

Would Oil Workers Eat Tofu?



Creating a workplace culture to influence positive behaviors

Chester Elton and Adrian Gostick

You'd think it would be easy for school administrators to get their people to believe in their strategy and goals. After all, for thousands of years, humans have searched for meaning in being part of something bigger than ourselves. We all strive to believe in something.

Then why don't more of our employees buy in?

Because belief at work is a choice, and the first step to becoming a leader who can influence others to believe is to do something very un-manager-like: pause and think about human nature. Why do people believe in the things they do? And how can they be persuaded to change what they think?

Influencing Belief and Behavior

To better understand the process, let us take you back to the fall of 2007,

when Dr. Kevin Fleming, clinical psychologist turned executive coach, was riding shotgun in the cab of a Ford pickup, traveling north on a dirt road in western Wyoming. The driver was a man named Tyke, an oil field worker whose job was to maintain 40 pump-jack wells strung throughout this barren county of sagebrush and antelope.

Tyke wore a close-fitting blue T-shirt over a stomach that extended almost to the steering wheel. Occasionally he would take a long draw from a soda bottle or reach into a chip bag, and the psychologist would pull out his notebook and scribble something. It had been going on like this for several days.

Occasionally the doc would ask a question. What would get you to pass up a pizza place and order a salad? How many sodas do you

drink in a day? Have you ever tried tofu? It's not so bad, you know. Do you know what age you are estimated to die?

Dr. Kevin Fleming was on a mission. For more than a year he'd been riding along with oil field workers such as Tyke. His goal was to help these men and women live longer, to reduce the incidence of heart disease and cancer that was killing so many in their profession. The oil company had hired him to influence behavior but first he needed to influence belief. And to do that, he had to get into the minds of a group of tough-as-nails pumpers and roughnecks. In the end, the company was able to influence the behavior of its workers and wellness improved. But it wasn't easy. Beliefs don't change overnight.

At the beginning of their diet or



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fitness programs, the changes they were choosing to make were forced. They didn't like eating healthy food or exercising. It was hard work. But as the physiological change in their bodies began to form, the reward system changed as well. More began to feel a boost in their self-esteem and even feel good when they exercised. The healthy foods started to trigger reward systems in their bodies as they received nutritional replenishment. And yes, some even developed a taste for tofu (and some didn't; after all, it is tofu).

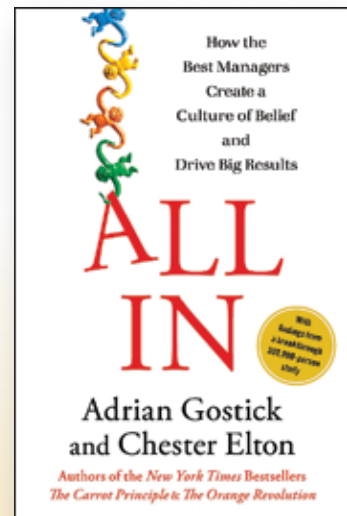
Said Fleming, "The interesting aspect of weight loss that is relatable to workplace culture and belief is the moment when the person who lost the weight says, 'I get it now. It clicked and now it makes sense.' That's the point where the brain

allows the new belief system to be right. And for most people, that is a transformational moment — their belief system changed."

That people would begin to believe in a new way of acting once they begin to experience intrinsic rewards is easy to understand. The tricky part, of course, is the front end of the process, the stage when nothing feels like it makes sense, even though the change is perfectly sensible — even proven by data.

Said Fleming, "First, understand that our brains are wired to feel right, not necessarily be right."

He added, "Our brain is wired to want to prove that our behaviors and feelings are justified. Managers want to prove they're right. Employees want to prove they're right. And when you combine all



THIS ARTICLE is an excerpt from Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton's new book *All In: How the Best Managers Create a Culture of Belief and Drive Big Results*. Learn more about their work, including this book, at thecultureworks.com.



these people into one organization, you can end up with an egocentric system collision.”

And that means too often leaders state who they are and if people don't share the same beliefs, those employees quickly learn to do what Fleming calls a cost/benefit ratio dance — they minimize the dissonance they feel by showing up and doing the minimal amount necessary to seem like a team player.

How then can leaders align beliefs and build real team cultures?

■ Understanding Employees' Perspective

We have to better understand the complexity of the brain. “Employees enter your workplace with their own beliefs,” he said. “If you immediately try to align their beliefs with those of the culture, the brain can switch into self-protective mode. Those employees might not hear the benefits of what you're saying, but they could make you think they do. They might superficially accept your leadership, rejecting it whenever it suits their purpose, claiming, ‘I never really bought in.’ ”

This means that as leaders we must first allow people on our teams to feel like valuable individuals, respecting their views and opening up to their ideas and inputs, even while sharing a better way forward. It's a balancing act that requires some wisdom. But let's face it, early leaders didn't survive on the savanna by diplomacy. Our brains as leaders are hardwired to survive, save face,

and make us feel that we're right. But being right and being wise are very different things, with dramatically different outcomes.

As for the nonbelievers: Many books will tell you the key to finding out what your people think is to ask them. When we ask people to tell us what they think — or believe — we must consider the fact that the brain is hardwired to protect us. Employees won't speak the truth if they think that truth won't be heard or integrated. And most managers won't truly listen to their employees' beliefs if they perceive those beliefs as opposing forces.

The vast majority of meetings with leaders and employees go this way: Leaders ask for input from their teams. Teams tell the manager just enough of what they believe the manager wants to hear to protect their survival. Obviously this is not a sustainable way to operate.

Fleming added, “The key is not to get rid of the squeaky wheels. Instead, leaders should consider why the wheels are squeaking. It's possible that all the other wheels are actually the problem and the squeaky wheels are simply communicating the problem.”

If a leader truly wants to read the bubbles over their team's heads, the simple solution is this: Don't dismiss the data or the feedback. And not only that—actively seek evidence that disconfirms what you believe, even reward it when you hear it.

After all, a vital first step in bringing about transformations of belief in one's employees is awakening within ourselves, as managers, the recognition that the real truth of any belief is actually not as black and white as we thought. ■

Chester Elton and Adrian Gostick are co-authors of the New York Times bestseller The Carrot Principle. Their newest book is All In: How the Best Managers Create a Culture of Belief and Drive Big Results. To learn more, visit thecultureworks.com.



MEET THE PRESENTER: Chester Elton

KEYNOTE ADDRESS : STATE EDUCATION CONVENTION
Thursday, Jan. 24, 3-5pm | Delta Center Ballroom CD



Best-selling author Chester Elton will be the keynote speaker on Thursday, Jan. 24 at the State Education Convention in Milwaukee. Elton has authored several successful leadership books and as a motivation expert he has appeared on *60 Minutes*, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and, among others, National Public Radio. His work has been called “creative and refreshing” by the *New York Times*. Elton is also well known as an energetic and entertaining speaker. ●

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