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WOULD OIL WORKERS EAT TOFU?

In the fall of 2007 Dr. Kevin Fleming, clinical psychologist-turned executive coach, was riding shotgun in the cab of a Ford pickup, traveling north on a dirt road in western Wyoming at a steady 40 miles per hour. The day was warm, and the psychologist with a University of Notre Dame Ph.D. passed the time listening to the Joe Stampley CD in the player, muffled partly by the hum of rushing air through the open windows. The driver was a man named Tyke, an oil field worker whose job was to maintain forty pump jack wells strung throughout this barren county of sagebrush and antelope.

Tyke was six-and-half feet tall and wore large aviator glasses and a close-fitting blue t-shirt over a stomach that extended almost to the steering wheel. He was born in the South and raised on fried foods and sugary snacks, and occasionally Tyke would take a long draw from a soda bottle, or reach into a chip bag, and the psychologist would pull out his notebook and scribble something. It had been going on like this for several days. The pumper (as Tyke called the job) would drive

hundreds of miles in a ten-hour shift, stopping periodically to fix broken tubing, grease a valve, or take a reading on one of his nodding donkey wells, and then would climb back in the cab where he would eat or drink again; and the psychologist would record what he saw.

Occasionally the doc would ask a question. *What would get you to pass up a pizza place and order a salad? How many sodas do you drink in a day? Have you ever tried tofu, it's not so bad you know? Do you know what age you are estimated to die?*

Dr. Kevin Fleming was on a mission. For more than a year he'd been riding along with oil field workers such as Tyke. His goal was to help these men and women live longer, to reduce the incidents of heart disease and cancer that was killing so many in their profession. The oil company had hired him to influence behavior but first he explained he needed to influence belief. And to do that, he had to get into the minds of a group of tough-as-nails pumpers and roughnecks. In the end, the company *was* able to influence the behavior of its workers and wellness improved. But it wasn't easy. Beliefs don't change overnight.

At the beginning of their diet or fitness programs, the changes they were choosing to make were forced. They didn't like eating healthy food or exercising. It was hard work. It didn't feel good. And the only reward was a sense of short-term accomplishment and maybe the fact that their friends and family patted them on the back or simply stopped pestering them about their habits. But as the physiological change in their bodies began to form, the reward system changed as well. More began to feel a boost in their self-esteem. Many actually started to feel good when they exercised. The healthy foods started to trigger reward systems in their bodies

because they were receiving nutritional replenishment. And yes, some even developed a taste for tofu (and some didn't; after all, it *is* tofu).

Said Fleming, "The interesting aspect of weight loss that is relatable to workplace culture and belief is the moment when the person who lost the weight says, 'I get it now. It clicked and now it makes sense.' That's the point where the brain allows the new belief system be right. And for most people, that is a transformational moment—their belief system changed."

That people would begin to believe in a new way of acting once they begin to experience intrinsic rewards is easy to understand. What's the tricky part, of course, is the front end of the process, the stage when nothing feels like it makes sense, even though the change is perfectly sensible—even proven by data. Fleming had some powerful insights about how to help people through this phase.

Since his time in the oil fields of Wyoming, the Cowboy Shrink (as Fleming is known) has become a thought-leader in corporate psychology and he founded the company Grey Matters International, which works with executive teams to help them drive success. Despite the Ph.D. hanging on his wall, Fleming was never your stereotypical couch therapist. Even when he was doing traditional counseling, he had a reputation for being aggressively blunt and uncomfortably inquisitive with his clients. He offered absolute truth and transparency.

True to form, the first words Fleming spoke to us when we met with him were a succinct, "What's this all about?" We explained that we had found that a culture where people *believe* drives profitability, and that we wanted to learn about the psychology of belief. That's when Fleming interrupted and said, "First,

understand that our brains are wired to *feel* right, not necessarily *be* right,” he said. “That’s where you need to start.”

Reinforcing what we’ve already written, he explained, “Our brain is wired to want to prove that our behaviors and feelings are justified and have reason. We all want to prove we’re right. Managers want to prove they’re right. Employees want to prove they’re right. And when you combine all these people into one organization, you can end up with an egocentric system collision.”

When we asked him to elaborate, he said, “Too often leaders state who they are and if people don’t share their same beliefs, those employees quickly learn to do what I call a cost/benefit ratio dance—they minimize the dissonance they feel by showing up and doing the minimal amount necessary to seem like a team player.”

How then can a leader align beliefs and build a culture?

