

## **Building an organization that works in the fourth dimension (The SMASH story)**

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Its 5.45pm and I am running late, as usual, to pick up my two children from their after school care called SMASH. I arrive there trying to look calm and collected after a stressful drive from town, to see a strange sight, my children sitting quietly reading books, they don't manage this at home! The staff, while keeping an eye on the children whose parents were late, were having their daily team debrief. When was the last time you had a team brief?

I noticed other strange things happening and I began to wonder that maybe, I had discovered something, as David Attenborough would say "this is a rare sight not often caught on camera". I subsequently interviewed the manager and found that the SMASH team works on many levels including the fourth dimension. Let me explain.

### Develop a Team Mission Statement

The SMASH mission statement has the words "to be awesome" in it and it is of no surprise staff are passionate about their work as they live and breathe the mission statement. The word is also particularly powerful. It would immediately mean that many staff and managers would need to change the way they look at their working life, as they themselves are preventing others from being awesome.

When you look at a company's mission statement, one thing that is often lacking is any sense of passion or the word awesome. If individually we all want to be awesome at home and at work, why does the word not appear in our corporate mission statement? Every single individual is passionate about something, what we as managers have got to do is try and dig into those reserves and spread it across their work activities, maybe thinly at first until they themselves buy into the mission.

### Based on spiritual belief of "love thy neighbor as thyself" (the fourth dimension)

SMASH is based on many spiritual beliefs including that we should "love thy neighbor as thyself". Maybe the problem is that many of us in the corporate world do not love ourselves enough, and that is why we quite happily create conflict in our working environment. New Zealand corporate life is littered with examples of unnecessary litigation, which has led to the demise in health of those individuals who are caught up in this self inflicted process. If you look at most of the major religions that exist today, the statement "love thy neighbor as thyself" is a key building block. Based on some of the sad events of the recent past which have undermined people's belief in the corporate world e.g. Enron, World Com etc. It might be appropriate for the CEO or the senior management team to start bringing some "spiritual elements" into the business world which would help reinforce good and sound business ethics.

What I am talking about is:

- respecting your colleagues and your team member's time (in other words allowing them quality time to progress initiatives rather than interrupting them with another meaningless task)
- investing time to actively listen (even when you're on the verge of exploding with frustration)
- conducting your working relationships effectively with all colleagues (even those who you would not choose to invite to your weekend barbecue!)

- not setting demanding goals when they are unnecessary (e.g. avoiding asking for a report by 9am tomorrow when you will only get around to reading it 3 days hence)
- appropriate assistance to non performers
- better handling of stress, of yourself, your staff and your colleagues
- taking control of your stimulant intake (don't underestimate the impact it has on your work colleagues)
- better treatment of your suppliers

Caffeine addiction is a serious problem in the office environment. As a sufferer receiving remedial treatment comprising "hot lemon, ginger and honey" at 10.30am, I am now more aware of the impact this addiction has had on my staff. Some of my caffeine addiction symptoms included: having the perception that my staff were working in slow motion compared to myself; my mind racing from one thought to another, my staff getting more work done when I was away from the office, and craving for the 10.30am and 2.30pm fixes. My staff comment that I am much calmer now!

Many of us pray to our God during the weekend and yet, on Monday, we seldom practice "love thy neighbor as thyself" with our workplace relationships (suppliers, direct reports, colleagues etc.). I recall two images, one of an elderly couple having left my church forcing an oncoming car to give way in the one-way street, outside the church. The other driver shouting the memorable words "I suppose you have just been to church". Another is of a dysfunctional professional firm where the language between the partners was not fit for "The Simpsons", yet they would be devoted at the sometime at the weekend.

#### Based on spiritual belief that prayer works both at work and at home (the fourth dimension)

In this time prayer is an important part of the manager's life and the guidance received is feedback into the way the staff and children work. The children have for example a prayer wall.

In business today we so often tend to internalize our problems and act without due care and attention. Yet there are so many helping hands so near, our colleagues, our mentor (we all should have one), our family, our own God.

I was fortunate enough to hear a testimonial, recently, where the speaker pointed out how he learned to pray both at work and at home. He has found an amazing clarity of thought and improved working relationships when he sought guidance from his god.

#### Debriefing of staff at the end of the day and no meetings during key service delivery time

Staff debriefings are a rare sight these days and if they are scheduled, they are often the first meeting to be deferred or cancelled. This is often I believe because the debriefings are not handled in the appropriate way, and thus staff attending may consider them a waste of time. It can be different, at SMASH they have an open ended debriefing every night. On a difficult day this debriefing may take over an hour and a half, in other words the length of the debrief is very much up to staff and runs largely into their own time. In their debriefing sessions they cover the following issues.

- how best to help a particular child who is having difficulties

- ways to improve the program
- plans for the next day and next week
- finishing off communication, which due to the pressures of 40-50 kids traveling in different directions, which is difficult
- last but no means least to “pop the balloon” on those difficult issues that may be growing out of proportion during the day

Another point worth noting is that SMASH could not operate if it chose to have meetings during its key service delivery time. Yet that is the very thing we all tend to do. See introduction to time management.

### Careful staff selection

SMASH always like to recruit people who are previously known to them, they have a high occurrence of staff rejoining when they are back in town and if they do have to advertise they go through a careful interview and selection process to ensure the person will fit.

