

# **The FISH! Phenomenon: Rediscovering the Bold Simplicity of our HR Mission**

## **Stephen Lundin (aka The Big Tuna)**

In the closing Keynote of the HR Summit 2007 in Australia, I sought to provoke those assembled with a few challenges. You see, I consider HR my tribe. Over the years I have taught doctoral students in Organization Development and facilitated hundreds of training and development programs, developed competency models, established succession planning systems, developed performance appraisal systems, and consulted on a variety of HR issues ranging from selection and retention to sustaining a vision. My MBA teaching has focused on leadership, change, innovation and the people side of business. In 1997 I worked on the film FISH! and in 2000 published my book FISH! which was followed by FISH! Sticks and FISH! for Life. These books have sold over 7 million copies and the phenomenon has kept me on the road for decade. That is why it is such a pleasure to pause for a moment and reflect on what has been learned as a result of this amazing story that could be useful to my tribe, HR. Below are a few of the things that stand out for me today. I hope you are as challenged by these observations as I am.

### **Lesson One: The big story is no longer the fish market in Seattle, it is HR.**

If Pike Place Fish was lost in an earthquake tomorrow it would be a terrible loss but the FISH! Phenomenon would not miss a beat. All over the world people have been provoked by the story of the market and taken action on their own; discovering ways to bring the old wisdom contained in the FISH! Philosophy to their workplace. I have heard hundreds of inspiring stories about the actions of these pioneers including a nursing home in New Zealand, an insurance company in South Africa, an oil platform in the north sea, a bank in Malaysia, the military in Australia, a super market chain in Thailand and a hospital in Singapore. And in the center of each story is an HR person leading or supporting the change.

In some ways you might consider this phenomenon the largest business experiment of our time. And it is a natural experiment. By natural I mean no one is

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in charge, it is simply moving across the globe by word of mouth. Its people like you who have been inspired to their personal possibilities after considering the amazing story of a rag tag group of fishmongers in Seattle. If the market disappeared tomorrow there would be no shortage of equally powerful stories.

### **Lesson Two: Work life balance is not a physics problem.**

I have been troubled by the industry that has developed around work life balance. I admire the mission of work life balance, to help us lead a well-rounded life in a world full of work addiction. The excuse for the addiction is often economical but it is my observation that people addicted to work are not usually more productive, nor are they more successful. The addiction is like all addictions. It is a way to hide from the natural and intense feeling of life.

So creating a model that makes this a physics problem is not really addressing the core issue. As would have it my travels with fish provided me some insights. Well, actually it was a personal tragedy combined with my FISH travels.

On November 12, 2007, my oldest child, Beth Ann Lundin, was killed by a drunk driver. Some months later I made the observation that I was now her legacy. Where we expect to be our parent's legacy, I was my daughters legacy and I was now living for both of us. What could I possibly say that would properly honor such a responsibility? And one day I heard the words coming out of my mouth before I was aware of their presence. "It is not about work life balance because it is all life and all meant to be lived fully. Life at work and life outside of work, all to be honored. And the shorthand of the FISH! Philosophy is not a bad reminder of what is entailed if one chooses to live life at work in a way that honors life itself. Remember, life is too precious to just be passing through." This is Beth's legacy.

### **Lesson Number Three: It is up to HR to take care of the canary.**

In the old days, when miners would go deep underground, they would bring along a carry. If the canary flopped over dead, it was a sign the air might be toxic and a reason to boogie out fast.

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As human resources professionals we are well aware that the climate in our organization can have a big effect on the quality of the operations and the lives of the people. We carry the canary, it is a part of our makeup in HR to do so, and we are the first the notice when the internal climate turns bad. As keepers of the canary and the enemy of toxic energy, a key part of our role is to see that the canary not only stays alive but thrives. Some in HR have found that the ingredients in The FISH! Philosophy contain important nutrients for a high quality of work life and a healthy canary.

#### **Lesson Number Four: Truth telling is often left to HR.**

The world of organizations is run by folks who are both political and strategic. It is a place where the words hard and soft are used to hide the fact that the opposite is true. Our work in HR is referred to as soft. This is because we deal with people and people have emotions, an ingredient in the human equation that many with primarily linear and strategic minds find quite disquieting. Since our leaders are often selected for their strategic mind, it is common for our work to be considered a necessary evil that is not fully understood. The truth is that many of these leaders are terrified of the authentic human engagement and would rather avoid the fierce conversations that are required to keep the toxicity out of the climate.

In my travels with FISH I often get the following question. "But what about those people who actually seem dedicated to their negativity. You know the ones who can find something bad in anything and have permanently scrunched up faces. How do you get them to adopt the FISH Philosophy?"

