

Embrace change

Customer interaction leads to productive adjustments

BM's Lou Gerstner proved that elephants can dance. Exxon, under Lee Raymond's leadership, demonstrated that a phoenix can rise up from the ashes.

Dynamic local businesses including Harley-Davidson Inc., Johnson Controls Inc. and Emteq as well as innovative nonprofits including St. John's on the Lake and St. Ann Center have consistently outperformed over extended periods of time because they have figured out how to create stability by mastering the change process.

Each has developed the organizational capability to anticipate events, solve problems and implement change faster than the competition. They have formed close bonds with their customers which enables them to recognize opportunities early, sometimes years, before the market catches wind of the trend. These organizations refuse to allow the way they operate today to become a stranglehold on how they will operate tomorrow.

Harley-Davidson (H-D) consistently outperforms the auto industry in profitability and has done so for more than 20 years. Whether intentional or not, H-D created a direct communication link between headquarters and its most enthusiastic customers back in 1983 with the formation of the Harley Owners Group (HOG). Rich Teerlink, former CEO, eliminated the top-down leadership and replaced it with a model of shared leadership, continuous improvement, learning and development, and accountability. He fundamentally believed that "people should have the opportunity to influence their life and workplace."

Through HOG, Harley team members (including current CEO, Ken Wandell) ride with customers, attend HOG

rallies and participate in other company-sponsored events where they talk with customers directly and observe their behaviors. Additionally, they gather input from H-D dealers and supplier networks, and then flow information in real-time to key stakeholders, especially marketing, so reaction time is quick.

By establishing a direct flow of communication from all levels to the strategic leadership team, market opportunities are exploited.

At St. John's on the Lake retirement community, the Resident's Council which includes ten different committees made up of residents who are interested in everything from general "Concerns" to "Food," "Green" and "Health" provides a steady stream of ongoing and unfiltered messaging between leadership and their residents. Discussion takes place. Decisions are made. Action steps are defined and appropriate personnel are held accountable. This relationship provides leadership with a clear line of sight about how well the organization is living its mission and values and delivering on its promise to provide an exceptional resident experience.

Market leaders are driven by a different standard of excellence than the norm – they continually strive to deliver unique and measurable value to their customers.

At St. Ann's Center for Intergenerational Care, Sister Edna Lonergan identified the need in the early 1980s for an intergenerational community-based center that supports family well-being. Today, St. Ann's Center provides loving support for family members with dementia, Alzheimer's, or individuals in need of adult care, child-care, grooming, message therapy,



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counseling or respite care, regardless of their economic means. Her goal "to lift the human spirit" through intergenerational care, has earned St. Ann's Center numerous local and national awards. Their approach to serve the whole person – mind, body and spirit – and enhance the quality of life for both caregivers and family members has created a unique and valued resource for the Milwaukee community.

What these organizations share in common is a relentless commitment to adapt and optimize market opportunities. They each have developed their own systematic approach to change that allows them to shift gears swiftly and deliberately. They refuse to allow circumstance to dictate their future. Rather, they have figured out how to be the master of it. ■

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