

THE KEY TO HIGH PERFORMANCE: NEIGHBOURHOOD LEADERSHIP

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Glance through the literature and resources on organizations and you're sure to find reference to that elusive thing – "the high-performing organization." But what does this mean? Simply put, organizations are high performing when they have the best people being the best that they can be. In other words, when they have the right people headed in the right direction and working in the right environment. Put these things in place, and spectacular results will be yours for the taking.

One company that has taken this approach to heart is Rogers Video, a national video retailer headquartered in Richmond, B.C. The company has opened on average 25 new stores per year, and has won both the Video Software Dealers Association "Canadian Retailer of the Year" Award and the BCAMA "Marketer of the Year Award."

But these successes are merely a reflection of what Rogers Video now defines as the true indication of high performance – their development of "neighbourhood stores" where you feel welcomed, appreciated, genuinely valued and well known. Stores where you feel that special atmosphere the moment you step through the door.

President and CEO Chuck van der Lee clearly saw how this neighbourhood store concept could provide a significant competitive advantage, and a couple of years ago it became perhaps the most important strategy in the organization.

When Mark Barry (according to Chuck, a zealot when it comes to unleashing an organization's potential) joined the company as Director of Training, he began by asking some tough questions. "How can we make the way employees treat customers a real competitive advantage? How can we create stores that are unique, special, where our customers actually feel a sense of ownership in the store? What kind of employees do we need to make this happen? What potential are we not realizing here?"

According to Mark, the answers all came down to leadership. It became clear that Rogers Video needed to empower their store managers to create and lead these neighbourhood stores. Mark helped the managers understand the difference between operating the store and leading the store – the difference between managing and truly leading – and to view the store as their own and to feel responsible for its success.

Then it was time for the folks in head office to take a long hard look at their role. In the past, says Chuck, "We got cranky if the business wasn't going the way we thought it should and there was a lot of blaming. We were so busy with the mechanics of the business that we didn't recognize the true potential of having leadership-driven stores."

With Mark's help, the head office departments began to focus on eliminating problems so that those working in the stores could be free to do their job. Chuck now sees himself as the head cheerleader. "The very best ideas come from the folks who are closest to the customer. If we get into the trap of thinking that the head office is this masterful think tank, and that there are no good ideas out there, we will hinder the success of our stores."

Another area at which they looked long and hard was their hiring practices. They soon realized that they were hiring for skills, not for values and attitude. Yet the hard skills were "trainable" in a way that people skills were not. Hiring for attitude soon became the mandate. No one was let in the door unless they had the required attitude, and people and leadership skills.

And does this emphasis on leadership show up in the bottom line? "Absolutely," says Chuck. "We have seen growth in our same store business and we continue to. This isn't an altruistic thing. It's the greatest way to ensure that we are still here tomorrow."

Chuck offers this advice to other organizations: "Firstly, do a very honest report card on your current contingent of employees, relative to their leadership skills. Then be prepared to make changes. If employees don't have leadership potential, then don't kid yourself into thinking that you can train them to be leaders."

For Chuck, the entire process is about more than simply profit. It is about doing what is right, about leading ethically and respectfully. It is about treating people well – and in so doing creating a strong, successful organization that can look to the future with confidence.

Rogers Video would be the first to admit they still have a long way to go when it comes to being a truly high-performing organization. Nevertheless, their strategy can offer you some valuable lessons. Start by asking yourself some key questions about your own organization. For example, have you got the best working for you? Are your managers leading in a way that brings out the best in people? And are you investing enough resources to ensure your leaders are doing the right thing, both now and in the future?

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