
Affiliation and Workforce Strength

“Respect: we treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. We do not tolerate abusive or disrespectful treatment.” This statement from an organization’s annual report sounds encouraging. Which organization is it? This statement is from Enron’s 2000 annual report. It is disingenuous as it was published before the organization’s collapse due to gross violations of business ethics and practice. Enron employees lost their jobs and their company stock. Is this typical organizational behavior? Unfortunately we could cite a litany of examples of questionable organizational practices by senior leaders, from Volkswagen in the world of automobiles, to FIFA in the world of soccer. Early stage companies are not immune. In 2015 a Silicon Valley start-up, Good Technology, a company comparatively recently valued at more than one billion dollars, was sold to BlackBerry at a reduced price as problems surfaced, known apparently only to a select few (Katie Benner, New York Times, December 23, 2015, When a Unicorn Start-Up Stumbles, Its Employees Get Hurt). The sale price rendered stock options virtually worthless for the approximately 800 employees, meanwhile venture investors’ with preferred stock prospered, as did the CEO.

With this sort of thing happening, and with the growing appeal of nontraditional career paths, it is not surprising that more people would prefer to be self-employed rather than an employee. However, for those charged with workforce responsibility in organizations an important question is “How can I create a strong sense of affiliation within the organization?” We explore that question here.

Let’s start by examining what people are seeking in their work and in their organizations. “I wanted to be a blessing to someone.” These moving words, spoken in one of our exit interviews by a person after leaving an organization, and referenced in *Business Behaving Well*, show the depth of connection people often seek. When we ask people what kind of relationship they would like with their work using Betsy Brewer’s descriptors, ranging from a job, which is only about material reward, to a vocation, which is about a calling in the service of a greater good, most say they would like to come closer to a sense of calling. We seek a sense of purpose in our work and will contribute much to that end.

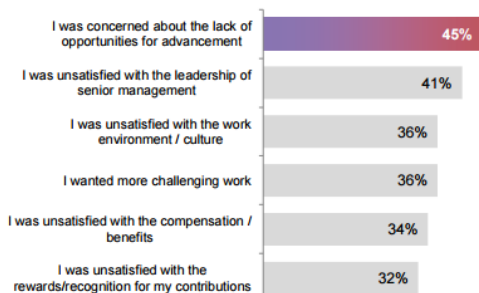
Responses from different studies of employee needs show some commonalities. Here are reported results from a Randstad U.S. employer branding survey, published in 2015, of about 11,000 U.S. workers (the survey was conducted between September and December 2014):



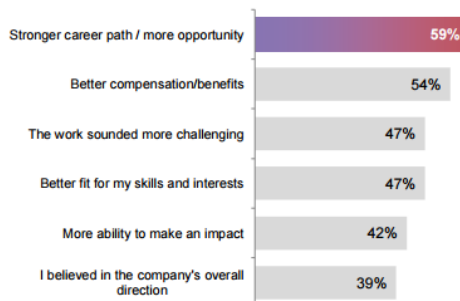
Here are results from a LinkedIn report published in 2015, Why and How People Change Jobs, based on surveys and analysis of several thousand LinkedIn members from late 2014/early 2015:

The #1 reason for changing jobs? Career opportunity

Why they left: Concern for career advancement
Top reasons people left their old job (global average)



