

# THE CURIOUS CASE FOR INTERNAL FOCUS

By Dr. Keith Owen, Ron Mundy, and Frank B. Falkstein



HOW PUTTING  
CUSTOMERS  
SECOND DRIVES  
REVENUE

For years experts have said to be successful, companies should put the customer first. That advice is wrong. There can be no successful *customer focus* unless the foundation of *employee focus* is in place. When companies build an employee first culture, they outlive and outperform companies that don't. The task of a leader is to create a workplace that attracts the very best while exciting, motivating, and inspiring employees to give their all on behalf of the company. Leaders who do this create companies that are the clear winners in today's complex, rapidly changing world.

As a leader, how do you build the 'employee first' culture? The answer: Create an internal brand promise (IBP) that communicates, in no uncertain terms, employees are valued and respected, and then deliver on this promise every day. Make sure you do everything possible to create a workplace that is challenging, provides many opportunities for learning and growth, has interesting people to work with, and provides a product or service that makes employees proud. The essence of this is captured by Lou Gestner, who awakened IBM from its decade's long slumber.

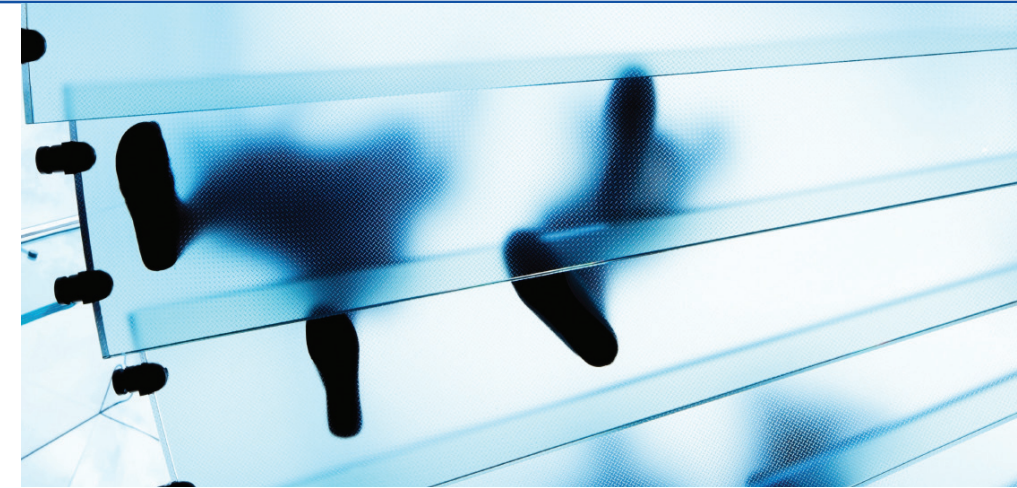
*"If I could have chosen not to tackle the IBM culture head-on, I probably wouldn't*

*have. My bias coming in was toward strategy, analysis and measurement. In comparison, changing the attitude and behaviors of hundreds of thousands of people is very, very hard. [Yet] I came to see in my time at IBM that culture isn't just one aspect of the game—it is the game."* (Lou Gestner, "Who Says Elephants Can't Dance")

Your goal as a leader is NOT to create a customer focus, but to create and deliver on, your company's own internal brand promise (IBP). By doing this first you will create a sustainable company culture that gets the absolute best out of every employee, every hour, of every day. Only then will your customers be taken care of above and beyond their expectations. So, how do you go about it? There are four steps to the process.

First, throw away many of your old beliefs and create an internal brand promise defining what it will be like to work for your company - the future state.

Second, define the current state of your culture through an objective research process. A good place to start is to systematically ask your employees in a safe, non-threatening manner, through a professionally administered employee survey. Employees need to feel they can be 100 percent hon-



est in answering the elephant-in-the-room questions such as: How much confidence do they have in you and in your leadership team? How valued does the company make them feel? Do they believe they have opportunities for learning and growth? Do they feel as if their future employability is being taken care of? What it is like for them to work in your company? You must let them know you want the whole truth and nothing but the truth. They must trust the impartiality of the survey process. Then, you must be willing to listen. This is what many business leaders find the most difficult and sometimes the most painful. Many times your perceptions of the workplace simply do not match the experiences of your employees. Do not discount what the data reveal.

Third, take this data and use it to define the current state in terms of the desired future state. What must you, your managers, supervisors, and employees do more of and less of to deliver on your IBP? Define the behaviors employees will see around them when the future state is achieved.

The fourth element is to transform your culture one step at a time. The key to success is to monitor your progress as you learn and grow towards this goal. This will

be difficult for most leaders who sometimes find it too hard to stay the course; they make the promise, but do not deliver.

Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman, in their book *Organizing Genius*, summed it up best:

*"Groups become great only when everyone in them, leaders and members alike, is free to do his or her absolute best. The best thing a leader can do for a Great Group is to allow its members to discover their greatness."*

The best leaders do not transform people. They provide a context in which people can meet their very human needs for meaning and purpose, belonging, achievement, mastery, and respect. Get this right and your company will thrive, even in today's marketplace.

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