Section: Best Practice

CHANGING A *CULTURE* OF *FACE TIME*

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Marriott's intense work ethic was driving away talented managers. Transforming that *culture* wasn't easy, but the change led to happier employees--and better results.

THE HOTEL *BUSINESS* is relentless. We have to provide 24/7 service 365 days a year, and every single day is just as important as any other. So when a problem arises late on a Friday afternoon, someone has to fix it that night or over the weekend. Managers who have an attitude of "I'll get to it on Monday" don't last long in our industry.

Not surprisingly, Marriott, which prides itself on providing excellent customer service, for many years had a deeply ingrained *culture* of "*face time*"-the more hours you put in, the better. The typical workweek exceeded 50 hours for many of our managers. That philosophy of "see and be seen" was effective for serving customers, but it had a price: By the mid-1990s, we were finding it increasingly tough to recruit talented people, and some of our best managers were leaving, often because they wanted to spend more *time* with their families. Employees are the foundation of any *business*, but nowhere is this more true than in the hospitality industry. Our sole product is the service we provide to families and *business* travelers. If we were to lose our ability to attract and retain the best managers and staff possible, we'd be in trouble.

So we knew that our emphasis on *face time* had to go. In early 2000, Marriott implemented a test program called Management Flexibility at three of the company's hotels in the Northeast. The goal of the six-month pilot was to help Marriott's managers strike a better balance between their professional and personal lives, all while maintaining the quality of our customer service and the bottom line of our financial results. We found a lot of quick fixes by eliminating redundant meetings and other inefficient procedures. The tougher task was overhauling the fundamental way we thought about work. Transforming a company's *culture* can be harder than *changing* just about anything else; people's natural inclination is to hold on to whatever feels familiar, even when there are better alternatives.

Because of the pilot program, managers at the three hotels now work about five hours less per

week. More important, they perceive a definite change in our *culture*, with less attention paid to hours worked and a greater emphasis on the tasks accomplished. Furthermore, through surveys and anecdotal evidence, we found that those managers are experiencing significantly less job stress and burnout. Because of this early success, Marriott is implementing Management Flexibility at hotels in the western, south central, and mid-Atlantic regions, and the company plans a wider rollout in 2002. The pilot taught us an invaluable lesson: Not only is it possible to change deep-rooted attitudes about work, but doing so can lead to improved *business* practices and higher efficiency.

A Moment of Revelation

About two years ago, I had one of those "bing!" moments -- when the lightbulb inside your brain goes on. At the *time*, I was in charge of the Copley Marriott in Boston, a 1,150-room convention hotel that is one of Marriott's largest properties. I was having a one-on-one rap session with the person who oversaw our switchboard operations, a young guy in his twenties who was one of our best entry-level managers, and I asked him where he saw himself in five years. He said he really wasn't sure that he would still be with Marriott. "I'm working a minimum of 50 hours a week, sometimes 55 or 6o hours," he said. "And I commute an hour each way, so it's not just ten-hour days for me; it's 12-hour days. I don't know if I want to continue doing that, because I want to have a life outside of work."

I was taken aback--but not by the fact that he felt that way. After all, when I was his age and working long hours, I probably had the same thoughts. What struck me was how comfortable he was in telling me. Years ago, when I used to have similar rap sessions with my boss, one of the things I certainly would not have done was to tell him that I had doubts about staying with the company. *Times* have changed, I thought to myself. This generation has the gumption and actually feels comfortable enough to say, "I think you guys are out of step with what I'm looking for. I don't mind working hard, but I also want you to recognize that I have a life outside this company."

Other Marriott employees were saying the same thing, albeit in different ways. From exit interviews and from word of mouth, I knew we were losing a lot of very good managers who wanted greater flexibility in the workplace. Parents, for instance, weren't happy to be dropping off their kids at day care at 6:30 in the morning and then not picking them up again until 6 at night. Recruiting was also becoming tougher. A disturbing trend was the declining percentage of people who would accept the jobs that we offered.

So I was ready for the phone call I got in February 2000 from my boss, Bob McCarthy, who at the *time* was the senior vice president for the Northeast region. He had called to ask whether I'd be interested in volunteering the Copley Marriott to be a test hotel for the Management Flexibility program. The objective was for us to figure out ways that Marriott could help provide a better balance between the professional and personal lives of its managers. The success of our efforts would be judged by four criteria: reduced work hours, less job stress and burnout, no adverse impact on Marriott's financial performance, and sustained high quality of service to guests.

