

Tapping the Hidden Reserves

The Breakthrough Strategy: Using Short-Term Successes to Build the High-Performance Organization, by Robert H. Schaffer.

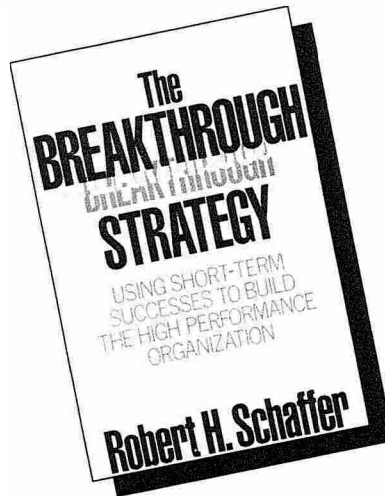
"In most organizations, unbelievably vast quantities of potentially productive capacity are untapped, undemanded, unused, or frittered away," claims Robert Schaffer in *The Breakthrough Strategy*. Often that capacity is released only when something forces a company into overdrive—when a major new customer is brought in, when a new product must be developed in record time, when a natural disaster strikes, or when key players walk off the job. Mostly, says Schaffer, employees rise to meet the challenge in ways managers never dreamed they could or would. Moreover, they enjoy it.

"The customer came and told us that nothing except absolute excellence would be accepted," says one line manager. "It was generally considered a suicide mission. The team was really turned on by the challenge of doing something that was considered impossible to do."

"People were challenged every day," says another. "Engineers were working up to 100-hour weeks. They were getting calls at 3:00 in the morning. There was a strong drive to succeed in this program. It was the most exciting time of my life."

Schaffer says that most companies are working at only 40, 50, or 60 percent of capacity. He shows managers and consultants how to tap hidden potential by using disciplined, determined efforts to improve constantly. Many real-life examples of companies or divisions that have been revived—including Motorola, Northern Telecom, Harley Davidson, and Allied-Signal—attest to the effectiveness of the methods.

In Part I he describes some of the psychological patterns and manager-



ial norms that can keep performance levels low:

- psychological myopia—blindness to technological or economic change;
- wasteful work patterns—a high level of busy-ness and a low level of accomplishment;
- weak performance expectations—hiding in the bureaucracy or failing to connect results with rewards and penalties;
- misuse of work management disciplines—too many or too lofty goals, fuzzy accountability;
- an invisible corporate conspiracy—an unclear decision-making process with low performance norms.

Part II identifies "zest" factors that can stimulate performance improvement during a crisis. Such factors include a sense of urgency, an "impossible" challenge, fear of failure, encouragement to experiment, visions of success, and an exciting assignment. Schaffer outlines how managers can use zest factors as wedges to help employees break through performance barriers. Says one breakthrough convert, "Perfect work was required—and the schedule required immense personal sacrifice. The team loved it."

Schaffer also outlines how to make measurable results a virtual certainty and how to design projects that incorporate the skills and disciplines needed for long-term gains. The key lies in the title of the book—*short-term* successes. He suggests the following simple steps:

- begin with an urgent and compelling goal;
- anticipate a small but measurable success in the near future;
- focus on a measurable, bottom-line result;
- exploit what people are ready, willing, and able to do;
- use available resources and authority.

Part III shows how breakthrough projects can provide opportunities to introduce new management methods, new technologies, and new tools and systems into companies. Schaffer shows how top management can combine one success on top of another with organizational strategy to improve company-wide performance and accelerate the change process.

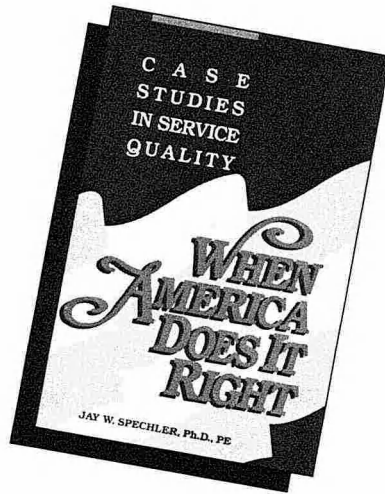
The secret of Schaffer's building-block approach is that the directives are doable, understandable, and appealing. "Stop focusing all your attention on infusing your organization with the right programs, preparations, and technology, in the hope that someday these magic ingredients will make your company a ferocious competitor," Schaffer advises. "Instead, go for a better result at once, now, immediately—exploiting the zest factors to make it happen." Schaffer takes the stand that any company can improve measurable results with what they have now—by such actions as reducing inventory by 10 percent, increasing turnaround time by a day, or decreasing the number of levels in the approval process. Diagnostic worksheets help guide the process.