My first response is to clarify, "Is their negativity affecting the performance of the organization or the quality of work life? Could what you see as negativity actually be an individual difference or a legitimate disagreement or difference of opinion? If either of these let them be, not everyone has to FISH! FISH! must always be a choice."

And 95% of the time the person who asked the question will tell me that the quality of work life is negatively affected and productivity suffers and I then say,

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"Why have you done nothing about this?" The awkward silence is an indication that the soft is really very hard.

We in HR need to be the truth tellers or often, the truth will not be told. When confronted with negativity in the form of passive resistance or any of its other insidious forms, we have to advise our colleagues of the following sequence.

1. Compassion. Be fully present with the negative person and take the time needed to be sure they know you are really listening.

2. Confrontation. If the compassionate approach leads nowhere confront the person with the impact of their negativity in your view and ask them to stop.

3. Say Goodbye. If the first two steps do not lead to a change the human thing to do is say goodbye. Many find my use of the word human in this context hard to understand. How can it be human to fire someone? Think for a minute, this is a critical message we must convey to our colleagues if we wish to eliminate the toxic energy dumps of our organization. This person has been saying over and over again, "I am unhappy here. I am unhappy here." But the person will not leave for complex psychological reasons that would make a good discussion some day. It is up to us to help them find happiness.

Oh. There is research on the result. Both parties consider themselves better off in six months. You have saved a human being from a life where every day is something to get through and despise and you have helped them have a chance to find happiness from the largest expenditure of life they make, work. Sometimes the soft is hard and the hard is soft.

#### **Lesson Number Five: HR Understands Natural Energy**

Perhaps the biggest surprise I have encountered with FISH! is the number of leaders who like the results they see in the film, book or case studies and want the same result today. By simply dictating that it will be so. Liking the result of having a workforce that engages customers and colleagues in authentic and inspiring ways I can understand. But wanting to dictate that result shows an

amazing lack of understanding of human beings. "I want 50% more FISH by Friday." Sorry, doesn't work that way.

My colleague Carr Hagerman and I have focused on the ingredient that fuels the result and have come to call it **natural energy**. In fact we wrote the book *Top Performer* and made the film by the same name to help communicate the power of this renewable resource.

It all boils down to the fact that the authentic human connection is always a result of individual choice. If you want a customer experience that rings real, you can't demand it, coerce it, force it, or incent it, you have to invite it, inspire it, model it and support it. A very different way of thinking and yet the most amazing and successful companies seem to find their way through the sea of egos and the waves of arrogance to the island called natural energy.

### **Lesson Number Six: In HR we understand the role of freedom in the workplace.**

If I could pick or predict the next big business topic it would be "freedom". Isn't it interesting that one of the last institutions to embrace freedom is the organization? Interesting but not surprising. Freedom is frightening to those who cherish old-fashioned control. But we in HR know that when you replace old-fashioned control with distributed control, the result can be an explosion of energy and innovation. And what better name for distributed control than the value nested inside, freedom. (Yes, we tried empowerment but it became a tool that could be given and taken away. You can give freedom, you set people free, and that can not be taken away or it really isn't freedom.)

Freedom is a universal value that has not been at all welcome in most enterprises. Its time has come and it is up to us to work out the details and smooth the worried brows of executives who have lived their whole life in relying on position power. Remember from the words of the Rat Catcher in *Top Performer*, "There is nothing so compelling as to witness someone who is truly free." If natural energy is a renewable resource then we are wildcatters drilling for freedom.

## Closing Remarks

Colleagues in HR; it is time for us to claim the bold simplicity of our mission. It is time to put aside discussion of our place at the table of executive decision-making and **claim** the place for which we have been uniquely trained. The future of our organizations and the quality of work life experienced by our colleagues depends on this. HR. **Claim you pitch.**<sup>1</sup> And that, by the way, takes me to my next journey.

*Stephen Lundin, the Big Tuna Ph.D. is the author of seven books and producer of a number of films. Steve personally wrote FISH!, FISH! Sticks and FISH! for Life. He was co-writer of FISH! Tales and co-author of Top Performer: A Bold Approach to Sales and Service with Carr Hagerman. His books CATS: The Nine Lives of Innovation and CATS: The Personal Guide will be published in Australia in September 2007 and featured at the Druker Conference conducted by the Australian Institute of Management in Sydney. Jimmy Tan, a resident of Singapore, is the co-author of CATS. Steve's latest film is Top Performer, which features business lessons from street performers in an environment of natural energy and lots of laughs. For more information on Stephen Lundin please contact O2 Speakers at [www.o2speakers.com](http://www.o2speakers.com)*

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<sup>1</sup> Claim you pitch is one of the seven terms comprising the “Language of Energy” in the book Top Performer.