There are still too many staff selections made by the old and antiquated interview process, accompanied by some cursory reference checking, the result is a too high failure rate amongst new staff. A greater effort needs to be put into the selection process, and in particular the recruiting of people who have a better chance of succeeding. Often we advertise a position when, if we had discussed it with the team, we may well have known a person who would have ideally fit the bill. Instead of spending hours and hours sifting through the great unknown maybe it is time to be more targeted with some of the recruitment.

### Systematic and organized team training session

SMASH have a training evening each term and they invest considerable time planning the training workshop which may include: helping staff to revisit policies and procedures; looking at likely scenarios; what makes a supervisor excellent; triggers to children’s bad behavior; increasing knowledge about special needs etc. We can certainly learn from the commitment that SMASH make to training and the positive team spirit that these in-house workshops generate.

Back in the 80’s company’s recognized that organized in-house training could derive many benefits, to this end training departments were set up, linking with external providers. With cost cutting exercises over the last 10-15 years organized in-house courses are a thing of the past, individuals are often left to their own devices in selecting what they would consider to be a useful way to spend the training budget.

### Resolving conflict effectively and efficiently

SMASH have a three step process to resolving conflict between the children.

1. both children have an opportunity to speak and give their view of the situation
2. it is then explained to both children that the dispute is wasting time which they could better invest elsewhere e.g. playing
3. the options are explained, and repeated until the penny drops in most cases

This procedure works successfully in resolving conflicts, maybe it would also work well in the office environment where typically conflicts are allowed to fester for months on end including the sending of unsavory emails.

It is important at the very least to have a conflict resolution policy and is communicated to all staff making clear what is expected to occur when a dispute

arises.

### Getting the induction process right

Like all good organizations SMASH put a lot of time and effort into a good induction process, which is committed to, not only by the Team Leader but by all other staff. In addition to the induction process the staff meet together off site once a quarter to go back to basics and once again build on their understanding of SMASH starting off from the mission statement. They also have an induction program for their clients (the children). How many customer relationships would be improved if we had an induction program with them so that they could maximize the benefits of working with us. I suggest all those that went on the induction.

### Creating a service culture

When you walk through the door at SMASH you are greeted with a smile by all staff who make eye contact with you. As adults we cart around a lot of baggage, which makes life difficult. One of those crippling behaviors is the inability to maintain eye contact, there must be many reasons why this occurs but it is a very damaging and career limiting behavior trait. Organizations need to support their managers and staff to cast this trait away and thus make "summitting" much easier. At SMASH making eye contact is part of their training and part of their job. This is no mean achievement as they are under minute by minute pressures and dramas as 30 young cannons are racing around and capable of all firing at once. In business we are often less welcoming, you arrive into an entity and everybody is so busy and stress pervades the air. How you move from this to the SMASH atmosphere I do not know, all I can say is that it is obviously worthwhile. Maybe you need a charismatic leader as SMASH clearly has.

### Obtaining buy-in from staff and clients

Recently SMASH were looking to set up a new position, so they cleverly put a notice board up so that parents were encouraged to write down their thoughts as to what was important.

Exhibit 19.1 message on the whiteboard to the parents

Dear Parent/caregiver!

SMASH is looking to employ a  
full time,  
long term,  
2<sup>nd</sup> in command

Please list below what you  
consider to be the important  
attributes when caring for  
your children

Get involved in this process

It was simple and effective. We too can seek feedback in such simple ways. Often company's dither around when it comes to performing a survey, many of which can be set up really quickly if you "just do it".

#### Accommodating special needs through partnership

At SMASH some children need more care and attention than others, they achieve this by ensuring there is appropriate disclosure from parents and then put in action a partnership between the home and SMASH. Staff are trained to know what the warning signs are and what support action is required. In an office environment often employees do not communicate honestly with their manager about issues that may impact on performance. In an ideal world management should mention to staff that they can be a lot more supportive if they understand a little bit more about the issues which might have an effect on performance. It is important when doing reference checks to ask, are there any special needs that this candidate requires in order to perform well. This may force the referees to be a little bit more honest about the baggage this individual is currently carrying. It may not change the appointment decision, but it could make a significant difference to the way you operate with that person in those critical first three months.

#### Continuous innovation

At SMASH innovation is discussed everyday during the debrief. They want to know what can we do differently tomorrow, next week, next month. In many organizations that I have worked in and visited this is not the case. Innovation needs to be on every agenda, it needs to be pushed so that staff know what's expected otherwise we are simply standing still. I get the impression that in

many organizations staff have the perception that innovation is not required, because the person who is "building his yacht in his back yard" after work is performing the same unproductive tasks day after day like a laboratory rat hunting for its cheese. How is it that organizations can take an individual who is innovative at home and turn them into an automaton. There are many aspects of the culture that need to change, more delegation, more risk taking, less witch-hunting and more celebration of success, then you truly can have continuous innovation.

### Bringing passion into the workplace

One reviewer of this article commented that SMASH are exhibiting a 'servant relationship'. Which as the words suggest is leadership by serving the people.

"When servant leadership is demonstrated in organizations it quickly builds trust and relationships. Furthermore, applying the principles of being slow to anger and quick to forgive also builds relationships. Being greeted by a smile comes from the heart and a genuine love of the people they (the staff) serve."

So what does SMASH stand for? 'St Mary's after school house'.

If you can adopt some of these aspects and in particular introduce spiritual beliefs into the workplace you will start working in the fourth dimension. All the best in putting a bit of SMASH into your working environment - you will reap the rewards.