



FlexBulletin #46: C-Suite Sets What Tone from the Top?

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[The C-Suite is the Gateway to True Culture Change Whole bookshelves, countless leadership seminars and the assumptions of millions of corporate citizens concur: CEOs and senior leaders are the keepers of the culture. They play a unique role in accelerating, moderating or blocking vital changes in the culture. A popular phrase has emerged to describe their cultural impact: the tone from the top. There can be little doubt that the shift companies make toward a flexible culture, whatever its depth and breadth, requires a sustained blast of tone from the top.

Many flexibility initiatives open with CEO messages. As with other key communication elements – guidelines, success stories, testimonials – pronouncements from CEOs and senior business leaders vary in quality and effectiveness. And more often than not, they are a one-time event rather than a continuous thread aimed at transforming the culture. Those launching a new flexibility effort or relaunching or remodeling their approach have the opportunity to reconsider the centrality of, and the core message from the top. Below are some sample messages that seek very different impacts.

Note: In [FlexBulletin #44: The GPS of Flex—Introducing FlexWise 2.0](#), we describe our new flexibility website which has a consistent focus on business productivity and discipline. Last issue’s spotlight on comparative success stories and this issue’s highlight of CEO messages are samples of the integrated approach in 2.0. Contact us at the phone number below to preview the site.]

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CEO MESSAGES often define flex as a benefit for employees and useful for companies

The opening message in a flexibility rollout by one or more leaders defines the degree and nature of change that is about to take place. Rare is the CEO who writes the actual message. The process often takes place at a distance between internal champions and assistants to the leadership. In most organizations, the standard seems to end up at or near the lowest common denominator. The emphasis ends up being employee emphasis rather than business impact. And the target of any change in the culture turns out to be modest. Typical elements may be:

- The company recognizes that employees need flexibility
- A fair process will be encouraged, acknowledging that flex isn’t for everyone
- This will be a significant step toward the goal of becoming an “employer of choice”
- The company will benefit from better recruitment, retention, engagement, etc.

A (disguised) sample follows:

A CEO MESSAGE – The “Employee-Centered” Approach

We value our people, and we recognize that flexibility in where, when and how you work matters a great deal to you. That means these issues are important to us as well. Support for your greater flexibility can help us maintain the best talent and help you achieve balance in your work and personal lives.

We expect proposals and decisions to focus on the well-being of our people and to pay attention to the needs of the business as well. In this spirit we can develop new ways of working while delivering high quality products.

EXAMINING THE EMPLOYEE-CENTERED APPROACH and its impact on culture change

Surely there is nothing wrong with this message. It acknowledges the diverse needs of employees and recognizes that the time has come to accommodate complex lives. It calls on managers to pay attention to the needs of employees. There is an understanding that one can serve customers and meet the needs of employees at the same time. And there is recognition that it is in the company's interests to act. These are all good things to hear from leadership. And yet, the call for culture change seems muted at best. The essence of the message is:

- We care about flexibility because you care about it
- The gains for you (balance) and us (talent) are promising but vague
- We “expect” a mutual process, but it too is ill-defined
- There are noticeable omissions: transformation, work redesign, flexible management

If this message were the theme of a flexibility initiative, it could produce many good results and satisfied employees. But it is highly unlikely to end in noticeable culture change. If leaders don't stake out clear goals and promote and monitor a serious culture shift over time, it is very unlikely to occur.

OCCASIONAL CEOs make mutual benefit the heart of their approach (and message)

Some leaders see broader value in flexibility and become engaged in the development process. Presiding over a culture that could benefit from significant improvement, they see flexibility as a vehicle to assist in that process. They recognize the need, and support resources for a long-term initiative. They put their stamp on designing key elements, and make themselves available for ongoing forms of support. Typical elements of their approach include:

- Encouraging, not just tolerating, the use of flexibility
- The goal for employees is greater control of the way they work
- The company expects a trade-off: flexibility in exchange for rigorous work redesign
- The explicit goal is a flexible culture and the means is greater collaboration

A (disguised) sample follows:

A CEO MESSAGE – The “Mutually Beneficial” Approach

Flexibility has many benefits and noticeable costs. It can offer value to our employees and to our work process. Making it work for all of us depends on design. We have developed an initiative that gives our employees greater control over their ways of working in exchange for participating in a work redesign process that enhances their contribution.

Our people have many reasons for wanting to work flexibly. As you will see in our guidelines, we are not asking employees to offer, or managers to judge, those reasons – as used to be true here. Instead, we expect our employees to propose the flexible schedule they wish and then work with their managers to identify the ways this change will be good for the business.

We are serious about this change. The leadership and I expect managers to manage flexibly, employees to be consistent collaborators and colleagues to express needs and cooperate. We will regularly assess our progress toward a far more flexible culture. This change will make us a healthier, more attractive and better organization.

EXAMINING THE MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL APPROACH and its impact on culture change

If your goal is culture change, this is the message for you. It views flexibility in a broader context, lays out new standards and makes clear that compliance will be expected and monitored. It takes a very “adult” view of employees and recognizes that work redesign can and should be an integral part of this initiative. The essence of the message is:

- This is an undertaking with clear mutual benefit: personal control and redesigned work
- It puts to rest at the highest level the dangerous notion that reasons determine decisions
- It replaces bromides about “employer of choice” with visions of a healthier organization
- It commits the leaders to holding managers to a flexible standard

Both these approaches have their value – and there can be many variations in between. The value in examining this critical piece of an initiative is to recognize and take seriously the way in which this opening “act” can affect and inform all that follows. It is also important to recognize that there is no automatic link between introducing Flexible Work Arrangements into an organization and changing the culture. An initiative with limited support, inadequate tools and little training is unlikely to yield very much flexibility, and likely to have little impact on the culture.

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[READER CALLS *As you may recall from the last **Bulletin**, Stacey Gibson and I are contacting many of our readers to understand where you are in your own flexibility journey. The calls have been quite interesting and productive so far, and we look forward to more that include your feedback and suggestions for items to address in the **Bulletin**.]*

Best regards,
Paul Rupert
President
Rupert & Company
Chevy Chase, MD
301-873-8489
paulrupertdc@cs.com

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements. To see our Bulletin Archive, approach, services, web-based tools and client stories, go to:*

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