All that glitters is not gold

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For Workplace News

It's a new year. Budgets are set, business plans are in place. Are there any sparkling new initiatives on your human resources agenda? Before you get too excited about your shiny new toys, consider this piece of wisdom: All that glitters is not gold.

Business leaders are as susceptible to new fads as teenagers. How else to explain the speed with which companies jump on the bandwagon. In the 1970s, we had a "strategic approach" to work, corporate analysis, and planning. The next 10 years brought us the "pursuit of excellence," leadership development, Total Quality Management, process mapping, Just-In-Time delivery, "Kaizen" and employee involvement.

By the 1990s, we were thriving on chaos, re-engineering the corporation, empowering people, building learning organizations, creating self-directed work teams, and celebrating cultural diversity In the last few years, we've discovered Emotional Intelligence, employee brand, employer of choice, and least but not last - business ethics.

Each of these ideas drove impressive results in a few heralded corporations but failed to provide a panacea for all the organizations that followed suit. It's as if the impact of a powerful process becomes paper-thin when it is spread too widely, despite all the hoopla and celebrated success. If you're contemplating the latest can't-miss, must-do idea, how do you make sure it will actually work?

After all, you are going to have to implement it, and you may even be responsible for the results. But knee-jerk skepticism will get you nowhere. You need a framework for evaluating whether an idea will work in your organization and adapting it to fit your people and drive your business strategy. Lacking such a framework, even the mighty have fallen.

Take Business Process Re-engineering, for example. In the wake of much hype and over selling, many leaders attempted to implement re-engineering in their firms. Or so we thought. An awful lot of them called what they were doing "re-engineering" when in fact their plans were nothing close to its fundamental concepts. Its widespread failure, however, damaged its reputation within the business community and scared employees stiff.

From a "must-do" initiative, BPR became a "never-do" initiative. Both extremes were wrong. There are concepts within BPR that can be appropriate for a company in certain circumstances. Evaluating on the basis of positive or negative hype is not a realistic approach to assessing whether the idea will improve your organization's performance.

Before you buy the mold, read the ingredients and determine whether the end results are right for you.

Behavioural competencies, multi-source feedback, the "shamrock" organization…gurus and experts promote these ideas as the best and sometimes only way to organize, manage and lead. But for every heralded case study that exemplified the power of the initiative, there were probably just as many (if not more) impressive failures whose story did not get told in the pages of Harvard Business Review. If you would rather be read about in HBR than tossed into a file marked failed experiment, here are some tips for looking before you leap.

First, consider how the initiative "fits" your organization. Is it a good match for your culture and values? Will it cause anyone at any level to be tempted to violate those values? If so, the initiative will act like a virus on your corporate DNA, and will be rejected outright or cause more harm than good.

If the initiative looks like a good values fit, consider the next level of practical questions. How will the initiative benefit internal and external customer service levels and efficiencies? How will it improve your productivity? How will it impact quality?

If the anticipated results don't measure up, you should not feel

compelled to hop on the bandwagon. We can all learn from different ideas, and even different aspects of ideas. Executives should go to the source and observe a concept in action to see more dearly how those ideas work in reality and how they might be adapted and made meaningful.

Leaders don't follow the herd when it comes to new concepts, they take responsibility for ensuring organizational fit. When contemplating your latest shiny new initiative, ask yourself and under take the due diligence to answer three critical questions:

How does this activity fit into my company values, culture and strategy?

What are the alternative theories and perspectives and why did they work better in some situations?

Do I have the right people in the right places to make the activity successful and sustain it beyond "the flavour of the month"? ●

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