Bob had selected two other properties to participate in the initiative -the Peabody Marriott, a smaller hotel (260 rooms) north of Boston, and the LaGuardia Marriott, a midsize hotel (about 450 rooms) near the New York airport. The thinking was that if the pilot program was successful at these three hotels, each one a different size, then Marriott could feel reasonably confident rolling it out at its numerous properties nationwide.

Fortunately, Marriott does a pretty good job of recognizing and rewarding employees who take prudent risks. The philosophy is this: If you're not willing to try new things that have been thought out thoroughly, then you're probably not being as aggressive as you should. So when I first proposed the idea of participating in the Management Flexibility pilot to the members of my senior leadership team, I tried to convince them that we could do something important for the company-help it retain and attract the best and brightest employees. In the process, we could also get some recognition for the talent we had in our own hotel to pull the project off.

Some on my leadership team jumped on the bandwagon immediately. Others needed to talk things through. One of their questions had to do with trust: Would people abuse the program? We discussed that issue, remembering that we had voiced similar concerns when we initiated "employee empowerment" in the 1980s. Before then, if a customer in a Marriott restaurant didn't like his food, for example, the server would have to call a supervisor over to the table, which might take *time*, and the customer would then have to explain his problem all over again to the supervisor. After employee empowerment was introduced, the server could simply adjust the bill by herself. If people didn't abuse employee empowerment, why would they abuse Management Flexibility?

A larger issue was whether it would truly be possible for managers to cut back their hours and still get their work done without letting Marriott's high standards of quality slip. Deep down, I knew that it was. Every organization has its share of inefficiencies, and I was sure we had ours. All we had to do was find them and weed them out. Also, because our *culture* placed so much emphasis on the amount of *time* spent at the hotel, I knew that managers were sometimes hanging around at work when they didn't really need to be there. They were doing unnecessary busy work to pass the *time*, or they were subconsciously inflating their work, perhaps taking one hour to write a report that might have been done in half the *time*. To stop such practices, I knew we had to change the *face-time* aspect of our *culture*, and to accomplish that, I needed people to realize that even subtle, unintentional actions could sabotage our efforts. We could send out as many memos and talk about as many initiatives as we wanted, but if someone leaves work early one day and sees his boss glancing at her watch as he is heading out the door, that tiny gesture could send us back to square one.

Consequently, everyone on my senior leadership team -- which included the director of food and beverage, the director of finance, the director of human resources, the director of engineering, and the director of room operations -was going to be crucial in setting the right tone for their departments. For some of the skeptics, I followed up our initial discussion with one-on-one meetings to talk through their doubts. Finally, after discussing all the pros and cons thoroughly, everyone agreed that the potential upside of the project far exceeded any possible downside.

Soon after news of the pilot program spread, I received a clear sign that we were headed in the right direction. A sales associate at the Peabody Marriott had resigned from the company sometime earlier, but after she heard that we were implementing a new initiative to shorten managers' hours, she asked if she could withdraw her resignation. Already the program was helping us to retain valued employees.

Following Through

As the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. To change people's attitudes toward *face time*, we had to show them we were serious. First, we had an outside consulting firm, WFD, conduct a series of focus groups that included all 165 managers at the three hotels--from

the entry-level managers to the senior ones. It was important that all of our managers participate; we wanted to send a clear message that this was an important project and that everyone's opinion mattered. Only then could we get an accurate picture of what we were dealing with.

The focus groups helped uncover several inefficient procedures. We learned, for instance, that Marriott managers could file certain *business* reports less frequently and that many of our regularly scheduled meetings were unnecessary. As an example, all the managers at the Copley Marriott used to meet monthly for a financial *review* of how the hotel was doing. We would go over expenses, costs, and profits, line by line, and everyone had to sit through reports from all the different departments, regardless of whether the discussion concerned them directly or not.

We also reexamined certain hotel procedures we were following, mainly out of tradition, that might have been inefficient. Our protocol dictated, for example, that front-desk managers' schedules should include a one-hour overlap with the person on the next shift. But people in the focus groups questioned that practice: Wouldn't 15 minutes be sufficient to get the next manager up-to-date?

