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Enabling Leadership Change

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Bill Huffaker, Director of Global Talent Management and Acquisition at General Motors, joins Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series. Bill discusses his experiences helping to bring leadership change to a 114-year-old company during a pivotal period in its history.

Bill has served in similar positions in a variety of high-profile, global companies that are also undergoing significant change, including Google, Microsoft, and Visa.

This eBook is a brief part of that conversation. Listen to the full podcast at zengerfolkman.com.

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How would you describe your transition from Google to General Motors?

It was a bit of a culture shock, moving geographically, but Google's culture compared to General Motors' culture is very different. General Motors is an older, established company while Google is notorious for its culture, speed of execution, and innovation.

Following bankruptcy, General Motors had to unplug a lot of programs, services, and processes around talent. I love building things. It is sort of like working in a giant startup, but at scale and at a global level.

How is leadership development impacting culture in this organization that is going through massive transformation?

According to our CEO, "General Motors is a 114-year-old company, but it is also a four-year-old company with 114 years of history." We have to be mindful about the past and the organizational dynamics. Approaches that have worked at other companies wouldn't always translate well to this environment.

When an organization goes a heartbeat away from closing its doors, you take change seriously. There have been cultural-change efforts in the past, but everybody at GM recognized that we needed to change.



We were building cars that we thought were great products and wanting our customers to buy them. We've flipped that and are now building cars that put the customer at the center. Our recent recall situation was also a wake-up call.

We've been very clear about what we needed to change and we've engaged leaders at all levels as well as all employees. Our CEO has been very vocal and has been driving that change. We talk about culture change, but she's taken it to the level of behaviors.

This program, with its strength-based approach, has given people hope in an organization that has gone through post-traumatic stress disorder. Helping people understand what they are extraordinary at, and helping them embrace and leverage those strengths, has been an incredible, inspirational message of hope.

Your CEO mandated that all senior leaders participate, but how did you get them to *really* participate in this process?

We have approximately 8,500 people leaders, worldwide. To target our efforts, we have a goal that everybody gets a 360-degree review. We're about 5,500 people into this after two and a half years.

My personal philosophy is that I don't think we should mandate something. On the other side of that coin, we don't want people that aren't interested in learning and growing. What we should always mandate is that you can't work for 30 years and quit the job but not quit the company. That's a sad situation when the world passes people by.

As we launched the program, we did mandate that the top 300 leaders participate. We see their responsibility as being the vanguards of the culture and to lead by example. We stressed the fact that this process is important and to make time on calendars and to make time to focus on development. We don't want this to be seen as a check-the-box exercise.

We have high demand for people to enroll in this process. The constraint has been people's time to attend the workshops.



As you talk about this organization with a long history, and you bring in new ideas and programs, there has to be a bit of distrust and uneasiness. How have you been able to mitigate this?

People have long memories. GM had a cradle-to-grave career focus that is no longer the case here or in most modern companies. People are aware of 360 programs in the past in which data was shared and decisions were made that positively or negatively affected careers.

We had a very strong communications campaign when we launched the program to say what the program was and what it wasn't.

We have received requests from senior leaders to share 360-review information. I simply tell them no. I tell them we promised not to share that information without each participant's consent—not even behind closed doors.

Communication and getting in front of people telling them that this information is for development purposes only has squelched any concerns. It took about six months, but I don't hear about trust issues anymore.

You've followed the best practice of following a 360 review with coaching. What have you learned from this process?

We have invested in certifying 180 internal coaches. Having coaches has helped us move away from a check-the-box workshop thing.

The first step in changing and growing is raising awareness, but it is the follow-through and action that we worry about. Coaching has been absolutely helpful here. Each of the top 300 is assigned a coach. The coach meets with each participant three times over three months. We've found that it is not onerous to sign up for three meetings, rather than to engage a full-blown coach. Having a coach increases the return on investment.



As humans, it is not intuitive for us to understand our strengths. You tell the story about getting five A's on a report card and one C and the parents ask, "Why the C?" That's how we live. You should be saving more. You should be a better spouse. You should be more involved in your church or community. Your cholesterol should be down. We are conditioned to view all of these metrics to say we are not good enough.

Something has to happen after the workshop to remind participants of their strengths and how they translate to growing and stepping into something bigger. This is where the support from a coach becomes important.

Where did you start with this process?

When we first started, we were focused on getting people enrolled and driving towards our goal of getting 8,500 leaders through it. This process felt like a 747 at the beginning of a runway—when those engines turn on, it takes a few seconds to begin to move that plane down the runway before liftoff.

If I could rewind the tape and be an idealist, I'd think about sustainment and what's next before even launching the program. But our focus was getting the program off the ground and not waiting 18 months down the road to say we're finally ready to turn on the engines.

There is a wealth of research evidence that proves that combining coaching with the 360 process provides a far greater return on investment. What has been your experience?

People have experience with great coaches and not-so-great coaches. When you tell people in the workshop that you are going to get them a coach, they ask, "What is this? Are they going to go over the data again?"

What I've found is that it helps to describe what they will be talking about in the coaching conversation and how it can help them and provide value. You have to coach participants on what coaching is.



Is there anything else that you've learned that will be beneficial to our listeners?

First, the marketing and education of the program are very important.

A research-based approach resonates with people. It isn't just somebody saying we think this competency is important; it is saying these are the 16 differentiating competencies, and we have data to back that up.

The strength-based approach has also been really important. We have been taught our entire lives to get better at things that we are bad at. A coach can help you better understand your strengths. When I teach leaders how to conduct performance reviews, I tell them to zero in on three key points. Don't boil the ocean and say everything that's wrong with that person and everything that's brilliant about that person. I also tell them to pick one thing that the person does extraordinarily well. After performance reviews, people gravitate to the negative things that were said—or to those things that were perceived to be negative.

We chose this program because it is no longer good enough for one of our leaders to be better than another GM leader. We want all GM leaders to be extraordinary compared to other global leaders. This point of comparison helps us guard against being insular with our leadership and patting ourselves on the back. Our competition is global for market share as well as for talent.



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