

# Reverse the “BUSY” curse

Author **DAVID GILBERTSON’S** blunt assessment of modern workplaces: they’re hectic and less thoughtful. What happened to simplicity and common sense?

**W**E ARE LIVING IN AN ERA OF SEEMINGLY relentless downward pressure on corporate costs. Consumers expect to pay less for everything. Globalization, automation and, increasingly, AI are wiping out swaths of jobs. Formal commitment between employers and employees is being replaced by at-will/on-demand models of work.

Do staff really matter so much these days? Maybe not. Unless your people are what differentiates you.

In my book *Wine Bar Theory* I talk about how modern enterprise has become progressively busier and less thoughtful at the same time. I think that’s more than a regrettable trend, and put forward 28 ways of reversing that spiral to replace “busy” with “smart” and “urgent” with “important.” How people are organized, managed and led is central to achieving that and to making a positive difference.

The first of those credos involves clarity of purpose and its communication. Many leaders find it hard to say what their business is for, though they can describe at length what it does.

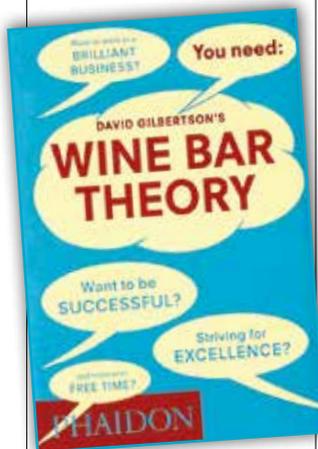
Simplicity is key. We overestimate how effective we are at communicating. I come across businesses with convoluted sales messages, yet they wonder why their sales are low. Complicated means you haven’t distilled significance. If Einstein made the Theory of Relativity communicable, you can do the same with your business.

That is critical for staff. Many may have come straight from formal education and got used to accepting fuzzy understandings. That compromise is anathema for business. If I don’t understand the purpose of what I do, I can’t advance in the job or advance the job itself. That’s why you must hire people who won’t take fudge for an answer.

Often it seems to be the middle ground, policed by middle managers, that proves to be the killing field for suggestion, idea and initiative in business.

Here are a few tell-tale examples of how innovation is routinely slaughtered, but in a nice, humane way.

**When a job comes up internally.** “She’s good but I don’t think she’s quite ready. We should look outside



## DAVID GILBERTSON

David Gilbertson is former CEO of media companies Informa PLC and Emap Ltd. He is now Chairman of the marketing service group Communis and an adviser to several private companies. His book, *Wine Bar Theory*, is published by Phaidon Press.

instead.” Translation: I’m threatened by her and it took me years to get to her level.

**On recruitment.** “He was really smart but I didn’t think he’d be satisfied with the job after a while so we gave it to someone who was more of a fit.” Better to choose a person who does what they’re told than someone who can grow the role.

**On marketing opportunity.** “Yes I can see that would be a very good way to reach new customers but unfortunately we’ve already spent this month’s budget.” So if that initiative costs us \$1,000 and we make \$10,000 from new sales from it, which budget was it we didn’t have?

**On resourcing.** “Let’s commit two people to digging this hole for the next six months.” That would be instead of six people digging it for two months for the same cost and a more certain outcome?

Business increasingly complains of a lack of loyalty among young recruits and puts it down to Millennial “attitude.” It has either forgotten, or never known, the enduring ingredients of job loyalty: responsibility, recognition and reward.

Everyone in a company should be responsible for something. The Big Boss is responsible for everything but, if smart, knows she can’t do it all. The effective devolution of responsibility from the top down makes great companies sing. The doorman needs to be absolutely responsible for the door and should be able to explain why that’s important, how he makes what he does outstanding and what he is determined to do even better this year.

How many of your colleagues have those answers? How are they recognized for delivering on them and when was the last time it was reflected in their rewards? If your answer is not many, not often or not at all then the reason they’ve gone backpacking is not that they’re awkward new-century ingrates. It’s because you didn’t understand the nature of the relationship: they didn’t matter to you and you didn’t matter to them.

As consumers, we recognize the difference between organizations whose staff are disengaged and those whose staff believe in what they’re building. We are loyal to brands and places we like.

Success is still closely linked to the customer-facing behaviors of the people businesses select to represent them. Creating wealth sustainably for owners is best done by creating an environment where employees feel they own what they do.

There’s a 100 percent reliable question you can ask yourself at any time to check how well you’re doing that. “How would I feel in their shoes?”