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Rekindling the Human Spirit in Business

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Editor's note: Academy Member **Rodrigo C. da Rocha Loures** shares with us a story of business survival, reinvention and transformation that exceeded his every expectation. It was one in which he learned that a company must be treated as a living system in order to unleash its vitality. In resolving his crisis, Rodrigo writes of the valuable lessons he learned about inclusion and reinvention that resulted in a transformed and successful organization of content and aware people.

Sustaining Appreciative Change Through Organizational Design

By Rodrigo C. da Rocha Loures, President, Nutrimental Foods

The consciousness of who we are and our purpose permits each one to effectively contribute to the well-being of the whole.

The ups and downs of my thirty-five years of business have taught me that during crucial moments, the company's destiny depends above all, on the collaboration and determination of people. Because of that, in 1997, our plan of action to reinvent the company was based on the principles that all persons can collaborate while deserving respect and co-creating trust.

Nutrimental, founded in 1968, experienced a period of growth and success for more than 20 years. In 1992, the market changed significantly. Because of the Brazilian Economic Plan of the 'Real' (1994) our situation became dramatic. In 1996, it became clear that reinvention of the business was, once more, a question of survival. Through friends sharing their own cultural journeys, I was awakened to the idea of unbinding life at the company. That is, to treat the company as a living system, unleash it from bureaucracy and sponsor its reorganization in order to emphasize continuous learning. I began to study theories and experiences of other leaders intensely. In 1997 I chose the path of business reinvention in an appreciative way.

These were my rational reasons to begin the program. What most confirmed this strategy was the enthusiastic reception of people. I knew that the search and interest in acquiring knowledge by human beings is innate. I became convinced that there would be the openness to build a "Learning Organization" through an "Appreciative Inquiry" approach, but our experience with the process itself exceeded all my expectations.

In order to guarantee sustainability of the process, we began to listen to all interested parties: shareholders, employees, suppliers, consumers and the general society. We heard from them about the best strategic possibilities to interact with the environment. We discovered together that the vitality of the organization lies exactly there--within this perspective and ability to interact, within our current dynamic context.

Since then, with a clear sense of identity and purpose, we have been constructing an agile and strong organization, capable of responding successfully to any challenge. An organization with space for knowledge discovery, creativity and individual initiative, where the change processes are managed in a consciously sharing way, with issues and conflicts being resolved through dialogue. In summary, we have co-created an organization of people who are aware of the whole and an organization of content people.

From this experience, the first big lesson we learned was that our business must be based on inclusion instead of exclusion regardless of our product and service focus. People appreciate, even need, to participate in building their future. The second big lesson was that it takes courage to constantly reinvent ourselves.

What really gives life to Nutrimental?

When the organization was founded, the people that “created this company” were the ones that were giving strength to it. As it kept growing, each new member who joined also naturally would give force to it. People have the need to be part of something bigger than themselves. When they really feel integrated within a group, they more readily give their energy to the whole. That is really easy to observe in soccer games where people even fight or cry because of their team. They feel part of the team, and they give their energy to the team, so that the team may take this infusion of energy and use it for the well-being of the whole.

As people give life to an organization, they also have the power to take life from it. When they do not share common values, the risk of one following his or her own interests instead of working for the whole is very big. People holding shared values within the company are responsible for giving identity to the organization. The nature of these values is what stimulates collaboration and builds up the spiritual level of the organization. Shared values guarantee that each one operates according to the interest of the whole, not merely for their personal or individual interests.

Our company has taken some heavy hits in its journey. Usually in situations like these, analysts call for layoffs and retrenchments. But we believe that the best way for dealing with crisis is through the geniality, innovation and commitment of our people. We need them to be energized and willing to take risks as they break old dysfunctional patterns.

One aspect of life is the objective rational side that we may choose to emphasize (physical and social phenomena that are observable, for example). But what really gives us energy is the enthusiasm that comes from feeling part of the whole. This is more abstract and is the most important because it is responsible for people bringing their life force into their work. Therefore, one of the most important roles of the organization is to foster an atmosphere of trust among people. If trust is there, then the natural needs and wants of each person naturally give strength to the whole organization. Each person can find fertile soil to grow and bloom in his or her own area, while contributing to the whole. So, it is not just an economic rationale that is influencing our strategy, it's something more fundamental in our character: it is about living our values and principles within an integrated practice.

I believe Nutrimental's life-giving force is its people: people who work within our values' web of relationships, who work directly with us, and who consume our products. But what really keeps our community alive is its spiritual dimension that comes from the faith and trust within the interrelationships among all the people around us. It is this spiritual dimension that, in chaotic, mysterious, abstract and unexplainable ways, gives energy, strength and continuous life to the company!

Rodrigo Loures, 57, Brazilian, is Nutrimental Foods' CEO. In 1988, he implemented a program called 'New Era,' based upon shared management concepts. In 1997, he began to focus on the development of a Learning Organization Culture, leveraged by the continuous application of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology and whole system involvement. Mr. Loures is a member of the Brazilian Foundation for Sustainable Development, World Business Academy, Society for Organizational Learning, AI Consulting, and the ETHOS - Brazilian Institute of Social Responsibility, among others.