Schaffer's logic is startlingly simple and direct—it reverses the squeaky-wheel-gets-oiled corporate view of management. *The Break-*

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through Strategy is a high-energy book. It is amply grounded in theory, but at the same time is realistic, highly readable, and practical. Schaffer, who heads his own management-consulting firm, knows how to get to the point. Seasoned professionals as well as young, hustling managers will find it relevant, thought-provoking, and readily useful.

The Breakthrough Strategy: Using Short-Term Successes to Build the High-Performance Organization. 196 pp. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing, 617/492-0670, \$22.95. Circle No. 180 on Reader Service Card.



In Pursuit of Quality

When America Does It Right: Case Studies in Service Quality, by Jay W. Spechler.

What is "quality"? The special feel of a plush fabric? The luxurious look of an expensive car? That extra-special attention from the maitre d' at an upscale restaurant? From a customer's view, quality is a belief that someone stands behind a product or service after the sale.

When America Does It Right takes an inside look at corporate America's recently renewed commitment to understand and deliver quality on a regular and consistent basis. Each chapter is a case study of a customer-service program at one of 55 U.S. manufacturing or service firms. Chapters, grouped by industry, are based on information submitted by executives who were instrumental in developing, implementing, and maintaining the programs. The case studies include, among others, Anheuser-Busch, TRW, Cummins Engine, Pillsbury, Winnebago Industries, Warner-Lambert, and The New York Times Co.

The premise of the book is that corporate America is finally realizing the enormous direct and indirect

benefits of providing the kind of service customers expect and that the true judge of quality is the user, not the maker. The contributors all seem to agree that implementing a high-quality customer-service program "requires a well-defined purpose, patience, and discipline."

Manufacturers are having "to expand their concept of quality to cover the total service life of their products," says author Jay Spechler. "It's one thing to build a computer. It's quite another to staff a telephone center to respond to customer inquiries about how to use the computer."

In an attempt to describe quality in effective customer-service programs, Spechler outlines six key components:

- having a quality service strategy and a company-wide commitment to put the strategy to work;
- using technology to improve communications with customers and to reduce human error;
- creating quality measurements to track the level of service and to ensure that customer requirements are met;
- using feedback mechanisms that tell employees how the customer perceives service;

■ using training to provide the skills and knowledge necessary to reach the company's goals for quality service;

■ believing in a management philosophy that enables the initiatives to succeed.

According to Spechler, quality must become a top priority at all levels, "from executive commitment and corporate policy statements to the nuts and bolts of delivering quality—transaction by transaction." One contributor, the head of a major manufacturing firm, states that "a simple organization with decision making at the lowest level possible is mandatory."

Spechler describes how each company assessed its strengths and weaknesses from the customer's perspective, and then revised and revamped its systems, from production to distribution to order processing. He discusses innovations in technology, measuring customer expectations, feedback and training techniques, and more.

The writing is a bit too uniform and textbook-like at times; perhaps it is the result of a mammoth effort by Spechler to unify the voices of the many contributors. The book might have read more smoothly had he retained (or assigned) a first-person perspective, speaking directly from the insider's point of view. Still, large amounts of useful material have been condensed into logical, manageable chapters. The book's most appealing aspect is the subject matter itself. Spechler succeeds in conveying the importance of service quality programs in today's industries and in showing the strides innovative companies have made toward achieving quality in service.

This book may urge corporate execs to take a hard look at their professional commitment to their customers. By itself, *When America Does It Right* is a strong indicator of business growth and entrepreneurial revival. All readers will be heartened

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to know that quality is alive and well in the United States.

Spechler is director of quality assurance and engineering at American Express in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. *When America Does It Right: Case Studies in Service Quality*. 599 pp. Norcross, GA: Industrial Engineering and Management Press, 404/449-0460, \$49.95. Circle No. 181 on Reader Service Card.

Ongoing Skills Alignment

Facilitating Technological Change, by Patricia M. Flynn.

From the black-and-white TV to the IBM Selectric, products and technologies have a way of evolving, reaching a peak, and eventually being surpassed by a superior innovation. Each has its own life cycle and technological cycle. According to author Patricia Flynn, there is a human relations counterpart to those more traditional cycles—a "skills-training life cycle" that relates changes in technology to the availability and provision of skills training.

Facilitating Technological Change is a 200-case study of the implications of high technology on human resources. For several decades, Flynn studied the introduction of automated equipment or control devices in manufacturing facilities and offices, primarily in the United States and about a dozen international firms. She views products, production processes, and technologies as dynamic functions with skill and training requirements that change as the technology evolves.

