In Pursuit Of High Performance

Dr. Michael Beer (Cahners-Rabb Professor of Business Administration, Emeritus, Harvard Business School) reveals how to achieve sustained high performance and earn high levels of commitment from stakeholders.

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A career dedicated to understanding and improving the way businesses enhance performance while building capability and commitment, and the Cahners-Rabb Professor of Business Administration, Emeritus at Harvard Business School, Dr. Michael Beer packs 4 decades worth of insights into this exclusive interview with The Human Factor. Dr. Beer is also Chairman and co-founder of TruePoint, a research based consultancy, and has consulted with dozens of Fortune 500 companies, like Hewlett Packard, IBM, Merck, Honeywell, Agilent Technologies, etc. He has served on the editorial board of numerous professional journals, the board of governors of the Academy of Management and the board of directors of GTELCH Corporation. He has authored various articles and books, among which ‘Managing Human Assets’ and ‘The Critical Path to Corporate Renewal’ received the Johnson, Smith &
Knitelly award for the best book in execu- tive leadership in 1990. He is renowned in several business disciplines - includ- ing management, organisational design, strategic HR, organisational psychology and organisational development. Read on to find out more about this guru.

Q. How did you get to where you are today? What lies next in store for Michael Beer?
A. I have devoted my 40-year career to understanding and improving the way businesses enhance performance while building capability and commit- ment. This was what I researched as a student at Harvard Business School and continue to apply at TruePoint, a firm I founded in 1984.

Q. What are the greatest people management lessons you have in the cross-cultural context?
A. For leaders in any company, country or industry to get the buy-in of employ- ees that is essential to transform into a resilient, high-performing organisation, they must build a purpose-driven community.

Q. How can HR ably manage the four generations of employees across workplaces today?
A. Commitment and trust cannot be developed unless employees are given a voice. This means HR must support the develop- ment of proactive mechanisms that enable all employees to overcome the hierarchy’s barrier to voicing grievances and concerns to higher management. Employee voice will enable continuous improvement in the quality of leadership and management. Senior HR leaders will learn exactly what each generation needs and be able to manage.

Additionally, senior leaders - includ- ing HR leaders - must break the silence and organisational development. This was what I researched as a student at Harvard Business School and continue to apply at TruePoint, a firm I founded in 1984.

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Q. How has the HR function changed during your career, considering that you have been a pioneer in this regard?
A. HR policies and practices of the most progressive, resilient and high-perform- ing companies bear remarkable similari- ties. This is because their management is always positive and optimistic about employees. They assume people are capable of learning, motivated intrinsi- cally, want to contribute and make a differ- ence, and prefer not to be controlled through monitoring and incentives.

As a result, the best companies hire for the long-term - even for life. They invest in understanding people and the behaviour that underlie their culture, so they select on the ba- sis of values, potential and goal to grow and develop. Then, they invest in various policies and practices that socialise people to fit the culture and develop employees’ skills to the greatest possible extent. Finally, they motivate through intrinsic rewards and recogn- ise high performance through extrinsic rewards (promotion and money).

Q. What projects are you primar- ily working on at present?
A. I just published my tenth book, ‘High Commitment, High Performance: How To Build A Resilient Organisation for Sustained Advantage’ (Jossey-Bass, Au- gust 2009), which provides a vision of how managers at all levels can transform, manage and lead sustained, high-performing firms.

Q. What myths would you like to clarify about the fields of HR and corporate leadership?
A. One myth is that shareholders are the only constituents companies must serve. Employees, customers, commu- nity and society must be considered in all business decisions. Another myth is that companies can change how they are managed and orga- nised overnight. Organisations are complex, multidimensional systems, and unless all facets of an organisation fit together, it will not be able to create sustained high performance. Culture is the hardest facet to change because it involves changing people’s minds, hearts and skills. Therefore, transformation is a mix of change and strategy and how people lead, manage, and manage. Doing so will allow lead- ers to go against conventional wisdom in critical business decisions and build a purpose-driven community.

HR FACTORED

High Commitment, High Performance: How To Build A Resilient Organisation for Sustained Advantage

The Critical Path to Corporate Renewal

Provides HR professionals with an understanding of the practices required to enhance organisational effectiveness and em- ployee commitment

CULTURE IS ALWAYS THE HARDEST FACTOR TO CHANGE because it involves changing people’s minds, hearts and skills

The global leader’s hand- book for revitalising the corporation, it describes the strategies that will work and will not work... during the process of corporate renewal

Q. How do you spend free time?
A. In my free time, I enjoy family, read- ing, swimming and golf. My family and I enjoy summers on the coast of southern Maine where I also find I can write with- out interruption. We typically travel to Florida in February to warm up and in early April to cut the winter short. When we return, spring has come to the Boston area where we live.