

The change factor: Strategic positioning in trying times

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It's not business as usual in the wonderful world of office technology. There are fewer resellers on the landscape than in years past. The technology itself is changing so quickly you have to be a magician to keep up. Shrinking revenues no longer afford the perks of the '80s and '90s. Even attendance at conferences and educational events is considered a luxury. In fact, many are struggling to survive while operating in the red.

Add to this the fact that markets for our products and services are not rapidly expanding. In addition, customers are more demanding than ever. They require even better products and services. They want the highest caliber sales and service staff interacting with them at every encounter. As if all of this weren't enough, neither staff, managers, nor customers have the loyalty characteristic of a bygone era. They can pick, choose and refuse. So, what's a reseller to do?

Controlled flux

First, executives have to recognize that there is a need for even more change. There is no rest for the weary. It is essential that everyone in the office technology industry embark on creative, innovative paths in order to maintain a high degree of industry relevance. Roles and responsibilities are changing. Sales managers are responsible for becoming sources of limitless information and expertise on products, technology,



broad industry issues and trends. Associations representing the industry must be on the cutting edge of advocacy, research and education. Conferences, conventions and meetings have to be dramatically revamped to capture both new members and those who have gone astray.

Many in the OEM community have first-hand knowledge of the negative effects of inertia on the survival of an enterprise. Most of us can look around and identify once formidable players who have gone by the wayside. Recognizing that obsolescence is not an attractive option, those who lead the smart organizations that remain have decided to operate their organizations differently. Impacted by dwindling sales, high staff turnover and smaller market shares, savvy organizations have developed sound strategies for staying on top. They invest time and energy in strategic planning, develop sales, service and leadership training, and implement fresh awards and

incentive programs. The overall goal is to provide tangible value to customers.

Successful resellers realize that even the longest relationships can be severed. Customer loyalty has to be earned and re-earned with each encounter. Companies that remain alive are destined to remain in a state of controlled flux, constantly seeking fresh approaches. This is tough for those who would prefer a more comfortable coast. But coasting is a luxury few can afford. Controlled flux requires constant, purposeful motion with the impetus being customer satisfaction, customer retention and revenue growth.

Leadership responsibilities

So, what are the leadership responsibilities in tackling the change factor? First and foremost, leaders are responsible for leadership. That may sound silly, but it is so basic that it is often ignored. Leaders often think their primary responsibility is political, to lobby and position the business. Not so. Executives certainly have political responsibilities, but more important, they have the responsibility to skillfully lead within the organization itself.

This is no easy task. It requires that executives have the ability to build internal coalitions. Internal coalitions, when mobilized for improving the company, promote progress. They support innovative approaches and foster cultural change. Without the right internal coalitions, the

forces of inertia cripple the organization. Internal coalitions, characterized by staff and management working collaboratively to propel the association forward, spell the end of complacency.

The executive is responsible for directing this unsettling flux. That means directing the myriad activities that compose daily life within the enterprise. This is not micro-management. Instead, it is gently guiding the bright, capable employees who are doing the day-to-day work.

Next, the executive is responsible for being a shield. It isn't necessary for staff members to know each and every potential threat that is on the horizon. They don't need to know about every squabble that goes on at the management level. Executives need to shield staff members and managers, allowing them to feel only pressures that really matter. Otherwise, they become overwhelmed or desensitized, thereby unable to respond when it really matters.

The leader is also responsible for shaping norms, using his or her own behavior as an example. For instance, if one of the norms sought in your changing organization is an emphasis on two-way communication, you, as a leader, should send fewer memos and e-mails. Try talking with people. Consider holding informal discussions that utilize free-flowing communication. Create ways to abolish unilateral communication in the organization. Once you are successful at improving internal communication, it will be much easier to build dialogue with customers.

Finally, the leader is charged with managing the inevitable conflicts that arise during a state of flux. That does not mean squelching the dissonance and discontent that are inevitable components of change. Instead, it means harnessing the best from the myriad divergent ideas and opinions borne of the flux. Creative ideas can come from even the most contentious conflicts.

Strategic positioning

Seriously addressing the change factor means a change in attitudes and behavior.

The emphasis shifts from maintaining the status quo to creating opportunities for progress. The executive has to work from the inside out, focusing first on the attitudes that create innovation. Working from the inside out means striving to become the employer of choice.

Flex hours, job sharing, ongoing education and training are all components of the most desirable employment situations. Leaders have to expend that energy and effort to measure the organizational climate. Yes, that means measuring the experiences and expectations of staff and customers alike. Find out exactly which innovations both groups would like from your company. Then, once you have that data, act on it while it is still fresh. Many organizations make the mistake of gathering data and then pondering it until it gets stale.

Strategic positioning also entails creating leadership opportunities throughout the organization. Pushing decision-making down to the lowest possible level in the organization is a vote of confidence in the abilities of every staff member. This type of empowerment awakens talents that may have been dormant for years. It allows people to flex their cognitive muscles.

After much diligent internal work, the process of external strategic positioning begins. One facet of this external positioning is the revitalization of marketing efforts. Marketing has to be consistent and targeted. Try using mediums that are on the edge, catchy enough to reach your targets and draw them into the fold. Marketing materials need to be different enough to catch the eye of prospects and distinct enough to reinforce your brand image.

Remember, in your external thrust as well as in your internal, diversity does matter. Marbelize the organization with appropriate recruitment and retention aimed at the many people who make up our mosaic. Linda Roll, director of minority national affairs for the American Psychiatric Association, stresses the importance

of understanding, addressing and managing diversity in her work.

"Diversity changes the dynamics of the organization," she says. "We cannot operate like we're a homogenous entity. Cultural differences impact the work of any organization."

Those differences require that we examine policies, procedures and practices. They also require heightened sensitivity. Roll is quick to stress that sensitivity is necessary from everyone in the organization, not just those in the cultural majority. She cites the need for more active efforts from everyone, regardless of the diversity they represent, to foster inclusion. This means being aware of the composition of committees and task forces, monitoring recruitment and retention trends and paying attention to the overall climate of the company. It is the inclusive spirit that reduces the tensions often characteristic of diversity initiatives.

Maintaining viability in rapidly changing markets is tough work. It requires constant, purposeful motion aimed at improvement, innovation and ingenuity. Creating and maintaining constant flux is the job of today's office technology executive. It is that flux that enables us to capture and keep customers.

Recruiting and retaining legions of loyal customers compels a few nips and tucks. The organization cannot look like it looked 20 or 30 years ago, nor can it operate in the same antiquated manner. Leaders have to keep flipping the script, trying different approaches. Success with strategic positioning comes not from rote repetition, but from using the change factor to revitalize the limitless talents in the company. ■

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