

## Too Lean to be Mean

### Corporate Anorexia isn't Good for Business

Anyone who reads the gossip columns – however casually – will know only too well that anorexia can have a pretty debilitating effect on the most bankable of Hollywood stars. The need to be constantly lean can translate into all sorts of physical and mental health problems, that get in the way of personal growth and career success. But, while this may come as a surprise, it isn't just movie stars and pop music divas who are threatened by the effects of the anorexia “bug”, corporations have it too.

While there is no doubt at all that there has been a definite upturn in business – which has led to a stirring of the corporate talent pool – a much more worrying trend has developed: many organisations have got so used to being lean they are unable to “break the spell” and get into serious re-hiring mode.

What this has created is a kind of corporate impasse: they know they need to grow, and know they need to hire the right people to help them achieve that, but they are, physically, unable to really make that happen. In extreme cases, this has become so much of a problem that the shortage of people is actually the root cause of poor performance.

Literally, there are countless businesses out there that are just “too lean to be mean”. Their best talent is so thin on the ground that they can't even get around to making cost savings or cutting new business deals, because everyone is managing to the maximum (and beyond) already.

What many managers are telling me is, “we are running so thin right now in terms of people, that we have no time to do anything but the bare basic essentials. Are we missing opportunities – YES!”

Observers I have talked to say that this corporate anorexia – the mistaken need to stay super thin in terms of employees – is beginning to take its toll in a variety of ways:

- There is just no time to hire new people or properly brief recruiters on hiring much-needed management help.
- There are no “spare” people to champion new business opportunities as they arise.
- Stress-related work absences from “under pressure” executives are rising, further contributing to the crisis.
- When they do hire, there is little or no time to train new recruits or immerse them properly into the company culture.

Neither is this just a European problem. Recruiters in the U.S. report that this is already a worrying trend, with many companies not staffing up at executive levels, preferring short-term contracts and interim solutions instead.

It seems that too many top managers are still very risk-averse and are still on last year's corporate crash diet plan when they should be feeding on steroids to be ready for the future. I can't tell you the number of battles I hear of each week, of HR professionals trying to get their CEOs to begin a serious, planned hiring process.

Many hard-working managers have put up with covering two, three and even four jobs during the recession, assuming that once

the market picked up they would get help. In lots of cases that help has not yet materialised. What that means is that these managers are even more disenchanted with their jobs than they were a year ago. They've given it their best, they've been promised help, now they need to see some action taking place.

Of course, this just exacerbates the problems further. If you are suffering corporate anorexia now, imagine what it will be like if the few key players you have left choose to depart. Let's be honest here, no business can run on empty for very long. You may get away with it in a recession, but in a growth market you'll just starve the business from a lack of people able to make things work.

And where recruitment is taking place, many companies are reporting that it's tough to get the right people on board. It seems that although there is a definite recruitment churn in some industries, the uptick in business need has not been fully linked to recruiting people who can make a true difference, especially self-starting middle managers. And it appears that this shortage of “ready-to-go” mid-level executives with leadership skills is mirrored in the U.S., where recruiters report the same problem: the biggest talent shortages are in the ability to recruit good, people-oriented middle managers.

Part of that shortage is that they are few and far between and they have a great deal of choice as to where they go next. Anyone can get their hands on some kind of specialist, but the overall challenge is to find the manager who can just get on with the job – and leading people IS a real bonus!

This, of course, means that any organisation that has been refusing to expand its people policies is going to lose out in the fight for the best managers. Indeed those refuse-to-recruit, anorexic organisations are quickly ruled out by would-be employees.

What this means is that these anorexic enterprises are not only starving themselves and their futures by their fear to recruit to meet new business opportunity, they are also cutting themselves off from potential talent if and when they have to make a move.

And it looks as though it is going to take a seismic shift to change the habits of these corporate laggards. The market has moved, but not everyone is convinced that the good times are here to stay. Consequently there are still a large number of managers out there who persist in forecasting coming doom, gloom and a return to the bear market. They are so pessimistic that it is practically impossible for these people to change their management mind-set, even if competitors are not only eating their lunch, but breakfast and dinner too!

So, consider. Is your business suffering from corporate anorexia? Is there a real reluctance to hire much needed people into the business? Think about it, your organisation may look svelte and skinny, but that doesn't give you the strength and muscle to make it to the next stage.

Truth is, you can be just too lean to be mean; don't say someone didn't warn you.