It's all about people – and that's what makes it so rewarding – and potentially awarding!

As a finalist in the Australian Small Business Champion Awards, Melinda Fell looks at what's made her consulting business a success – and what she personally finds rewarding about working with her C-level clients – in her own words...

"I work with people because I've always been intensely curious about how they tick and what drives human behavior. I enjoy taking people on a journey that helps them achieve their goals and transition into different environments. Guiding them to make a shift, being an opener of doors, helping others to see opportunities they may not realise are there - all that totally energises me!

"I transition people into more appropriate environments for many different reasons, but suddenly I began to think, why were all these top performers so open to a move, why were they all so easily disengaged? Why weren't their employers more successful at retaining them?

"This started a train of thought about who is really happy with their job – totally engaged? Where were clients eager to tell me how passionate they were about what they were doing and the company they worked for?

"What is the difference between people who love their jobs and people who don't? I realised that in many cases the answer was leadership – and more explicitly the individuals who were workplace leaders, both those in formal leadership positions and others whose leadership roles were more informal – but recognised by their colleagues.

"How could I help these people understand that there is a better way, that leadership is not a destination but a journey, one during which they pick up fellow travellers, the people who they realise will contribute to the team's success.

"Aware that I was not the first person to think along these lines and keen to know more, I enrolled in a global accredited executive coaching course and spent three years studying human behaviour to learn how I could help my clients and their companies to achieve positive lasting change.

"It's been an interesting journey, during which I realised that despite all the changes in corporate workplaces, people remain the core contributors to an organisation's success or failure - and that many human capital strategies are failing the people with whom they operate.

"Most people understand the concept of a "changing workforce" and that there are huge opportunities for leaders to enhance their human capital strategies, however in many cases it's simply not working. Many of the better leaders and employees are either speaking up, or in the worst cases, remaining silent and voting with their feet.

"I asked myself why, in this environment, do I also meet so many complacent people that sit in silent endurance and don't consider new opportunities? Dissatisfied with their current situation but prepared to live with it because finding a new path is unsettling or challenging.

"I've seen toxic workplaces in which business leaders care more about their pay checks than the culture and the environments they create for their employees.

"In many of these cases HR departments are part of the problem, simply providing band aid solutions to human capital issues, throwing survey results around like confetti while avoiding coming to grips with the underlying issues.

"This led me to wondering how an organisation can work towards helping its leaders to solve their most pressing problems. Recognising their roles and ensuring that they are more than passive bystanders, motivating them to become active participants in creating and guiding exceptional workplaces.

"To achieve progress, the focus needs to be measurable performance management activities, such as clarifying work expectations, providing people with the skills and resources they need to perform at their best, developing and promoting positive co-worker relationships.

"I know we can't change the world overnight, but also understand that there are potentially huge gains to be made in the short term.
Experience has shown that business or work units in an organisation that have strong engagement can have nearly double the odds of success (based on a summation of financial, customer, retention, strategy, quality, shrinkage and absenteeism metrics) when compared with other business units operating in the bottom quartile.

They are challenging and potentially very rewarding statistics.

To realise the benefits of such change, we need to start executive committees talking about programs that move towards an environment that progresses from a culture of employee satisfaction which only measures things like how much workers like their perks and benefits to a “coaching culture”.

At an operational level, it’s all about engagement. Managers can’t be left on their own hoping that they will learn something from survey results that will change their work processes.

Global statistics evaluating employee disengagement and its cost to business suggest that it is in the billions.

Today there is an opportunity for alert organisations to profit from this by taking a closer look at how their critical engagement elements align with their performance development and human capital strategies. (If you don’t do it, your competitors will!)

We all know that engagement starts at the top. Highly engaged organisations ensure that managers are engaging employees from the minute they start their induction. Employee engagement must be a fundamental consideration in their people strategy, not an annual “tick the box” activity.

From my own experience talking to senior management, I can pretty much guarantee you of all topics keeping leaders up at night, performance management is one of the most pressing. Attracting and retaining the best people is the foundation on which enduringly successful organisations are built.

Consequently, many leaders are addressing their performance management strategies head-on. And in many cases that means throwing out accepted wisdom, or the ‘it’s the way we’ve always done it’ solutions out the window (being cognisant of OH&S and pedestrians below, of course).

Today, the consensus through research seems to be that annual reviews – as they have been traditionally practiced – are not worth the time and expense. They provide little real actionable information and tend to be biased towards maintaining the status quo, possibly with a few tweaks around the edges.

Once a year an official opportunity to discuss an employee’s performance? Complete it and treat it like any other item on the week’s to do list, simply check it off and ignore it until next year. This is a tired, formulaic approach to performance management that would be better described as an infrequent, task based activity rather than one that provides support and value to employees and meaningful information to employers.

It’s apparent, that against this organisational structure there’s a lack of ongoing, actionable feedback and structured, directed coaching.

The missing link in performance management could be more frequent, ongoing conversations, but we also have to remember that many managers struggle in this area.

Structuring these discussions to provide clarity, context and meaningful outputs to their participants and employing organisations is a challenge. They must always recognise what is currently broken in manager-employee communications and be focussed on identifying and providing remedial processes.

My challenge, as I focus on creating my new business model, is to develop a program that engages all parties and uses their input in a collaborative goal setting process. A new program that considers the entire employment life cycle, from all stakeholders’ points of view, and enables it to be measured and managed more efficiently and effectively.

With an end result that motivates everyone to strive to achieve their goals, because they are “our goals” not just “my goals” or “my boss’s goals or my company’s goals.”

And when we reach all those goals concurrently, everyone scores!
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