A skills-training life cycle has implications for business and academia; Flynn cautions employers and educators to expect and be prepared for changes in basic-skills, training, education, and employment requirements. Some of the

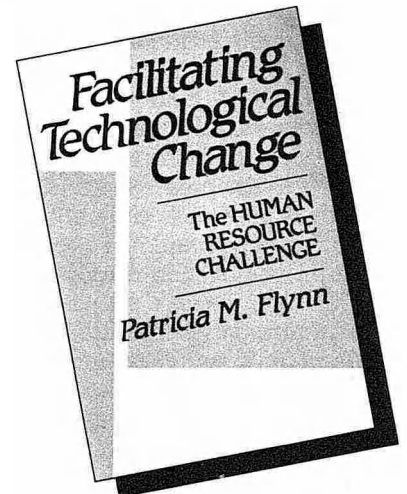
outcomes of technological change include

- skill shortages or surpluses;
- job creation, deletion, or "enlargement";
- commuting or relocation.

Flynn uses historical examples from the firms studied to describe how a new technology in a workplace can drastically alter hiring and staffing practices or even change the course of workers' career paths. Tasks may become simplified or redundant; labor-intensive duties may be "deskilled." For instance, "the mechanization of one frozen-food plant virtually eliminated all lifting of bagged materials, shoveling, and other manual transportation tasks."

In another example, a newly installed electronic route controller at a railway firm significantly reduced the jobs of boilermakers, woodworkers, drillers, riveters, platers, and blacksmiths. And the introduction of automatic assembly factories in the 1950s lessened the need for many hand laborers and required new higher-level skills and broader technical knowledge and competence.

Throughout the book, historical examples shed an interesting light



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on how technological development over the years has affected people's lives and organizational requirements. Flynn implies that today's employers and educators may learn from the past and make better human resource and training decisions because of it.

In her case analyses, Flynn finds that adopting new technology affects companies differently. "Some firms experience employment declines, some have net gains, and still others indicate no change." Before making organizational decisions, such as whether or not to expand the company because of increased productivity after implementing new processes, Flynn advises decision makers to consider other factors as well. Those may include the firm's rate of growth, its prior occupational mix, and the timing of the adoption relative to the technology life cycle.

One chapter discusses technology's disparate effects on workers, by such factors as gender, age, education, and professional status (blue-collar, white-collar). The chapter identifies common patterns and generalizations that employers should watch for during the adjustment.

Flynn's research impresses on the reader why organizational flexibility and adaptability have become so crucial, as today's businesses steadily introduce high-tech electronic processes and equipment, and as "downsizing" and "upskilling" become routine. The phenomenon mirrors the explosion in the technical-training professions and organization-development academic fields.

Facilitating Technological Change is an extensively researched and documented work. The writing is fairly technical, with a scholarly tone, but the presentation is clear. It is written for scholars and practitioners in a variety of fields who are attempting to interrelate technology, jobs, training, and education. Flynn's success in showing those in-

terrelationships fills a conspicuous gap in the technical HRD literature.

Flynn is professor of economics at Bentley College, where she is also executive director of the Institute for Research and Faculty Development. *Facilitating Technological Change*. 233 pp. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing, 617/492-0670, \$29.95. **Circle No. 182 on Reader Service Card.**

Additional Reading

CareerMap: Deciding What You Want, Getting It and Keeping It!, by Neil Yeager. 262 pp. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 212/850-6418, \$12.95.

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Change Agents: New Roles and Innovation Strategies for Human Resource Professionals, by Manuel Jossey-Bass, 415/433-1767, \$25.95. **Circle No. 184 on Reader Service Card.**

The Complete Guide to Customer Service, by Linda M. Lash. 216 pp. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, \$24.95.

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The Outplacement Solution, by Karen S. Wolfer and Richard G. Wong. 204 pp. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, \$12.95.

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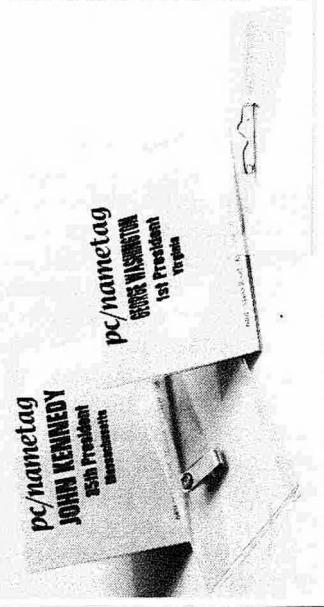
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