become creative,” he said. When people feel that their opinions count, and that their views may be acted on, they engage their hearts and minds, and think of ways to do things differently and better. If, however, the culture is to “listen to the boss and don’t rock the boat”, then this engagement process will simply not take place.

Engage employees by being open to their ideas

This is a great lesson for all of us in corporate life. The world is moving fast. We need to keep moving, keep improving, or we fall behind. Organisations grow faster and become more dynamic when they engage the brains of their workforce to look for ways to do things better in their own jobs, and between departments. This might seem obvious, but it will involve a paradigm shift in many companies where there are high levels of “power distance” between bosses and employees. These companies do not encourage employees to contribute ideas. In fact, I have come across cases where suggestions by employees to improve things are seen as a *threat* by managers. Employees fear that their bonuses or promotions will be affected if they are seen to be “showing disrespect” to their managers by suggesting that things can be done better. The result is that the culture of these companies encourages employees to “turn up, do their work and to keep their heads down.” Imagine the power if employees were encouraged to be leaders in their own jobs, to keep their eyes out on ways to do things better.

Stelios wants people to feel relaxed and to enjoy their work – and he creates an environment that nurtures this. He realizes that work is a social system, and that social systems operate more effectively when people are happy. He understands that people who feel good about themselves do good work.

There are other companies that are admired as workplaces. We admire Google. It looks after its people. Google employees like coming to work. And they perform at high levels. Zappos.com is an admired workplace. Southwest Airlines is an admired company. What are the common factors? They are all high performing and they all put their people first.

There is a powerful lesson in all of this. Business is about success. It is about building brand reputation, customer loyalty and market share. Business is ultimately about making money. I see many companies that push their people hard, where people feel stressed coming to work every day. Companies like Piscines Ideales, on the other hand, understand that, by creating a positive work environment, and by putting people first, they will achieve their objectives and more.

Your task for the month is to look around you. Observe how energised your people are. Count how many new ideas your employees have made in the last year. And observe whether your company fosters a culture of “everyone is a leader and entrepreneur in their own jobs.” If you score low on these questions, perhaps you are getting to a reason why your company is not leading the market as much as you would like. I will finish with the words of Stelios. “The conditions are the same for every company. The difference is how you manage your way through it”. Until next month.

First published in BUSINESS TODAY, September 2009

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TMI's Employeeship program helps turn employees into leaders in their own positions by focusing on three key values. We have a track record of helping to create a “winner mentality” among your employees.

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