

January 2009 Interview Transcript

Catch Your Limit: Jennifer Brown



Interview (transcript)



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CatchYourLimit.com talks with Jennifer Brown:

A NEW DAY

Corporations are under the gun, now more than ever, to innovate. That's a good thing.

Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC), a New York City-based workplace consulting firm, is committed to helping business executives redefine leadership in today's troubling economic times. With low morale and paranoia running rampant within companies of all sizes, across industries, it is imperative that managers foster workplace environments that resonate with current and incoming talent. Here, JBC President and Founder Jennifer Brown, discusses the changing dynamics of American workplaces and offers fresh ideas for navigating these uncharted waters.

What are some of the biggest cultural challenges facing organizations today?

These economic times are driving leaner and leaner workforces. That means people are being given more responsibility and are expected to work better, faster, smarter, and more collaboratively. So one of the challenges compa-



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nies have to get their heads around is how to empower employees who are being asked to do more with less. Imagine your team shrinking by 80 percent, but still being held accountable for the same deliverables! Companies have to figure out a way to keep employees excited about the work they're doing and who they're doing it for.

Compounding this challenge is the fact that workforces increasingly are becoming dispersed around the globe. This puts colleagues farther away from the people they're being asked to work more collaboratively with, and it puts managers farther away from the employees they're striving to keep motivated. Companies that are able to rise above time zones and cultural differences will be better equipped to innovate, a requirement for staying afloat in these strained economic times.

How does JBC work with organizations that are struggling to come up with models for innovation?

We start by facilitating conversations about roles. Traditionally, companies have locked people into a pretty rigid structure, defined by function. But these hierarchical models don't allow people to express their ideas. So essentially, JBC helps organizations with re-branding their individual professionals.

For example, engineers are normally considered part of an operations unit, held accountable according to the accuracy and timeliness of their execution. But in today's economic landscape, in which innovation is imperative, top executives are calling on all employees to

contribute. The problem is that many of these functions struggle to break out of the execution box that they've been kept inside by the same people who are now asking them to break out. So we help employees brainstorm ideas about how they can stretch their wings to become an engine of innovation and not just execution. We also work with them on skills and language development so that they feel confident about sharing their ideas with upper management and with clients.

It's a very exciting personal transformation for individual professionals to think about how they can be a part of an organization in the future versus what have they've been in the past. And from a company perspective, it's critical for them to look closely at all their resources and ask what they can bring to the table in terms of innovation. Maybe one of the silver linings of this economic crisis is that companies, as they are forced to really examine every ounce of value within their organizations, will engage in more responsible and innovative behavior.

How will reexamining individual roles affect corporate culture, especially in this age of telecommuting and cross-country/continent offices?

The first thing to be aware of is that the concept of culture is already being redefined by changing workplace dynamics. Culture used to be comprised of the people who share cubical or office space, or those who engage in conversation by the water cooler or at cocktail hour. But today, culture includes virtual relationships with internal colleagues as well as suppliers, vendors, clients

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and customers.

One of the things I encourage companies to think about is, “Who makes up your team?” With multiple internal and external stakeholders often contributing to projects, most companies find that they need to look beyond their own walls to define their teams. A team is really the whole ecosystem for a product. Widening the definition to include external partners not only expands a company’s resources but it also gives vendors a seat at the table, which motivates them to deliver more value to customers.

This ability to be more inclusive when defining corporate culture is especially powerful for leading Fortune 100 companies. These industry titans have a lot of influence within their markets—and with influence comes responsibility. Large organizations have a responsibility to be role models for all the other organizations they touch, including suppliers, vendors and clients. So if large corporations offer cultural models that promote inclusiveness and diversity, it raises the bar for all organizations within their network.

Fostering an attitude of inclusiveness is something that taps into employees’ personal beliefs and often requires changing mindsets. Are organizations receptive to change?

Organizations are so complex and there are several different ways that change happens. It can be driven from the top, which is the easiest and quickest way to initiate change. But even the most ambitious of executive mandates are often delayed by the reality of moving an initia-

tive throughout the various layers of a company. To implement a change initiative that sticks, organizations must develop a solid plan for delivering a consistent message to all levels of the company and for ensuring that someone at each level takes the ball and runs with it—that’s often the missing piece.

