

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

MILLENNIALS DRIVE LEADERSHIP CULTURE TO NEW HEIGHTS OF COLLABORATION *By Christopher Hann*

Inside the LaSalle Atrium Building in downtown Chicago, a short walk from Lake Michigan, Insureon CEO Ted Devine has his desk arranged in one corner of the company's open-plan office space. The CFO is adjacent. The head of marketing sits just 15 feet away, and the head of sales is nearby. There are no offices—not even cubicle dividers. In fact, from where Devine sits, he can look out on all 20 of his employees at company headquarters.

Devine came to Insureon in 2011 from Aon Risk Services, where, as president, he worked in a more traditional setting, one befitting the guy in charge of an operation with 28,000 employees and \$5 billion in annual revenue. But it drove him crazy, Devine says, to sit in his resplendent office and see people lining up in the hallway outside, as if waiting to be granted an audience with the pope. So for Devine, the open floor plan he instituted at Insureon conveys a message that extends far beyond any interior design aesthetic. It goes to the heart of the company's management style and workplace culture. It symbolizes an openness of spirit and Devine's availability to everyone in the company, no matter their station—and no waiting required.

"For me it says a couple things about leadership," he says. "One is: No walls, no barriers, no hierarchy. Everybody can talk to everybody. Everybody can participate in a decision. We work together, and that's very important in leadership."

In his eagerness to tear down the literal and figurative walls that have divided the workplace classes for generations, Devine is not alone. More businesses, especially those that employ large numbers of young workers, have sought to reshape their internal dynamics, ditching

their long-standing, top-down, my-way-or-the-highway management structure in favor of a management structure that encourages collaboration.

In many cases, this shift has been driven by the workplace habits of the so-called Millennial generation. (At Insureon, for example, half the staff has yet to celebrate a 28th birthday.) Millennials are generally defined as the population born between 1980 and 2000. Their role in the American workplace is having a profound impact on how leaders lead,



"No walls, no barriers, no hierarchy": Insureon CEO Ted Devine's office aesthetic.

requiring them to not just give direction on the *what*, but to explain the *why*. And, often, to step out of the corner office and show the *how*.

"It's best if you lead arm in arm with the team," Devine says. "The best leaders are the ones who will roll up their sleeves, and the team knows they're going to work with them, and they're respected. That's what the floor plan says to me—everybody knows I'm accessible."

Roxana Hewertson has seen the structure of business leadership gradually evolve since the late 1990s, but she says the pace of change has picked up steam over the past five years. Hewertson is CEO of Highland Consulting Group, an organizational and leadership consulting firm in upstate New York. For more than 20 years she has advised and developed leaders from startups and large corpora-

tions alike. She also teaches at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. In a presentation at a TEDx conference last year in Williamsport, Pa., Hewertson cited the litany of recent failures in leadership at once-proud American institutions such as Enron, AIG, Lehman Brothers, American Airlines, Fannie Mae and Chrysler. "There is no question," Hewertson told her audience, "that we need a paradigm shift in the way we think about leadership."

That assessment was reinforced in a December 2011 study,

"Future Trends in Leadership Development," by Nick Petrie, senior faculty member of the Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado Springs, Colo. "There is a transition occurring from the old paradigm in which leadership resided in a person or role, to a new one in which leadership is a collective process that is spread throughout networks of people,"

Petrie wrote. "The question will change from, 'Who are the leaders?' to 'What conditions do we need for leadership to flourish in the network?'"

Hewertson says the ascent of the Millennials, a generation less interested in taking orders from the boss and more interested in solving problems as a team, has spawned a desire among many executives to relearn what it takes to be an effective leader. "There's a real hunger out there for finding a better way," she says. "The old way is broken. It doesn't serve us."

Devine recalls when one of the "most junior" people in his office approached him to talk about an Insureon product that wasn't working. "Fifteen minutes later we had an impromptu meeting, and we're making modifications," Devine says. "Young people like to work in an

energetic environment. They like to work where they have a voice, where they can suggest things."

