

### Improving Performance Innovatively

**COMING** from a family of educators, Ms. Lynne Morton, the Founder and Principal of Performance Improvement (PI) Solutions, is a management consultant and executive coach specialising in talent management. The recipient of the HR Leadership Award at the 2009 World HRD Congress held in Mumbai, Ms. Morton has worked with senior leadership teams across the world for more than twenty years. In this exclusive interview with *The Human Factor*, she talks about addressing the improvement needs of organisations through a range of innovative interventions.

#### Q. Tell us all about yourself!

**A.** I come from a family of educators and intellectually curious people. Travel, reading, and being open to new ideas were instilled in me from an early age. Consequently, I get excited about exploring and learning new things, which drives my desire to solve organisational and individual behavioural problems through consulting.

My education includes a BA degree in English from Vassar College and an MA degree in English from Georgetown University. I also studied art. This grounding in the liberal arts has allowed me to think broadly, holistically, and value creative thinking. My first job was in publishing since I thought it would combine my interests in writing and the visual arts. Soon, I learned that I would do more writing in the business world, so off I went to marketing and corporate communications. Eventually, I migrated to consulting. It was a natural evolution from my original intent. To an extent, my career is an example of change management.

#### Q. How does PI Solutions help businesses improve?

**A.** PI Solutions was founded by me, with partners, to address the improvement needs of organisations and individuals. Performance is the focus. After all, business results are the result of individual

performance. Our tagline 'Creating Ideas. Returning Results' was our way of saying that we offer creativity with a business focus. Our work was grounded in the need to manage change that comes from internal or external factors. More recently, a good deal of the work has addressed change issues related to talent management. The objective, then, is to

challenging are the ones that must remain anonymous! That said, one strategic example comes to mind. I was once involved in a study of learning environments around the world, examining the physical structures and content areas that different kinds of organisations used for learning. I have developed recommendations for a large professional



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use a range of available interventions/tools – strategy or process development, facilitation/training, coaching – to improve performance.

#### Q. Tell us about your most interesting consulting experiences.

**A.** I have been fortunate to have many such experiences! Naturally, the most

services organisation on a holistic approach to learning. Another example is when I was asked to help a team better manage the continued changes it was experiencing. Here, we did 360-degree assessments and a combination of team developmental sessions plus individual coaching. It was memorable because one of the team members said it pro-

# CREATING IDEAS,

*In an exclusive interview, Lynne Morton (Founder and Principal, Performance Improvement Solutions) talks to The Human Factor about involving CEOs in talent management and adapting to work norms in different cultures*

# RETURNING RESULTS

vided insights that positively affected her personally and professionally. That was extremely satisfying.

**Q. What are the people management lessons you have learnt from various countries?**

**A.** I have been fortunate to have had experiences in many parts of the world. I treasure those and look forward to more! Working internationally is full of lessons, not the least of which is the continued need for patience and planning when travelling! The lessons fall into the area of being sensitive to different cultures. Business people from Western cultures tend to want to “get to the bottom line” very quickly, and by-pass what is common in the Asia-Pacific rim and in India; starting with a desire to get to know each other and develop a relationship before starting work. I was impatient at first, then I learned that part of this adventure was the opportunity to learn about other cultures and people. So I now make a habit of reading up on local customs and languages. I put a small index card in my wallet with key phrases in the local language, so that I can converse a bit. I have found that starting a workshop with a few phrases in the local language, even if not exactly pronounced, makes a huge difference. It shows my respect for the location and my desire to connect with others. This has always been appreciated. The other important example is that Western business people often look down on business people in other parts of the world. I have learned not to start a conversation with the assumption that “our way” is better. Being non-judgemental is a tough thing to learn to do, but I think it is essential for global cooperation.

**Q. How do you combine your work in quality management with your current role as coach?**

**A.** My prior work in Quality, both as a corporate VP of Quality and as an Exam-

## Lynne's Favourites!

**Management legend:** Max DePree, the former CEO of Herman Miller and author of *Leadership Jazz* (and more).

**Book:** I read a lot so it's nearly impossible to come up with one favourite. One close to home for you would be *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster.

**Movie:** Again, too many to choose from, but favourites include *Out of Africa*, *The Godfather* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

**Car:** Mercedes.

**Cuisine:** Italian - and Indian, as I learn more about it, is a close second.

**Company to benchmark for HR:** IBM  
**Holiday Destination:** Santa Fe, New Mexico. I visited India recently and found it magical. Can't wait to come back!

iner for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award remains highly relevant to my current consulting. The training I received at the Juran Institute and all the work I did had a lot to do with process rigour and measurement. In my current work, I continue to look at ‘how’ things are done (*process and behaviour*) as well as ‘why’ things are done (*strategy*). A deep understanding of the interaction

**BUSINESS PEOPLE FROM WESTERN CULTURES TEND TO WANT to “get to the bottom line” very quickly, unlike what happens in India**

between process and behaviour is critical. Behavioural improvements come about when people understand the “so what?” impact of what they do. That comes from seeing the measurable increments and the overall difference their behaviour makes. Also, when I lead a council of heads of Quality, we used to say that if we did our jobs well, we would “put ourselves out of business,” by which we meant that there should not be one executive responsible for Quality. It should be everyone's job. I say the same thing about Talent Management.

