The Learning Organization at LaFarge

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Introduction

Lafarge is a world-renowned cement company and it is currently on Fortune’s Global 500. The company dates back to 1833. There have only been 5 CEO’s and few people have left the company once it began. Lafarge is innovative and values human ideals. The “Lafarge way” denotes that the company will not work in conditions that deny the company values or practices. The key ideals of the “Lafarge way” include: managers need to develop their employees and challenge them; employees share feedback and experiences; teamwork is essential in dealing with conflict and seeking individual participation; in addition, effective teamwork builds trust and confidence. Self-renewal is a major process in Lafarge. Training is of the upmost importance because their mission is to be a learning organization that grows and strives toward continual improvement. Communication is a big part of the company’s corporate culture which is one of the most important elements of a learning organization.

Persistent Culture

It is not surprising that LaFarge has existed as a strong company for over 170 years. Innovative thinking, high human ideals, teamwork, humanistic values, innovative thinking, and strong communication have been cornerstones that LaFarge built its company on. A strong corporate culture was created reinforcing that the company cared about its employees. “Most companies can trace their culture back to an influential founder who personified a value system and relentlessly hammered in a few basic values that become the cultural core of the company” (Brown, pg. 65). The founding leaders created the culture and that culture transformed everyone in the company. Soon all employees felt valued and that their work meant something. When you can make people feel this way by fostering a culture of shared values, beliefs, and actions, loyalty and motivation are just two of the results. The bureaucratic notions that have existed and
continue to exist in so many organizations are blurred and fade away when you break down organizational layers (Brown, pg. 375) and involve and value the input of everyone in the organization. A combination of the value system that Lafarge decided to hammer deep into itself, continual establishment and integration of best practices, empowered employees, and supportive leadership has become the cultural core of the company that has allowed LaFarge to sustain itself over 170 years and several owners.

Learning Organization

LaFarge is most definitely a model of a learning organization. The “LaFarge Way” is founded on a set of fundamental values: integrity, commitment, courage and consideration for others (Lafarge, 2007-2013). They have worked hard to create an atmosphere of trust and confidence through professionalism, personal commitment, shared goals, and respect for common rules (Brown, pg. 376). They place responsibility on managers to do more than just manage. They ask them to develop their people through training and opportunities to improve themselves. LaFarge promotes the principles of best practices, encouraging networking, and cross functional working between all employees. They place responsibility on managers to do more than just manage. One of their mission statements is a key point in Peter Senge's school of thought regarding learning organizations. The “Lafarge Way” points out how a manager’s key responsibility is to create a challenging environment and help employees grow and compete with themselves to become better. Learning organizations do not depend on "accidental sharing" of knowledge but instead they develop sophisticated mechanisms to assure that people and their ideas are brought together. Lafarge promotes sharing knowledge. Sharing knowledge is not accidental. Lafarge goes to great effort to foster communication within all aspects of the company. Lafarge also focuses a great deal on its resource and development department and has
established an optimized structure. Lafarge has more than 1,000 people that work on the research and development of their products and solutions. Around 240 researchers, technicians and approximately around $200 million are invested in R&D each year. More than 50% of the R&D budget is dedicated to projects with a sustainable development dimension (Lafarge, 2007-2013). But the most common thread throughout is the value that is placed on all employees across the organization, not just management. All of these ideals mirror very closely what our text says learning organizations are.

**Conclusion**

Lafarge is a learning organization that has a deep culture that has tested the sands of time. While Lafarge is always looking for ways to improve their products, services and staff by focusing a lot of time and money in their Resource & Development department, they also make sure that there is a focus on keeping the culture that they created so long ago. Instead of just being concerned with making a profit the company is also been concerned with the well-being of their employees. So other organizations should take note that it is possible for their culture to persist over many years. When this culture is persistent over many years it is usually because that culture is passed down from founding members who shared similar values, beliefs and actions; one could see that Lafarge is a prime example of this. Lafarge’s founding members incorporated their culture within their company and made an effort of showing the importance of that culture to future owners; so that the culture that they created could live past their ownership. According to the “Lafarge way” there are three major concepts that Lafarge focuses on, these include: making employees successful, delivering continuous performance improvement, and having a multi-local organization. While Lafarge has become a learning organization throughout time, they have also always had a commitment to incorporate a form of humanism within their
company, and even though the family no longer owns the company; one could see that the
culture that they instilled is still prevalent today.
References

