Memo bosses: Here's the secret to good workers

By Adele Horin
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A study has found what makes a workplace excellent. And it's not hard to guess.

For too many Australian workers, the summer break is like a reprieve from prison. Worn-out and browbeaten, they retreat to the coast to recuperate from yelling bosses, distrustful managers and tension-filled environments. For 21st-century industrial prisoners, a month off is not enough.

But some workers are almost sorry to take a holiday; their job is a pleasure and their workplaces are excellent places to be.

Don't believe me? These first-rate workplaces are rare, it's true. But they exist. And researchers Dr Daryll Hull and Vivienne Read, of the UNSW, have unearthed their secrets. As a result they have produced the summer's must-read, a little report called Simply the Best.

All managers and CEOs should pack it in their beach bags. Simply the Best is a page-turner and its message is potentially life-changing. It sets out the ways an excellent workplace that produces superb business results differs from a merely good one. And the results might surprise some people. It is not luck. It is not the absence of unions; in fact, contrary to conservative diatribe, some of the best-performing workplaces are heavily unionised.

It is not the hours of work employees put in or the level of casual employees on site. None of these things makes the difference.

The researchers visited 16 workplaces, eight of them identified in advance as excellent performers and eight as good. They surveyed hundreds of workers at all levels from the CEO to the floorhand to determine the elements that distinguished the excellent from the good.

And they discovered the same story again and again. Absolutely central was the quality of relationships at work - how people related to each other as friends, colleagues and co-workers. In the excellent workplaces "the atmosphere of mutual trust and respect was overwhelming". Colleagues and workmates supported each other and helped get the job done.

Friendship was not the key aspect. But mutual respect, recognition and trust were paramount. And this extended to the relationship between managers and workers. "To produce quality work in Australia, one must have quality working relationships," Hull and Read concluded.
In this focus on people, Australian workplace culture is unusual. Other research shows that Germans, when asked about a quality workplace, think "standards"; Japanese think "pursuit of perfection"; the French think "luxury". Australians think quality means "quality of relationships".

There were 14 other factors in the excellent workplaces. And together they made them special places in the lives of the people who work there.

The quality of leadership was crucial. In the excellent workplaces visited, the bosses at all levels knew their behaviour was critical in setting an example. The bosses understood that how they conducted themselves affected how workers felt.

Staff valued leaders who behaved as a captain/coach. Excellent bosses gave support when needed but did not get in the way. They helped in a crisis and allowed trial and learning at other times. They were accessible and, above all, they inspired trust.

Bosses trusted workers to do the job well and workers trusted the information they got from the boss.

Another core driver in these excellent workplaces was that workers felt confident enough to "have a say". Taking the initiative is not always valued in Australian workplaces. But in the excellent ones it was encouraged, and this gave workers some autonomy.

Everyone understood the culture at the heart of the enterprise. Workers said the major difference between the excellent workplace and others of their experience was that here "they really do practise what they preach".

Interestingly, pay and conditions were seldom mentioned by those in the excellent workplaces. It went without saying that an excellent place to work offered good pay and conditions. People felt they were paid for competence and experience, not merely or necessarily for achieving production or financial targets. Performance-linked pay has become popular in Australia.

But this research found: "Money is not the only motivator." People also performed well when they felt their efforts were recognised, or they were given access to training and career development.

As you might expect, these top places took staff recruitment very seriously. Much emphasis was placed on a potential newcomer's ability to get along with others. Recruiters tried to get a rounded view of the candidates and, in most of the excellent workplaces, once the initial screening was done, final choice was left to fellow workers.
The word "passion" is also relevant here: some workers unashamedly said they loved their jobs; they were absorbed in the work. They thirsted for knowledge, wanting feedback on how they were going, how the company was going, how the production was going, and how the rest of the team was going. And feedback went both ways.

It is amazing how often these places turned out to be fun places to be.

Industrial prisoners do not make excellent workers. And it's hard to imagine an excellent workplace, the authors say, where the staff are miserable or surly. These lucky workers felt relaxed enough to joke and muck around in a spontaneous way.

The secrets of excellent workplaces are in some ways touchingly simple. It has little to do with machines, policies, creative tension, performance-based pay or individual contracts. It comes down to the relationships between people. Funny so few managers make nurturing good relationships top priority.