In other cases, people were asking for certain tools to do their jobs more efficiently. For instance, lots of managers wanted access to the Internet so they could communicate with customers through e-mail. Without access to e-mail, employees were having to send proposals, contracts, sample menus, and other materials to customers by fax, overnight mail, or messenger--not exactly the most efficient way to transact *business* in today's hyperlinked world. And those managers who had computers wanted better IT support. At the *time*, if they had a problem they had to call a help desk that was staffed at our corporate headquarters in Washington, DC, sometimes having to wait until the next day before their problem could be solved. The managers wanted someone on-site who could help them right away, a person who understood their software, their systems, and the work they did in their departments.

Soon after we collected this information from the focus groups, my leadership team and I felt it was important to move quickly. Our strategy was to get some early wins to build momentum and to convince everyone that we meant *business*. So within a couple weeks, we started picking the "low-hanging fruit." First, we eliminated our departmental and monthly financial *review* meetings. I can't overstate the effect that had. Our *culture* was such that some of those meetings were considered sacred cows; many people assumed that Marriott would always have those meetings. So eliminating them was like committing a big taboo--one that was noticed by everyone. And second, over the next several weeks, we also showed people that we were willing to put our money where our mouth was by providing Internet access to those managers who needed it and by hiring an on-site systems manager. We highlighted these changes in our employee newsletters. The word spread, and people started to realize that we were indeed serious about creating an environment that would enable them to work more efficiently and get home earlier.

A Cultural Evolution

In retrospect, transforming our *culture* wasn't as hard as I thought it would be, mainly because people truly wanted the change. And it wasn't just employees with families; most managers expressed a desire for less stress and a better balance between their home and work lives. Nevertheless, I knew that my senior leadership team and I had to be extremely careful with how we proceeded.

First off, we wanted to make sure that people didn't mistakenly think we were talking about a 40-hour workweek. Our philosophy, which we continually emphasized through various formal and informal communications with employees, was that we were eliminating the assumption that you had to work at the hotel for a certain number of hours. We were no longer looking for *face time*. We were looking for people to be at the hotel when they needed to be and to go home when they didn't. Our message was simple: Do whatever it takes to get your job done, but be flexible in how you do it. If last week was hellish and you had to put in a lot of extra hours, but this week is much slower, then take the afternoon off and go see your son's school play or your daughter's soccer game. Don't feel bashful about doing it, and don't feel that you need to make any excuses.

Changing the work philosophy of some of our longtime managers was tricky. A few of them expected that, "If I'm your boss, you should be at work before me, and you should still be here when I leave" My leadership team and I knew we would have to work hard to change attitudes like that, and we knew we had to start at the top, with ourselves.

For me, that meant rethinking the way that I approached work. I had joined Marriott as a desk clerk almost 30 years ago, so the company's *culture* had pretty much become a part of me. I'm not sure that the company's emphasis on *face time*-that if you weren't working long hours then you weren't earning your pay--ever made total sense to me, but Marriott was certainly a successful organization, so who was I to question it? My wife and I have five boys, so over the years I've scooted out early on occasion to get to one of their hockey games, but I usually did so discreetly.

Under the Management Flexibility pilot, I made a more concerted effort to leave early when I could and to make sure that people were aware I was doing it. I figured if employees saw me grab my gym bag and heard me say, as I'm walking out the door at 3:30 in the afternoon, "I'm headed home. It's been a long week. See you later," then they would feel okay about doing the same. People have seen me working late plenty of *times*. They didn't need to be convinced that I work hard. They needed to see that I had a life outside of work and that when *business* was slow I wasn't going to hang around just because it wasn't six o'clock yet.

About three months into the pilot, we noticed one sure sign that things were *changing*: People were no longer telling "banker's hours" jokes when others would leave early. In the past, when someone left at five o'clock, a coworker might remark, "Working just a half day?" Such comments reinforced our *culture* of *face time*, and they certainly made people feel guilty about the *time* they put in. Soon, though, those jokes were being replaced by something a lot more supportive--genuine interest in others' outside lives: "That's great that you're leaving early. Doing anything special? I'm taking off early tomorrow because of my kid's baseball game."

Of course, a minimum amount of *face time* is essential because people need to connect with their coworkers, customers, and suppliers *face*-to-*face*. They need to network, and so we let managers know that, although we no longer expected them to work long hours every week, we did expect them to be at the hotel every day that they were scheduled to be there.

