

Work/life balance improving - for leaders

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Organisations have made some progress in providing work/life balance over the past decade, but leaders and managers - not employees - are the ones who have benefited, new research shows.

Leadership Management Australasia's book, *A Decade of L.E.A.D.*, which collates 10 years of findings from its leadership, employment and direction surveys (involving some 28,000 leaders, managers and employees), says that in 2000, the notion of striking a balance between work and personal life was only just forming.

Five years later, around 60 per cent of employees - but only half of leaders and managers - said they were satisfied with their work/life balance satisfaction, but by 2008 employees were moving backward in this area, while leaders and managers scored a 20 per cent improvement.

Over the same period, the number of hours worked has grown steadily for employees (from about 43 per week in 2001 to 46 in 2008/09), while for leaders it has decreased (from around 56 to 50), and managers' hours have remained stable (at around 51).

Some four in five employees say that working fewer hours would help them achieve a better work/life balance.

Leaders taking HR departments less seriously by leaders

The research also shows that while leaders once took HR very seriously (92% in 2004), they are less likely to do so in recent times. Managers, on the other hand, believe their leaders are increasingly regarding the HR department seriously.

Managers also feel that HR departments are becoming more out of touch with important employee issues - some 30 per cent (compared to 21% in 2005/06) felt they had a poor or very poor awareness of issues in 2007/08.

Leaders, conversely, thought 85 per cent of HR departments had a good handle on the issues, compared to 74 per cent two years earlier.

The extent to which HR actually addresses employees' issues is lower in the eyes of employees than in those of leaders and managers (51%, 74% and 59% respectively - all higher in 2007/08 than in 2005/06), and the book notes "there is obvious room for improvement".

"The extent to which the HR department is attuned to the issues of employees and is

working to address those needs will determine the degree to which employees want to stay with their current organisation."

No progress in key areas

The study found there has been little or no progress at all made in some important areas:

- **Finding and retaining good people** - these are the greatest of challenges facing leaders and managers. Gaining employees' trust will become the core management skill, the book says, and "leaders with this skill are vital for the future sustainability of a high-quality workforce".
- **Communicating effectively** - around a quarter of employees still have managers who seldom, or never, listen to them, understand the issues they face, show interest in their views, or support them to resolve issues.
- **Gender equality** - the glass ceiling hasn't changed; there's no apparent improvement in gender equality in terms of pay, advancement opportunity and training and development opportunities.

Employer of choice status vital in talent war

The book identifies employers of choice as those that:

1. recognise and reward staff well;
2. invest in employees' learning and development;
3. operate ethically and fairly at all times;
4. have family/life friendly workplace practices; and
5. have passionate and engaging managers.

It says organisations keen to become an employer of choice, or cement their status as one, should:

- **Provide more of what people need and expect** - these employers will have an advantage in attracting, poaching and retaining the best talent;
- **Recognise and reward employees for working collaboratively through tough times** - employers should be prepared to "loosen up the reins' a little with regard to pay and conditions post-GFC, shine a light on their successes and publicly thank them... Let them know that having 'toughed it out' with this organisation, the leaders and managers have noticed and do appreciate the employees' efforts";
- **Provide career and training and development pathways to fulfil employees' expectations** - employees need opportunities to develop, grow, advance and succeed;
- **Develop a better understanding of the needs and expectations of key people** - HR should talk to the organisation's three most important people now, then

another three tomorrow. Continue these discussions until you really understand their individual needs and motivations, around career aspirations, professional development ambitions and personal goals. Provide the direction, challenge and support to engage their motivation;

- **Become more passionate** - employees are looking for longer careers, working with leaders and in organisations in which they can engage. "Show your interest in them and your excitement about the organisation's direction and goals. Share with them your confidence about the future. When you and they become excited about the path you are taking together, enthusiasm, teamwork and passion flourish."

Copies of the book are available from

http://www.leadershipmanagement.com.au/Decade_of_LEAD.aspx.