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The Six Attitudes Leaders Take Towards Social Media

by Anthony J. Bradley and Mark P. McDonald | 10:08 AM October 17, 2011

Slowly but surely, business leaders are shifting their attitude toward social media — from seeing it as a threat to discovering its very real opportunities.

And their attitude matters, a lot. Social media is about people, not technology. Its business value does not come from social software or a snazzy website, even one with 800 million users (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2011/09/facebook-f8-media-features.html>). Its value stems from how business leaders, from senior executives to managers, use it to foster new collaborative behaviors that materially improve business performance.

Leadership attitudes, and the organizational culture they spawn, are critical to social media success. They are among a company's most fundamental social media assets — or liabilities. Here are the six basic categories that business leader attitudes toward social media fall into:

Folly

Leaders with this attitude consider social media a source of entertainment with little or no business value, and they typically ignore it. Where a folly attitude prevails, the approach to a social media strategy must emphasize direct business value tightly tied to well-known and recognized organizational goals or challenges — and it must avoid flabby value statements around improved collaboration and stronger relationships.

Fearful

Fearful leaders see social media as a threat to productivity, intellectual capital (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intellectual_capital), privacy, management authority, regulatory compliance and a host of other things, and often discourage and even prohibit its use. This attitude can reduce the potential risk, but it also stifles any possible business value. To counteract fear, the strategic approach should focus on relatively low-risk initiatives, even if other, higher-risk opportunities might offer greater business value.

Flippant

These leaders may not ignore or fear social media, but they don't take it seriously, either. This typically leads to a technology-centric approach where the company simply provides access to social media and hopes that business value will spontaneously emerge. This rarely bears fruit. Important in countering this attitude is convincing leadership that purpose matters, and that they should progress beyond the technology and identify good purposes for social media — causes that are strong enough to catalyze and mobilize communities of people to act in a way that delivers value to the community and the organization.

Formulating

Formulating leaders recognize both the potential value of social media as well as the need to be more organized and strategic in its use. The right approach here should build on this positive foundation, emphasizing the broader strategic value of social media and mass collaboration (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/10/the_true_something_of_social_med.html), with a succinctly expressed set of business opportunities that (1) demonstrates social media's potential impact across many areas of the business, and (2) is strong enough to capture the attention of the most senior leaders.

Forging

In companies where leaders have a forging attitude, the whole organization is starting to develop competence in using social media to assemble, nurture and gain business value from communities. To keep progressing, leaders should recognize previous successes, capitalize on growing momentum, advocate continued evolution and increase investments. They should also promote additional grassroots social media efforts as critical in

becoming a highly collaborative social organization

(http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/10/all_organizations_are_social_b.html) .

Fusing

This is the most advanced attitude, and still rare. Fusing leaders treat community collaboration as an integral part of the organization's work, ingrained in how people think and behave. This is a description of a *social organization*, and in such organizations the need for an explicit vision and strategy subsides — all business strategy and execution already include community collaboration where it's appropriate.

How do most leaders shape up? Right now, our analysis indicates that leaders of most organizations have yet to progress to the Formulating stage, which accounts for the high social media failure rate. We know treating social media as strategic can lead to tangible business value and competitive advantage, so the goal is for business leaders to move quickly past the Folly, Fearful, and Flippant stages and get right to Formulating. Ignoring social media, or throwing it over the fence to Marketing or IT could create serious business risk.

Where does your organization stand?

Take the Social Readiness Assessment

(http://www.gartner.com/it/products/research/media_products/social_org/assessment.jsp) and find out.