



Don't Run Aground at the Sandwich Bar

A brief discussion with a sandwich maker and a cashier at a nationally franchised chain caused me to reflect on the importance of employee engagement to company vitality. This dialogue took place at a rest stop along an interstate highway. Being momentarily the only customer, I inquired how many sandwiches each thought they sold in a typical day. Neither could offer an answer other than “a lot.” While I had a satisfactory customer experience and they seemed a cheerful pair, their inability to estimate production suggested they could not see the link between their work and the health of their employer’s business. Were they simply performing a task in exchange for a paycheck? When I later posed the same question at a different location of the same franchise, the answer was a crisp and immediate “100,” followed by unsolicited commentary about things that made the restaurant tick. The contrast between the two restaurant staffs might have had something to do with the people involved, but the organizational climate created by management certainly played a role.

It was clear that at the first shop the boss was indifferent to employee views about how the store could be more successful. Given that these frontline workers would be the first to come into contact with variations in demand, such an approach seems wasteful. Obtaining their read would not only provide early detection to store performance issues, it would undoubtedly be positive for morale. When managers merely try to control operations through enforcement of policies and metrics, they actually narrow the scope of their own influence, effectively giving up some control. The best managers are curious and stay alert to changes in the marketplace, and an obvious way to do this is by asking provocative questions of their teams.



While these two episodes are isolated, scenarios like them play out every day in businesses small and large. The ultimate manifestation of the first case is when company culture becomes lopsided, favoring cost management over value creation. As marketing capabilities wither in this context, thinking leans increasingly inward, resulting in strategic stagnation, weak innovation and earnings that become vulnerable to economic cycles.

Reversing direction on this spiral takes time but can be accomplished by investing in better understanding of customer and market segments, then applying the learnings to strategy. Well-conceived questions to frame the research are essential. Equally important, managers need to demonstrate the value of curiosity to employees by probing for beyond first order considerations. We are in an era of learning how to pull value from Big Data, but there is much to be discovered in Little Data right before us.

Where does your company land on these parameters? Do your employees know the sandwich count?