



Tools & Techniques Playing Our Part...Carefully... in the 'Best Employer' Competition

By Sherrill Burns



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The growth of the best employer competition

As OD professionals we are often part of, or consulting with, organizations that have joined or are considering being part of what could broadly be termed 'best employer' competitions. Web sites and employment ads increasingly display 'Canada's Top 100 Employers' award logos, '100 Best Workplaces in

Canada' or '50 Best Employers' from Canadian magazines. There are sector awards such as the 'Best Small and Medium Employers' award and the '100 Top Hospitals' list. Scientist Magazine gets in the act by ranking employers by factors such as research environment and job satisfaction and the Working Mother web site rates job flexibility and benefits. Social research firms are engaged by lobby groups to rate 'best' companies for benefits and diversity and award an array of distinctions.

Since Fortune Magazine moved beyond its revenues-based 'Fortune 500' ranking system to evaluating organizations by their employee relations practices, creating the '100 Best Companies to Work For' ranking, interest in best workplaces has escalated in the media. Great organizations make great stories and each year whole editions of magazines are focused on their award-winning organizations. Now an array of consulting firms, often linked to the media outlets sponsoring the competitions, have grown up offering speakers, conferences, training workshops and pre-assessments. Thus, a new industry has been born in a relatively short time, one which our clients are facing regularly in the press.

Desire to be a 'Great Employer'

The reason these competitions have taken off is not hard to figure out. The perception of key stakeholders, such as the financial community and the boards of directors, that the integrity of the organization is solid and that its reputation will be maintained over time is vitally important. From hospitals with multi-million dollar fundraising initiatives to fast-growth firms seeking private capital, an award can go a long way to building external confidence in the institution and the CEO leading it.

In many organizations the pressure is already on in what the Economist magazine (October '06) calls 'The War for Talent'. The ability to attract and retain top talent is likely one of the most influential factors for interest in these competitions. For organizations proud of their employee relations practices, it is one more way they can demonstrate to

current employees that their workplace stacks up well with the competition.

In addition, for the past decade, process and systems improvements received the majority of executive mindshare. Now, with continuous process improvement institutionalized and systems installed to support knowledge sharing and collaboration, executives have shifted attention to the factor with the most potential to impede progress, their organization's culture. Many are ready for an assessment of the way it works to support and inhibit success, and may regard competitions as a tool for such an assessment

Our Role as OD Professionals

With such a hot marketplace for 'best workplace' competitions and with executives finally ready to look beyond employee relations to the culture underpinning performance, what role can we play in helping them with choices around these tools? What do we need to know and what do they need to know to make informed choices? Organizational development specialists are one of the few types of experts that many organizations will be able to use to make decisions about how to use these tools wisely (or not at all). The role may include:

1. Clarifying the underlying assumptions of these tools.

Two common assumptions of the tools used in these competitions are that there are a set of 'best' workplace characteristics that companies can be compared against, and that seeking these 'best' characteristics will result in organizational success. Is there indeed a 'best' set of employee relations practices? What if these characteristics are not in alignment with where the organization needs to get to next? What if pursuing this designation builds strengths that have little to do with future needs?

2. Assessing the objectivity, accuracy and sensitivity of the tools.

Does having a bonus plan mean you are a 'best employer' and does paying out a bonus plan early indicate, with any degree of precision, that one organization is better than the other? This is how one organization leaped to the top in rankings in 2006 in one competition.

Does movement within the rankings mean anything? A look at the 100 Best Places to Work in America shows Starbucks, SAS Institute and Adobe in the top 20 in 2005 and disappearing from the top 30 in 2006. Could such recognized institutions have changed so significantly in one year? Surveys loaded with item statements testing employee satisfaction can take a big hit in times of change and may need to be used only by stable organizations anticipating few changes in the future. OD professionals can help organizations assess how objective and sensitive the instruments are and whether the data they receive will provide information for action.

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3. Participation Over Time. A brief look at some of the award programs reveals that many organizations participate for one or two years, perhaps setting the award as a goal, and then let the designation lapse. Before competing for an award, there needs to be some consideration of the impact of *not* winning, dropping in ranking or withdrawing from the competition, on employee and stakeholder perceptions. Creating a short- and longer-term plan is a key part of managing the risks of these competitions.

Playing a Valuable Role

'Best employer' tools have some benefits and many risks that organizations need to fully appreciate. If the dimensions being measured are important for the organization, if the tools are objective and sensitive, if the awards result in improved talent attraction and retention and perhaps engage boards and other stakeholders in appreciating the way employee relations or

the organization's culture is developing, they can play a positive role for the organization. Be prepared. Get acquainted with these competitions. Check out the factors and processes they use and be ready to help clients determine the best way to participate or to explain to powerful stakeholders why competing isn't in the organization's best interest. Executives will be under pressure to make a good choice. Let's help them.

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Develop Your Personal Quality Management System™

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Identifying & Verifying the Expectations of Those You Serve

An organization that listens to its clients and consistently meets and exceeds expectations is rewarded with the results of increased client satisfaction and reduced costs leading to increased revenue and increased profits. Identifying and verifying the expectations of the people in your Universe attracts similar results: increased satisfaction in relationships and reduced energy drain leading to increased opportunities and increased quality of life.

Personal Management Processes and Best Practices

Well-designed and well-implemented processes promote consistency. The value of consistency is increased probability of quality and reduced waste. The value of consistency in your personal and professional life is enhanced quality of life experienced with ease, joy, and grace. What are your personal management processes and best practices? Does each process and best practice add value and improve your quality of life at work?

Measuring and Analyzing Your Effectiveness

An organization consistently measures client satisfaction and employee satisfaction, and analyzes the effectiveness of its processes in achieving its quality objectives. When the need for improvement is identified, it is based on objective evidence. Your personal quality management system benefits from

similar tools for measuring and analyzing your effectiveness as a quality person. These tools include self-evaluation and feedback from others.

Creating Your Personal & Professional Development Plan

Human capital is the greatest asset for an organization. An enlightened organization understands the importance and the ROI of well-planned and well-executed professional development, and professional coaching. You are your own best investment. Make a conscious effort to invest in your personal and professional development. Accept that you are worthy of every investment whether it be self-care, knowledge, marketable skills, or professional coaching.

Taking a Leadership Role in Your Life

As you embark on developing your personal quality management system, recognize that you are the Chief Management Officer (CEO) and Quality Manager of your life. You are leading and driving this initiative to integrate the concepts, principles, and standards of a personal foundation and quality that will have profound effects in your workplace, family, community, and the world.

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