



Introduction

I've seen line staff actually cringe when their senior management used the phrase "best practice" or "world class." This might be a commentary on a specific management team, except I've seen essentially the same reaction in every organization where the topics come up. Unless you want to dismiss your entire staff as slackers and layabouts, it makes sense to pay attention to this adverse reaction of theirs. Because each business is unique, the response is probably some unique combination of a variety of factors.

Best Practice Sabotage

Number One on the list is that staff have learned to recognize management by incantation. The drums beat loudly through the business press. Cocktails are sacrificed at executive mixers. And new magic is born. Leadership may not understand exactly how it works, but by God they're going to try the latest incantations of "World Class" and "Best Practices". The High Tech sector seems to be particularly susceptible to the buzzword d'jour. To avoid this kind of negative reaction, any leader raising these two banners must be able to articulate specific and tangible impacts to their organizations. It is not enough to set the benchmarks out there and let lesser beings scramble to meet them. Leaders will have to roll up their sleeves and help develop specific changes in process, structure, and communications which will support achieving and exceeding those benchmarks.

Number Two on the list is that in many organizations staff, everybody from middle managers on down the org chart, live in a different work culture than the executives that lead the world class best practices charge. Especially in knowledge industries like high technology, there's the formal culture of vision, mission, strategy, programs, and procedures. But side by side is an informal culture of relationships, on-going peer assessment, and daily judgment that is just as critical to business success as the formal culture that executives take so much care to develop. World class best practices, by their very nature, are aimed at the elements of a business that can be repeated and proceduralized, parts of the formal culture. Staff may already feel like executives don't understand how the work really gets done, a notion that is frequently only reinforced with cookie cutter applications of best practices and world class benchmarks.

Number three on the list is the unreasonably aggressive timelines that seem to be inexorably bound to world class best practice implementation. Most workers prefer performing well to poorly, and have a pretty accurate self-assessment of how capable they are. The High Tech sector almost requires this kind of on-going self-development just to keep up. Many a "world class" leader has lost their staff's support over a difference of opinion about how far the journey to world class really is. The first step for an under performing company isn't world class, it's parity. Skipping that first step or giving it too little time is a sure recipe for diminished creditability.

Better Best Practice

Am I suggesting that organizations should not be restlessly comparing themselves to their peers and to leaders in and beyond their industry? Absolutely not! But I'm just as certain that there is not a best practice for best practices. Especially in the high tech sector, our competitive advantage comes as much

from the judgments and the creativity of our people as it does from the procedures they follow. Each culture, work environment, and set of relationships is unique. Force fitting even the most finely crafted best practices will only damage that environment and reduce the productivity of everyone in it.

Instead, consider very targeted application of best practices. The operational side of high tech is more susceptible to a best practice approach while the research side, because of the creative thinking and innovation required, may be less appropriate. One way to proceed is to take a best practice and throw it in your staff's mental sand box. Help them do the work of measuring themselves against it, adapting what they need to exceed it, turning it around as a tool of competition. In the process, they'll probably take an absolute "Best Practice" and turn it into a continuously improving "better practice." If they're not capable of that, if the organization doesn't have the right people on board, then it probably isn't ready, just yet, to be world class.