Timely Results

During the six-month test program, we had regular reviews with our managers and other employees to track how things were going. We also conducted surveys, which suggested that there had been some dramatic improvements. For example, managers reported that before the pilot they were spending about 11.7 hours per week on "low-value" work, which was defined as

the things they were required to do that added little value to Marriott's **business** -- like having to attend certain meetings, even if it meant coming in on their scheduled days off. At the end of testing in August 2000, the **time** managers spent on low-value work had been slashed nearly in half to 6.8 hours per week. Overall, the managers at the three hotels said they were working an average of about five hours less each week, with the greatest **time** savings in the sales and marketing department; that group reported an average reduction of almost seven hours per week per manager.

Perhaps more important was the change in attitudes. Before the pilot program, 77% of managers felt that their jobs were so demanding they couldn't take adequate care of their personal and family responsibilities. At the end of the pilot, that number had plummeted to 36%. Also, the percentage of managers who felt that the emphasis at Marriott was on hours worked and not on the work accomplished plunged from 43% to 15%. (See the exhibit "Attitude Adjustment.")

One of the most important things we learned from the pilot project was that people could be just as productive--and sometimes even more so -- when they worked fewer hours. How could this be? Because when they're working those fewer hours, they're extra motivated to get things done, and they don't waste any **time** in doing what they need to do.

Throughout the pilot program, we were extremely careful to monitor the quality of customer service to make sure our standards weren't slipping. Fortunately, Marriott already had a feedback system in place: the questionnaires that our guests routinely fill out. Our corporate headquarters compiles the data (about 70 to 80 responses every month) and sends a report to us. The results showed no change in quality, which assured us that, as far as our guests were concerned, Management Flexibility was all but invisible.

We also monitored the financial impact of the pilot program and were relieved to learn that it did not adversely affect our bottom line. Although we did have additional capital expenditures (for example, providing computers and Internet access to certain managers), that cost was more than offset by gains in productivity (for instance, sales managers were able to acquire additional customers).

Furthermore, the Management Flexibility program fostered an atmosphere of open dialogue. A crucial take-home message from the pilot was that management shouldn't dictate that people do things that don't make sense; employees who are doing their jobs day in and day out often know best how to find efficient ways to do their work. After all, the best ideas don't always come from the leaders in an organization, and it's very easy for any company to slip into bad habits of doing something just because that's the way it's always been done. At Marriott, I have rap sessions with five or six associates from a particular department every Friday afternoon, and I've noticed that people now talk more freely in those meetings. Valuable information always bubbles up -often a suggestion for revising an inefficient or outdated policy--that would invariably make me think, "Wow, I'm sure glad we had this meeting."

A Balance for Everyone

When I was growing up, my friends and I played football in the fall, hockey in the winter, and baseball in the spring. Now-adays, even young kids will specialize in just one sport, maybe playing hockey year-round. They go to hockey camps and practice in the summer because they want to get a leg up so they'll get on the best travel teams. Little Leagues have become so competitive, and parents, right or wrong, are supporting that behavior. With my five sons, I've

been just as guilty as anyone else.

Some of that increased competitiveness has made its way into the workplace. The attitude is this: If I work longer and harder, and if I put off some of my vacations and resist going home early so I can do just a little extra work, that's going to give me an advantage over my peers. There's some truth to that, because those extra hours can give people additional experience that will make them eligible for their next promotion. But does that competitiveness then put pressure on the rest of the organization, including people who also want to get ahead but who want to do so with more of a balance between their personal and professional lives? The cold reality is that, yes, it does, and I'm not sure we're ever going to get away from that.

Of course, the best managers are not always the ones who work the hardest. Marriott has some weak managers who work an awful lot of hours, and it has other managers who are outstanding but who are quick to leave at four o'clock if they're done for the day. The company also has exceptionally talented managers who are workaholics--highly motivated and willing to make sacrifices in their personal lives to get ahead professionally. They've chosen a lifestyle that works for them, and that's great if they're happy with their choices. But the big cultural change here at Marriott is that we shouldn't expect or encourage everyone to work the same way. After all, people who thrive both at work and in their personal lives are just as valuable -- if not more so -- as people who thrive only at work.

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Attitude Adjustment

During the pilot test of its Management Flexibility program, Marriott conducted employee surveys to gauge how--and if--the corporate *culture* was *changing*. The managers' responses, some of which are reported below, showed substantial changes.

The percentage of Marriott managers who said:

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Legend for Chart:

A - Before the pilot
B - After the pilot
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	A	B
"The emphasis is on hours worked, not on work accomplished."	43%	15%
"My job is so demanding, I take care of personal/family responsibilities."	77%	36%
"I feel drained at the end of day."	83%	59%
"Management is supportive of		

less **_face time._"**   56%   73%

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