“You have to understand the complexity of the brain,” he explained. “For example, new employees enter your workplace with their own beliefs. If you immediately try to align their beliefs with those of the culture, the brain can switch into self-protective mode. Those employees might not hear the benefits of what you’re saying, but they could make you think they do. So the net effect of this self-protective dance is that they might superficially accept your leadership, rejecting it whenever it suits their purpose, claiming ‘I never really bought in.’ Which actually is quite true! In fact, this is 99 percent of the pain I work with.”

As Fleming shared this with us, we realized it means that as leaders we must first allow people on our teams to feel like valuable individuals, respecting their

views and opening up to their ideas and inputs, even while sharing a better way forward. It's a balancing act that requires some wisdom.

"Let's face it, early leaders didn't survive on the Savanna by diplomacy," said Fleming. "Our brains as leaders are hardwired to survive, save face, and make us feel that we're right. But being right and being wise are very different things, with dramatically different outcomes."

And being wise means we learn when to act and when to not. Fleming says the best leaders regularly ask themselves two questions:

"What do I have to DO right now to help my people do their best?"

and...

"What should I NOT do right now to help my people do their best?"

This may mean doing nothing except staying out of an employee's way. For instance, if a worker truly buys into your purpose and goals, managerial action may actually be detrimental to the employee's performance, engagement, or relationship with you, because it may lead them to believe that they're not trusted.

As for the non-believers: Fleming says many books will tell you the key to finding out what your people think is to ask them. "That's logical, until we consider the reality of that process. Companies are structured in hierarchies. So when we ask people to tell us what they think—or believe—we must consider the fact that the brain is hardwired to protect us. **Employees won't speak the truth if they think**

that truth won't be heard or integrated. And most managers won't truly listen to their employee's beliefs if they perceive those beliefs as opposing forces."

We learned this lesson early in our careers. In one his first jobs out of college, Chester was working for a woman who acted as if she was never wrong about anything. Riding in a taxi to an appointment in Manhattan, the boss asked him, "Do you like your job?" It was a time of intense pressure in the organization, and the workplace was truly miserable, but the young Chester thought, *There's no way I'm giving an honest answer.* So he said, "Oh, I love my job." The boss' response? She swore at him, repeated the curse in case he missed it, and then went silent for the remainder of the cab ride.

As a newcomer to the corporate world, he had felt in a no-win situation. He knew he couldn't be candid with such a misanthropic boss, and yet when he tried to fake his way through she saw right through it. When they arrived at the appointment Chester called his wife and said, "Honey, get a for-sale sign on our lawn before I get home. I don't know where we are going, or what job we are going to get, but we aren't going to stay here."

While meetings between leaders and employees are rarely that extreme, the vast majority go this way: Leaders ask for input from their teams. Teams tell the manager just enough of what they believe the manager wants to hear to protect their survival. After all, they know that if someone shares a view that is against the manager's or team's beliefs the chances are very good that it won't be embraced, or that it will be given what Fleming calls pseudo-acceptance; a state of "not overtly rejecting something while maintaining wiggle room for self-benefit."

Obviously this is not a sustainable way to operate, and leaders ask Fleming how to fix it. “They ask how to get the truth out of their employees. Notice how they’ve already blamed the employee. And that’s the problem.”

He says, “The key is not to get rid of the squeaky wheels. Instead, leaders should consider why the wheels are squeaking. **It’s possible that all the other wheels are actually the problem and the squeaky wheels are simply communicating the problem.**”

If a leader truly wants to read the bubbles over their team’s heads, the simple solution is this, “Don’t crap on the data or the feedback,” he says. “And not only that—actively seek evidence that disconfirms what you believe, even reward it when you hear it.”

One last personal story about how we’ve experienced this challenge firsthand. Once, when Adrian was still a naïve corporate communications leader, he approached his company president and earnestly told him morale was on the decline in the firm. “I’ve been listening to employees grumble in the break room and on the shop floor. They even complain to each other over the stalls in the men’s room. The situation is, well, disquieting.” The president smiled kindly, as if Adrian were a misguided kindergartener, and explained, “If morale were so (he paused before repeating the near euphemism) *disquieting*, well then surely my executive team would have told me.”

Adrian left the president’s office bewildered. He knew of course that the man’s leadership team wasn’t about to admit employee engagement was in the dumps. It would have been an admission that these men and women were failing in

their roles. It took months before he was able to start persuading the company's president that employees were fed up.

Fleming argues that the vital first step in bringing about transformations of belief in ones employees is awakening within ourselves, as managers, the recognition that the real truth of any belief is actually not as black and white as we thought.

“The leader who holds most dearly to the unbreakable nature of their belief is the one I am most worried about, for that pride gets projected in the name of righteousness. Most problems around promoting shared belief in organizations come from this subtle misguidedness—where we attempt to change others beliefs while holding on to the supremacy of our own.”