Joe Sexton delivered a similar message when he took the reins as president of worldwide field operations at AppDynamics, a San Francisco-based firm that helps companies manage the performance of web applications. Like Insureon, AppDynamics' headquarters, in the city's South of Market district, employs an open-space layout—no offices to underscore the corporate strata. On his first day there, Sexton stood before the work force and vowed that he would answer any e-mail he received from anyone in the company the same day and would return any phone call before the end of the next business day.

"It's that kind of accessibility and communication that is very powerful," Sexton says. He's a disciple of business author Jim Collins, who has mined leadership styles in a series of bestselling books. "You help employees get what they want," Sexton says, and "you'll get what you want."

At least two-thirds of AppDynamics' 150 employees are younger than 35. Sexton says his own 20-year-old son has made him acutely aware of the generational perspective in the workplace. "You ask them to do something, they're going to say, 'Why?'" he relates. "This generation—you just can't manage them the old way. They're used to being heard, used to being involved. Collaboration is the only way I know to be successful with folks that are younger. The idea that a lot of executives are sitting around a room deciding what works just doesn't work anymore. I believe those days are over in terms of innovative companies. The folks who are going to carry you there, they don't want to be led that way."

At Austin, Texas-based Spiceworks, which provides free network-management software for IT professionals, co-founder and CEO Scott Abel says his focus is on harnessing the collective brainpower—and gusto—that his workers

bring to the office each day. Abel estimates that nearly 40 percent of the company's 185 employees are younger than 28. "The great thing about young people is they don't know what they don't know," he says. "What we try to do is guide that energy and enthusiasm. If you want to put your head through the wall—I'm a martial artist; I happen to know it's doable—you might want to know where the studs are."

Highland Consulting Group's Hewertson says leaders who work with Millennials would be wise to sharpen their emotional intelligence. The basic idea is that, as a leader, you need to understand

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—Joe Sexton, AppDynamics**

not only your own needs but the needs of those you're charged with leading. In doing so, Hewertson says, you can inspire the best from your employees, who in turn will be better able to contribute to the company's success.

"There's a whole lot more to leading than just being smart," she says. "One of my clients has a whole lot of brilliant leaders, and they're all crappy leaders. The good news is you can teach emotional intelligence. None of this is rocket science. It's all about human behavior. It is the people who get them there. Those dollar signs are attached to people. How well you manage your people resources [is] going to make all the difference. Everything I do starts with self-awareness as a leader."

For Devine, the increase in the number of Millennials under his stewardship has changed his approach to leadership. The open floor plan at Insureon also helps. "I can't hide in my office, but because I can see, I know when my head of sales isn't creating enough energy," Devine says. "I know when somebody's upset. I go solve that. I don't think 10

years ago I would have been attuned to the interpersonal elements."

Perhaps nowhere has the Millennial work force made more of an impact than in Silicon Valley. The most successful companies in the modern-day tech revolution never really hewed to a traditional management style anyway. When was the last time anyone saw Mark Zuckerberg in a suit and tie?

Hewertson says Silicon Valley's ethos of collaboration has helped drive innovation—which is itself a motivating force in the workplace, especially when it comes to IT. "What is happening in the IT industry is this amazing amount of innovation, and innovation turns people on," Hewertson says. "The techies with a dream get excited about what's possible to do, and they get excited about doing it. The way IT organizations lead is very different, and I think you'll see a lot more stuff going on

with leadership in Silicon Valley. When you're at the forefront of something, no matter how big or small your IT company—wow, that's exciting. People need voices, and in IT, voices are heard a lot more than in corporate or education or healthcare."

Tom Ingersoll can attest. He's the CEO of Skybox Imaging, a Mountain View, Calif.-based company that is developing a system of low-cost imaging microsatellites, each the size of a small refrigerator, for use by business and government. Of the 80 Skybox employees—almost all of them engineers, including 10 with doctoral degrees—the average age is 30.

"They're like sponges. They want to learn. They like learning and feeling empowered," Ingersoll says. "For us, in Silicon Valley, it's all about learning. That's one key thread that I think about when I think about how to lead them, how to work with them, how to recruit them."

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