



By Mary Taylor, CEO at Mary Taylor and Associates

# PROXIMITY TO POWER

## The Big Results Created by a Small Personal Touch

For much of history most people lived and worked in stable, small-scale communities. Although fluctuating a little in size according to the task and individuals involved, these 'teams' rarely became sufficiently large that any individual was without access to the leaders of the group, unable to participate in decision-making or, in practical terms, became irrelevant.

Although sweeping societal changes, such as the industrial and technological revolutions, have transformed our daily lives almost beyond recognition from that which our ancestors experienced, evolution has not entirely managed to keep pace. Our natural instincts and 'hard-wired' cognitive processes remain in many significant ways similar to what they have been for hundreds of thousands of years.

It is also the case that in our modern, global society, life depends increasingly upon decisions over which we have no control, taken by people far removed from us and whom we cannot directly influence.

For example, our very survival depends on factors such as the emissions levels governments approve, aggressive actions by a distant dictator, and technological advances that are transforming social behaviour.

Whilst it was always the case that the actions of the few impacted the lives of the many, until recently this was usually without significant global impact and diminishing public

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participation and influence.

While the political paradigm is seemingly insurmountable, it is less so in the corporate sphere. In the corporate world, it remains true that the best performing teams are usually those who are reasonably small, at least in relation to task-based activities.

When a group is so large that each individual's contribution is essentially insignificant, the consequences are seldom positive.

Whilst few become leaders, it remains the case that the majority still wants direct personal access to leaders, to participate to some extent in making decisions, and be able to wield influence.

Working under rigid orders handed down from above is anathema to the human need to feel part of an informed, decision-making community. In general, the more involvement people have, the more successful the outcomes.

Workplace dissatisfaction is also closely linked to how much of the work consists of simple obedience - the greater the level of compliance required the more dissatisfied and disengaged people become.

What makes people feel secure and creates the optimum conditions for achievement is not so much objective security, but confidence in their ability to influence and impact - the defining factor is how helpless people feel in relation to the people and processes surrounding them.

In general, the more control and

autonomy people are given over their work the lower their stress and greater their performance and satisfaction.

Specifically, workforces respond well to being given greater responsibility and status. Corporate systems that have a less rigid hierarchy and allow different people to lead on different tasks according to their aptitudes tend to perform significantly better.

Whilst the pace of change is greater than anything we have seen before, it is not an alien concept for us. The biggest determinant of whether change has a positive or negative impact is usually whether or not people feel that the change is imposed upon them and largely outside of their control.

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A company wanting to increase both the working experience and results of its people can benefit by leveraging our natural preferences and processes. Keep teams small, give people maximum autonomy and control over their working environment, and allow at least some direct access to leaders.

In the pyramid-shaped structure of most organisations, the last recommendations may seem hard to achieve, given the significant time demands on those few at the top.

### ABOUT MARY TAYLOR

Mary Taylor has worked with top executives in many globally recognised brands, including Apple, Cartier, Ferrari, Dior, Pfizer, Prada and Sony, and has a unique understanding of the challenges of corporate life at the top.

Mary's extraordinary academic and professional background includes working in maximum-security prisons and as a corporate lawyer for a top global law firm. She is also a qualified psychologist.

That said, this is not an issue of providing significant quantities of time, simply a small shift in personal contact. A senior leader giving an employee, who normally has no direct contact, ten minutes once every few months provides astonishing results. Not only does the employee feel more 'heard' and significant to the organisation, but the leader gains invaluable insights and unique new perspectives.

Ultimately, we remain human beings, so it is no great surprise that we work and function best when we feel included, relevant, and at least to some degree in control.

By accepting and embracing these universal truths, a company can benefit from greater staff commitment and ultimately reap greater rewards.