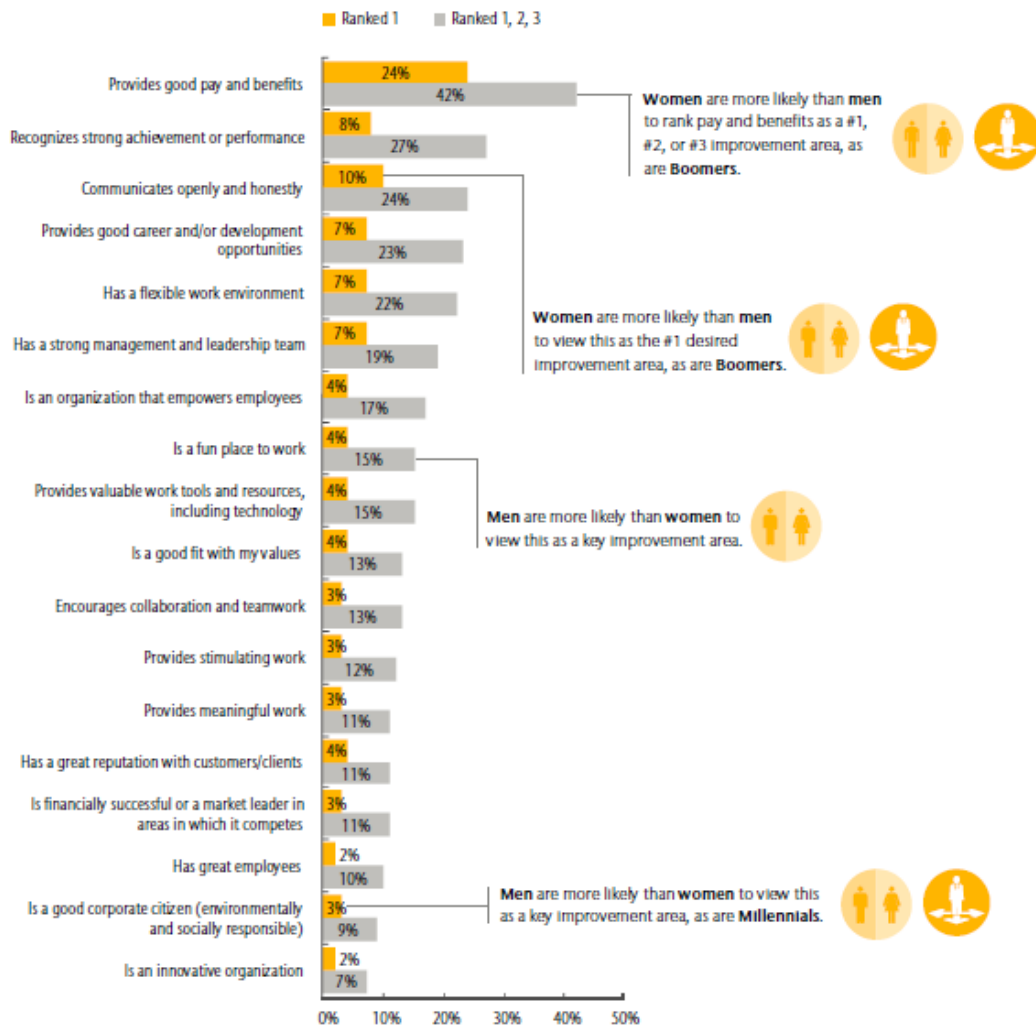
Why they joined: Hope for career opportunity
Top reasons people joined their new job (global average)



Source: LinkedIn survey, Why & How People Change Jobs, (Mar 2015). Showing global average. "Which of the following contributed to your decision to leave your previous employer?" and "Which of the following contributed to your decision to accept the job at your current company?"

And here are results from an Aon Hewitt study reported in 2015 based on a survey of 2,539 employees in companies of over 1,000 people in the United States in August 2014:

Qualities I'd most like to see improved to increase my overall engagement or satisfaction



Some common themes are the importance of career development (a focus of *Building Workforce Strength*), leadership (a focus of *Affiliation in the Workplace*) particularly communication and recognition, compensation, and flexibility. These items are intimately interwoven with organizational culture. While overall organizational culture can be deeply ingrained in organizational norms and is strongly influenced by behaviors of senior leaders, we can influence the culture of a workgroup from within that group. This may mitigate individual stress created in some competitive cultures (examples of personal challenges from workforce stress are described by Laurie Meyers, *Worrying for a Living*, January 2016, *Counseling Today*). Here are some aspects of organizational culture that are important (drawn from an exploration of partnering in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*) and can be influenced:

- Support for development and learning
- Facilitating open communication
- Encouraging participative decision making