**Q. What was most challenging coaching companies after 9/11?**

**A.** A lot of challenges come to mind. I did some coaching of displaced com-

panies/employees and also helped NYC organise job fairs for the many (*and thousands participated*) individuals who were forced to seek new jobs. Being able to draw upon my change management expertise was important. I had to realise that flexibility was important, keeping an eye on the future was essential, and being able to acknowledge the emotional dimensions of the situation was critical. As you might imagine, the last aspect, the emotional, was most challenging. There were some who felt constantly threatened, tremendously frightened, and generally shocked by the heightened level of uncertainty here in Manhattan. It was difficult to maintain control of my own emotions in the face of such strong emotions from others. We had to acknowledge and respect the emotional aspects, but also get beyond them to plan and work effectively. The challenge was huge, but was overcome!

**Q. What key project/s are you currently working on?**

**A.** I am working on an interesting and ground-breaking assessment for CEOs regarding their involvement in talent management, in partnership with some colleagues in South Africa. I am going to be drilling down further into the notion of accountability and how CEOs really involve line managers in the difficult work of accountability for talent, which ultimately means for business results. That will be the focus of a book.

**Q. How can companies create cultures that consider the needs of various generations?**

**A.** My suggestion for capturing the experiences of maturing workers is not new: it is simply mentoring. Older workers should have a chance to work with younger workers and pass on knowledge in a personal, real-time way. I did a lot of work in KM when I was at PwC and we found that static databases of knowledge are much less effective than personal sharing. Maturing workers have such a wealth of knowledge that they need to have personal opportunities to pass this on. Culture change is very complex

and takes good while to create. I can only propose a starting point: be sure that you know what is important to the employees from the various groups. I am not convinced that companies do know this. They read the surveys but they often do not ask their own employees. So I recommend starting there and then determining how far off the mark you really are.

**Q. According to you, how long is the current economic downturn going to last?**

**A.** If I could say with any certainty how long the current economic downturn will last, I would be a celebrity! As someone who has always been a ‘glass is half full’ person, I would prefer to think that its severity will not go beyond this year. That said, I do recognise that we have been living in a time of excess and enhanced globalisation, so a major rebalancing is in order. This is truly a “tipping point” and I imagine that some things will fall out of that glass permanently as it tips. Disparities in executive/employee compensation are likely

**Performance assessments are not viewed as essential, especially if there is little/no money for hikes, says Ms. Morton**



to change. I hope that greater rigour and accountability will be another change. The job market, I fear, will not open up quickly. Organisations in the US are still hunkering down, treading water, if not cutting back. I believe, it will be more than another year before that changes. Indeed there could be some surprises! I would think they will likely come from our environmental disruptions, weather patterns for example.

**Q. How has the slow-down affected performance appraisals in global companies?**

**A.** At least in the US, this economic downturn has wreaked havoc on many talent processes. Budgets have been either slashed or put “on hold”. Managers are feeling more pressure than ever to generate results and they have “no time for those HR things”. Therefore, performance assessments are not viewed as essential, especially if there is little/no money for hikes. Performance assessments remain important for top talent, but are losing hold at the middle ranks. That will eventually cause problems and once we get beyond this downturn, talent management executives will have to work hard to reinstate those processes.

**Q. What are the upcoming trends in HR and what advice would you give for managing these?**

**A.** I see continuing pressure on HR to be more business savvy or to think strategically. More and more aspects of HR are being outsourced, especially if they are transactional. I think this will continue. Therefore, what is left for HR to do is consultative. I think this is good, since that is the really high-impact work. However, it does require a different level of skill and temperament than what HR used to require. More education may well be needed in areas such as ‘Financial Knowledge for Non-Financial Executives’. HR professionals will have to learn enhanced communication. The

more that HR can show business value, in the language and terms that resonate with line executives, the more secure and important their roles will be. Lately we have seen big budget cuts and workforce reductions because value has not been shown. HR needs to change that.

**Q. Any pet projects you are currently working on?**

**A.** I continue to work on aspects of talent management, like better ways to enhance the performance of critical talent. I am also developing an assessment of talent management-related actions taken by CEOs and mid-level executives, with a global team. Both of these, I hope, will be able to take the work of talent management into new and high impact areas.

My goals 3 to 5 years down the line remain pretty much as they are now – to do meaningful and intellectually stimulating work that makes a difference to people and their organisations. I would like to do more with non-profits or socially-conscious groups. I have always done volunteer work for causes of importance to me and I would hope to be able to do more of that. And, of course, continued global work, which is fascinating. That does not sound like slowing down though!

**Q. What was the most memorable moment of your career?**

**A.** You asked about September 11 and I definitely view it as a life-changing event. I had a client meeting scheduled at the exact time of the attack, but the meeting had been rescheduled to September 10. If it was not for that rescheduling, I would have been there on a high floor, and I am not certain if I would have survived.

That jolting reminder of the fragility of life and the chance that things can change quickly/dramatically caused me to take a good look at many aspects of my life.