MAXIMIZING THE LIFE PURPOSE OF ALL EMPLOYEES

SEMCO STYLE STORIES

The tasks? Breaking through cultural barriers, language barriers, outlandish areas, and, above all, hierarchy. The destination? Human-centric evolved workspaces. This is the journey that organizations across the globe are embarking on towards a brighter, happier future.

Japanese Exidea, a digital marketing agency that focuses on constantly advancing efforts in AI and growth-hacking, has gone through a transformation of its own. The Japanese business world is highly performance-driven, and Exidea, with a total of 71 employees, was able to combine innovation and human values in the most authentic way.

A new department focused primarily on video content was set up in February 2020 as part of the growth of the organization and the diversification of its strategic goals. Teppi Shioguchi, Executive Vice President of Exidea, explains that this new department was created by merging members of other departments. Their backgrounds ranged from advertising, consulting, and marketing, which was all blended into their new position. Bringing these individuals together was all about combining their different abilities so as to create a well-functioning video department.

However, this newly-assembled team frowned upon this plan for not having a clear vision. The six members were tasked with building a new product without them establishing trusting relationships.

Such relationships are usually created when there is clarity on the different strengths and weaknesses of one's peers. Selecting employees from different departments and placing them in a new and already-operating collective eliminated the possibility for such relationships to emerge beforehand. Teppi stepped in to help structure the team's new project. His prior role in the video marketing department at a previous company naturally attracted him to the project.

Common values
After initial discussions among management, Teppi felt confident enough to test the waters within the organization. Top management, leaders of several departments, and members of the newly-founded department engaged in a personal discussion regarding their common values, translated into core principles.

The next step was to take out unnecessary control mechanisms, so as to stimulate a free flow of information and build ownership within teams.

'Style meetings' were introduced every six weeks to align with their core principles. These meetings, Teppi says, "had us focusing on figuring out our common purpose," adding, "It ensured, over time, that our vision became increasingly clear. In the end, with our vision in place, we focused on the individuals within the teams and how they aligned with this new vision."

Exidea's vision, which was built upon the insights of the new video content department, was to become an organization in which teams play a role independently, without top-down or control mechanisms. Aligning individual strengths with this vision allowed employees to start thinking about their roles alongside the vision of the organization. Merging personal and professional interests can be a difficult process. However, after clarifying individual responsibilities and ownerships, aligning interests became much smoother. This process was essential to pursuing a collective vision.

The manual to survive
The journey towards organizations becoming more human-centric often sees teams, leaders, and managers initiating training, development sessions, and other courses to spark new inspiration and creativity within a controlled environment. The question is — why? Centralizing new developments into the core business is often bad for companies. This becomes too risky, too time-consuming, or too trend-dependent. At Exidea, however, leadership made sure to centralize the developments of the pilot team immediately.

The clarity within the team on different roles and responsibilities gave way to the next step. Now, it was time to document these assets and combine these qualities and strengths with their life achievements and ambitions. This set in motion a space that allowed for a deeper sense of belonging.

Now, an employee was not, for example, only a software developer with the employee number X. Employees now had the opportunity to define their life achievements that led them to become, let's say, a software developer in a certain team, and link new ambitions to their role.

It became a means to roll out the red carpet for oneself and shape and centralize a prominent work-life balance. The process of documenting and sharing appreciation for personal achievements was essential to allowing every employee to go on their own journeys of growth. This 'personal survival book' — a manual to inspire oneself and others — brought much value to the future of the organization. Current and future employees got the chance to read, get to know, and resonate with their future colleagues. Exidea's understanding of trust became immortalized in the organization.

"TRUST WAS, AND WILL ALWAYS BE, THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT".

The success of the team's new approach is evident through the progress they made within just one year. From the very inception of the new department in February 2020, with its six employees struggling to align personally and in business, the focus has been holistic growth. That same department then grew to 20 employees. Within the first year of the transformation, the team also accounted for a hundred million yen in revenue (close to one million USD).

The process of adding new members to this team used a fundamentally different approach to recruitment. The idea was to embrace the organization's vision while going about the recruitment process. As upholding this vision was vital to the team, recruitment processes were designed around hiring candidates based on their similar approaches to work and passion to work in a self-managed team. For example, candidates who were highly skilled but lacked the vision and passion were not found fit to join Exidea.

The vulnerable leader
Teppi, through this transformative journey, did not want leaders to lose their importance. Even though the focus in the organization shifted from organizational and leadership-level to team and individual-level, leaders still had an essential role to play. "Decision-making for the overall direction of the company is still made by the managers. The difference is that team members decide on the 'how' and 'what'.

For example, in a facilitated session focused on building trust, leaders often open up first, sharing examples and ideas that team members can then provide feedback on.

This lays emphasis on a certain degree of vulnerability that is needed in leadership positions, which is linked to creating a successful feedback cycle. In addition to leaders in management positions, natural leaders in project teams also possess an important role in the philosophy of Exidea. When new project teams are to be created, an open discussion unfolds prior to the start of the project. All members of a project team, during a briefing about the aim of the project, its duration, and intensity, raise three to five most important items they want to accomplish within the next three months. In doing so, all members can openly discuss the ambition of their fellow team members and evaluate who is suitable to take the lead in the project.

This process is especially important in understanding leadership qualities. In doing so, traditionally-appointed leaders who are given such a position based on seniority but who lack proper leadership traits or ambition to run a certain project, are filtered out when their focus does not match the needs of the project or the other members.

Within a month of running the project, the allocated project leader will be evaluated by other team members. Either the project leader steps down as a project leader or is given advice on how to continue. It emphasizes an equal and performance-driven approach to creating and evaluating leaders.

Changing leaders after, let's say, a month, can be quite tense. If such a situation occurs, work is put on hold, and all members of the team share a moment outside of the office to ease the tension. It is a practical and team-building solution to facilitating and embracing feedback.

Avoid the rubber band
The organization's transformation is a constant process, progressing steadily over time. In this time, new rhythms and habits have been created. However, even while new strides are being taken, old traditions and dissatisfactions can resurface and continue to create the same challenges the organization set out to tackle at the start of the transformation.

It's like a rubber band – people can stretch when needed, but if nothing fundamentally changes in an organization, things can, and will quickly return to the 'old normal'.

In an instant, directive leadership can take over again, with older models such as control mechanisms and daily reporting becoming more prevalent.

"WE WANT TO RE-FOCUS ON HAPPINESS AND IMPACT."

Teppi says, "We want to re-focus on happiness and impact. Up until now, happiness was important to begin with, but then business as usual came into play again. For the company's growth, impact and business were priorities, but a degree of happiness was missing. We want to focus on continuously building trust and happiness, which starts with discussing our common values on a regular basis."

In doing so, an honest understanding of any journey is laid out, and the goal remains setting sight on that dot on the horizon. The focus is maximizing the life purpose of every employee at Exidea, and all subsequent actions and habits are designed in such a way that they align with this focus. In failing to do so, it is very easy to develop new rhythms that are based on old habits. The old saying 'you reap what you sow' holds true here. If there is a continuous focus on making sure employees are happy, the benefits will definitely start to shine through.

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