- Embodying generosity
- Embracing new ideas
- Emphasizing cooperation and collaboration
- Integrating support for individuals with task accomplishment
- Acknowledging multiple internal and external constituencies

Addressing these aspects of organizational culture means addressing the nature of workforce relationships. We can choose to encourage one or more of the following forms of relationship (as outlined in *Affiliation in the Workplace*), recognizing that leadership in this and other aspects is distributed throughout an organization:

- Cooperative
- Competitive
- Exploitive
- Divisive
- Regenerative
- Inclusive

These forms of relationship are not mutually exclusive; indeed some such as regenerative and inclusive are natural complements and others such as divisive and exploitive are natural consequences of each other.

A *cooperative* relationship is built on the premise that identifying and working jointly toward common interests will provide maximum benefit to each party. It is akin to the win/win concept of negotiating and it is based on open communication and the expectation that all parties are operating in good faith, respecting the needs of the other. To succeed it requires that the parties listen to each other, and that each be prepared to accommodate the needs of the other. The cooperative relationship is successful when the sum of the parts is greater than each individual component. Successful organizations remain together precisely because this is so.

A *competitive* relationship, on the other hand, is built on the premise that through competition individuals will exert maximum effort and make the greatest contribution. In this case the underlying assumption is that competition is needed to catalyze the effort needed to achieve excellence. Organizational structure and formation are needed only to the extent they foster an arena for competition. This represents a Darwinian approach to organizational development. It can be successful if individual initiative rather than cooperative endeavor is the primary engine driving organizational capability. Organizations practicing this approach need to provide regular, immediate rewards to their employees. Punishment for lack of success is likely quick and innovation will struggle in this culture that continually seeks a scapegoat.

An *exploitive* relationship can occur when the balance of power is far from equally distributed between the individual and the organization. Such an imbalance can lead to one party ignoring the needs of the other and exclusively pursuing its own interests. We saw examples at the beginning of this article. The exploitive form of relationship, aside from major ethical shortcomings, is inherently unstable and will ultimately dissolve.

A *divisive* relationship is rarely sought but sometimes created, for example as a consequence of an exploitive relationship. In highly political organizational cultures where progress of one person comes at the expense of others, management approaches that emphasize division to limit power may flourish. Such approaches lead to information being closely held, or worse misrepresented. In this relationship the sum of the parts is less than the individual components. This is a recipe for long-term organizational extinction. This approach destroys the sense of affiliation.

The *regenerative* relationship is focused on a continuing cycle of renewal. In this case both the organization and the individual recognize the need to evolve. While the timing of the cycles for each may differ, typically being longer for the organization, the relationship recognizes the need for ongoing change and development of each party. An underlying premise of this relationship is that innovation and exploration are essential to maintaining vitality. This form of relationship requires deliberate, constant challenge to the current status quo. It has potential for great longevity, drawing as it does on an ever-renewing cycle of re-creation.

The *inclusive* relationship is one that values differences. It embraces varied perspectives, wide-ranging viewpoints and practices. On an individual level this means openness to new ideas, on an organizational level this means openness to people with different backgrounds and to a breadth of partnership and community relationships. The inclusive relationship is likely to ignite the spark of innovation, bringing, as it does, varied perspectives together. It is inherently regenerative due to the infusion of new ideas that are implicit in this approach. Clear purpose and vision are needed to unite wide-ranging viewpoints that are central to this relationship.

Building an organizational culture that values inclusion and regeneration is an important step in creating a strong sense of affiliation, which, in turn, leads to extended, productive and fulfilling workforce relationships. Addressing such fundamental aspects of workforce relationship and culture is central to creating an organization that is appealing to people and one where people choose to stay.

Parts of this article are drawn from the following four books written or edited by Ron Elsdon: *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*, *Business Behaving Well*, *Building Workforce Strength*, and *Affiliation in the Workplace*. There are links to these books in the introduction to the Second Quarter 2016 Elsdon Organizational Renewal newsletter from which this article is extracted.