Change also can be initiated from the bottom up. In this case, focus groups form to discuss their desire for change. Too often, though, these desires meet resistance from unsupportive managers. At JBC we call this the “sandwich effect,” meaning that the meat—middle-level managers—doesn’t get it. Regardless of how motivated a company’s CEO or Generation Y employees may be about implementing change, initiatives can get squashed in the middle.

Many C-level executives are involved in larger communities of leaders and feel a lot of pressure to keep their companies on the cutting edge. As a result, they think about these things and are tuned into the notion that innovation stems from change and diversity. Often the biggest challenge for them is, “How do I get my 3,000 managers on board with this?” It needs to be a multi-level attack, including training, one-on-one coaching, fireside chats, whatever it takes. It’s a really tough nut to crack.

So is change possible? And if so, how?

Yes, change is possible, but companies have to be willing to get creative and commit to it. We’ve all seen the disheartening stories of the shortcuts people take to achieve financial success. Under a corporate system whose only marker of suc-

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cess has been revenue and compensation, greed rather than a company's long-term interests drives actions. I hope that one positive outcome of all the recent examples of corporate greed will be that companies revisit how they measure success.

Organizations need to ask themselves, "In what ways beyond quarterly earnings can we drive the behavior of our organization?" Questions like this are normally saved for annual employee surveys, issued by HR and put on the back burner by the people who actually have the ability to effect change. But it's a new day that calls for more oversight and new tactics. Companies must develop metrics that hold leaders accountable for not only numbers but also things that are critical to innovation, such as an inspiring and diverse culture that encourages people to bring their best ideas to work.

What effect do generational differences have on diversity in the workplace?

Workplace diversity has been through many phases throughout history. Originally, diversity initiatives in many cases were driven by legal mandate—class action lawsuits, for example. The initiatives were born out of fear, with a sole motivation of staying out of trouble. That perspective, which is incredibly cynical, is difficult for younger generations to comprehend. They have grown up in a world where they are used to looking around the table and seeing multicultural faces. They're comfortable talking about sexual orientation. Young men are used to being matched or surpassed by women.

So many young employees walk into today's corporate environments and feel like they're stepping back in time. They witness a workplace that is very hierarchical, where there is clear discomfort surrounding gender, race, and sexual orientation. Younger people don't understand why they're forced to participate in training sessions that teach them how to interact with someone who is different from them. Many of these training sessions are led by managers of the Baby Boomer generation who cannot speak the language of their younger colleagues.

How can companies mend this gap in perspective?

Not mending the gap will result in the next generation feeling alienated, which will leave organizations with empty leadership pipelines. So it is critical that companies examine their diversity policies and make them current. Companies need



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coming environment for people of all races and ethnicities? Do we convey an open attitude toward people of differing sexual orientations? Do our diversity training programs portray us as enlightened about the issues or close-minded in our views?”

These and many more questions can help companies develop diversity initiatives that are current and relevant to cross-generational audiences. It's important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, though. Companies shouldn't immediately get rid of whatever existing diversity programs they have in place. There are still plenty of experienced employees who will be most receptive to a Baby Boomer perspective on the topics. Employees should be viewed like a segmented market—different approaches are appropriate for different audiences. □

For more information about Jennifer Brown Consulting, please visit: www.jenniferbrownconsulting.com.

To arrange an interview with Jennifer Brown, contact: Eda Kalkay at eda@edakalkay.com.



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About Jennifer Brown Consulting

Jennifer Brown Consulting is a talent strategy consulting firm that specializes in developing and implementing unique processes and tools that enhance productivity, efficiency, and profitability. Our solutions are designed to specifically impact the metrics of our clients through behavioral changes within their organizations. Over the past 10 years, we have consulted to Fortune 500 companies in a number of markets in the United States, Europe and Asia, including Ernst & Young, Cisco, American Express, ESPN, and State Farm.

www.jenniferbrownconsulting.com

About Catch Your Limit Consulting

Catch Your Limit Consulting is a strategic management and marketing firm headquartered in Florida's capital city of Tallahassee with an office in Virginia's capital, Richmond. The company's mission is to guide our clients in the pursuit to catch their limit.

www.catchyourlimit.com