

Directions

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Book Review

by Ellen C. Davis

High Commitment High Performance: How to Build a Resilient Organization for Sustained Advantage
by Michael Beer

Harvard professor and OD consultant, Michael Beer's new book is a comprehensive text for anyone wanting to create a high commitment, high performance organization. While there is much to learn from this text, even for those of us who have been in the business of creating organizations for many years, I found two sections of particular interest and value.

- **“What stands in the way”** of sustaining successful high commitment, high performance organizations? Beer discusses six “silent killers,” all things I too have seen in organizations that have stumbled on their journey to high performance.
 1. Ineffective top team
 2. Unclear strategy, values, and priorities
 3. Either top-down or laissez faire senior management style
 4. Closed vertical communication
 5. Poor horizontal coordination
 6. Inadequate down-the-line leadership skills and development

Beer asserts that the only way to overcome these barriers is for the leadership team to willingly listen and openly engage in conversations where their managers and employees can tell them what is really going on. He calls it enabling “truth to speak to power.” I concur completely!

- **“What HCHP leaders must do, be, and know.”** The best way to summarize this is to provide you the chart from page 127 in the book:

TABLE 6.1.

WHAT HIGH COMMITMENT, HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERS MUST DO, BE, AND KNOW

<i>Do</i>		<i>Be and Know</i>
▪ Connect authentically	➔	▪ Requires self-awareness, capacity to be self-revealing
▪ Advocate a direction	➔	▪ Requires deep beliefs and will to lead
▪ Inquire into the quality of the direction and barriers to implementing that direction	➔	▪ Requires will to receive feedback and learn
▪ Help the organization confront and resolve tensions	➔	▪ Requires readiness to engage in conflict and have “the conversation that matters”
▪ Design an aligned organization	➔	▪ Requires systems perspective and design skills
▪ Develop a partnership with employees	➔	▪ Requires going beyond the “heroic” model of leadership
▪ Lead learning and learn to improve leadership	➔	▪ Requires courage to be vulnerable and learn

Beer, Michael. High Commitment High Performance. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

Beer adds a crucial reminder that success in building a high commitment, high performance workplace will not be possible without an aligned leadership team. Again, I concur completely!

I hope I have prompted you to consider sitting down and reading the book – it is very good and has much more to offer than the portions I have highlighted here. Michael Beer and I both have consulting roots at Corning. And one of the book’s collaborators, Russ Eisenstat, completed an internship at Cummins in my department. Maybe it isn’t so surprising I found much to like after all!

If you want to read more, but don’t have time for a whole book, you can access an interesting interview with Michael Beer at <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6119.html>.