



Frank Devine, founder, Accelerated Improvement Ltd., dispels myths about culture, performance, positive work culture, and more. Frank is author, *Rapid Mass Engagement: Driving Continuous Improvement Through Employee Culture Creation*.

MYTH
BUSTER

Drive positive change

MYTH 1: COACHING IS FOR LOW PERFORMERS.

Have you ever wondered why employees are sometimes reluctant to be coached? A clue may lie in your organisation's disciplinary procedure where coaching is considered a method for dealing with poor performance!

Let us think about return on investment of your finite time and where you will get the greater return on investment.

Situation 1: poor performing employee who is difficult to manage and rarely does more than the minimum.

Situation 2: high performing employee, eager to learn but subject to some limiting assumptions holding back performance.

Where should you invest your finite coaching time?

What do we do naturally? We get attracted to the problems assuming the high performers 'will be OK'. They may be OK, but this is neglect of our most important people; imagine what they could achieve if they were the focus of your coaching time? Deal with poor performance quickly but

your core coaching time needs to focus on your high performers.

This is an example of the need to change how we see coaching from an elite, expensive, planned and hierarchical activity to a multi-directional, spontaneous activity applied much more often by many more people to daily activities. Looked at this way, coaching creates multiple mutual leverages with systems thinking and improvement science.

MYTH 2: CULTURE IS FREE: OPTIMISE THE SYSTEM AND THE CULTURE WILL FOLLOW.

W. Edwards Deming said that a bad system will beat a good person every time and it is certainly true that even the most engaged employee will eventually stop banging their head against an immovable system.

Some make a logical leap here and argue that there is no need to work directly on culture and behaviour as this will come automatically when the systems are perfected.

The problem is pace of change. Why sacrifice the leverage effects of powerful employee engagement and leadership designed

to create a lean culture, which can be integrated with the systems improvement? Why run a 4-cylinder engine on 2 cylinders?

How to achieve much more rapid change than is conventionally thought possible via leveraging systems improvement with engagement and leadership is outlined in my new book *Rapid Mass Engagement*.

MYTH 3: THE WEST KNOWS BEST.

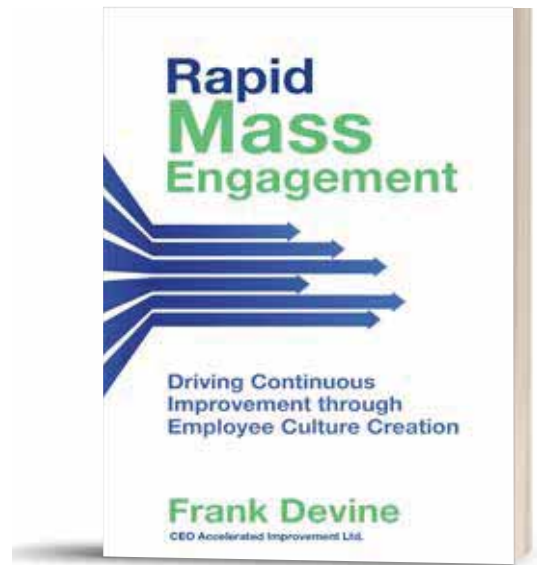
I'm Irish and have NW European biases. My corporate and consulting career is dominated by US and European headquartered businesses.

As my career advanced, I became more and more concerned about the effectiveness of 'roll out', or imposing centralising solutions and standardisation on locations globally.

My work creates employee 'pull' or motivation to improve; it addresses the challenge: "What is the point of having a workforce highly skilled in all the tools required for Lean, etc., if employees do not have the desire to improve the way things are done in their organisations?"

A key factor in creating employee pull for improvement is maximising the solution space and thus ownership of employees and local leaders alike.

Standardisation is needed to create and improve standards but is frequently imposed in situations which reduce solution space and inhibit innovation. A typical example is insisting on uniform methods of visual management. By doing so, organisations tip the balance towards integration—what is common in all locations—and miss the engagement opportunities for local differentiation—what needs to be different to respect local culture, law, etc. A better approach is for HQ to explain the positive intent and the science behind



corporate initiatives and then invite local differentiation by saying: "Experiment with this intent and science; test it against your local culture; change and improve it and tell us what works for you. By allowing a thousand flowers to bloom we will all learn so much more than anything that emerges, top-down, from us."

When advocating the principle of 'recruit on traits', I reference Tata Group in India (see 'The Ordinary Heroes of the Taj', *Harvard Business Review*, December 2011). Similarly, when I reference the power of higher purpose in employee engagement, I look to the East and Toyota's corporate response to the flooding of its factory in Durban, S. Africa in 2022. HQ's priorities were: Stage 1/ protect employees; Stage 2/ protect the local communities; Stage 3/ repair the factory; Stage 4/ learn how to prevent this from happening again.

MYTH 4: THE PURPOSE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IS HAPPINESS.

This is a confusion between outcome and purpose.



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It is true that employee happiness increases when employees are both engaged and enabled in achieving breakthrough levels of performance.

The problem is that focusing on happiness can have disastrous consequences in highly competitive markets. I have seen sites close because the local leadership team sought to ‘buy’ engagement or ‘industrial peace’ via above inflation pay raises and productivity-reducing concessions in pay negotiations.

MYTH 5: VALUES AND BEHAVIORAL STANDARDS SHOULD BE EXPRESSED POSITIVELY.

When I work with employees and their leaders to create a bottom-up, high-performance culture, employees are concerned about what will happen if people act contrary to the new culture they have so carefully created; they ask what will happen if a senior person does not adhere to the new culture?

In a challenge to the principle of ‘turn the other cheek’, the Irish philosopher and politician Edmund Burke is said to have remarked: “All that is necessary for evil to succeed is for good men to do nothing.”

Burke is arguing that it is not enough to lead by example, we have to act against what is wrong; if we believe in our new culture, we have to defend it.

Employees worry about using what is seen as ‘negative’ language, but restricting ourselves to positive language is simply less effective in achieving this.

We need the full range of linguistic levers available to make the most memorable and therefore the most effective statements of the behaviours describing the new culture.

Stating we will challenge anyone talking negatively behind another’s back is a powerful way of making respect and tolerance a behavioural reality rather than a vacuous aspiration. ■