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## Continuing to create a culture of change

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An ancient advert for beer inspired the chairman of Dale Carnegie to put the emphasis on people

Some years ago, an ancient stone tablet dating back to about 4000BC was unearthed in Mesopotamia. Once deciphered, it turned out to be not a record of kings or historical proof of events in the Bible, but a simple message believed to be stating, 'Drink El-ba - the beer with the heart of a lion'.

Beside the inscription was an illustration of a voluptuous woman holding two goblets, something which gave scholars an initial clue that the discovery was the world's oldest known advertisement for beer.

The significance of the find is not lost on Peter Handal, chairman, president and chief executive of Dale Carnegie and Associates, one of the world's leading providers of soft skills and business training.

'It just shows that, even though the world around us changes a lot, human nature and some of the things inside us don't change at all,' he said.

That was a message United States-based Mr Handal was keen to deliver during a recent visit to Hong Kong. He noted that the pace of technology-driven change was unlikely to slow, which made innovation and adaptability vital facets of modern business life.

However, for all the talk of cyberspace, globalisation, connectivity and the flat world, the fundamental success of any organisation still depended on the 'human element'. And that would remain a constant as developed economies continue to shift from a manufacturing base to greater reliance on services.

'Business is still all about the people side, which is as important as ever,' Mr Handal said. 'So, what we have to consider is how change and innovation, which are generally making our organisations and jobs less secure, affect our staff and the people we deal with.'

For this reason, he said, many of the firm's training programmes - now available in more than 70 countries and 25 languages - focused on creating a culture for change.

The basic principle is that companies must learn to perform better, faster and with fewer resources if they want to survive. And the key point of instruction is that they can only do this by being more responsive to customers, employees and the world around them.

'That's why we coach people to be good listeners,' Mr Handal said. 'A lot of what we train is common sense, but not common practice.'

He said that senior executives in the retail sector were expected to have a good understanding of

customer preferences and the overall market. Comparatively few, though, actually spent time in a store dealing with shoppers to hear directly what they had to say. Those who did had an immediate advantage.

Mr Handal said that if employers wanted to create a genuine culture for change they also had to be tolerant of failure and ready to encourage risk taking. In today's competitive markets, the alternative was not only short-sighted, but also a sure-fire recipe for stagnation, lack of initiative and staff discontent.

To gain an edge, companies therefore had to make a commitment to employee development and regard staff involvement as an integral part of the strategic planning process.

'We know that people support a world they helped to create, where they feel they belong,' Mr Handal said. 'It may take longer, but you end up with a culture and strategic plan that everyone buys into, and a better organisation.'

In training the key is improved communication. Therefore, many of the firm's courses include techniques to develop listening skills, and teach the knack of seeing different viewpoints. Specifically, this is done by asking participants to pick an article from that morning's newspaper. First, they argue one side of the case, then the other in an exercise designed to teach understanding, awareness and respect for others, more than mental agility. Mr Handal said concepts such as these had informed the thinking of the original Dale Carnegie, whose *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is still one of the world's best-selling management books.

'It was written in the 1930s just after his visit to China, and his daughter often makes the point that a lot of the ideas were influenced by the culture in this part of the world,' he said.

Since then, about 7 million people have taken various programmes inspired by the initial work and other books which followed.

As the first person from outside the family to lead the firm, Mr Handal sees a big part of his role as building the business outside the US.

'We are in the process of becoming a truly global company,' he said. 'We are devoting a lot of resources to expanding internationally and adding about five new offices a year.'

There is a major thrust to offer courses for the local offices of Fortune 100 companies, which are already clients in the US, and to introduce shorter seminars lasting between one and three days. Some will teach the 'classic' Dale Carnegie principles, with others customised to meet the in-house needs of individual companies.

'In these programmes, we are trying to change [people's] behaviour and make it more consistent with human nature,' Mr Handal said. 'You can't learn everything you need from the computer screen.'