



Guttman Insights

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David Swers is president and COO of Custom Fabrics, LLC, the largest division within Glen Raven, Inc., a North Carolina-based, privately held, 141-year-old global organization and industry leader. The company's flagship brand, Sunbrella®, is respected by consumers



worldwide for beautiful, high-quality, long-lasting fabrics that have revolutionized the shade, marine, and furniture markets. Its Dickson brand is the leading awning brand in Europe. The Custom Fabrics Division has almost 2,000 employees worldwide.

In this issue, COO David Swers of Custom Fabrics, a division of Glen Raven, discusses how the high-performance approach has kept his company, which is in one of America's oldest industries, vital and on top. Working virtually? Who isn't, which is why Howard Guttman's column on virtual teams is must reading. And, during COVID-19, inadvertent, dysfunctional self-limiting stories are tamping down performance. Howard Guttman's "If I Were You" advice will help rewrite defeating narratives.

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Leader's Corner: David Swers — Spinning and Weaving to High Performance

Glen Raven was founded in 1880 as a cotton mill. It doesn't exactly evoke high-tech razzle-dazzle. Yet, the company has been remarkably successful in a tough, competitive segment. What's the key to success?

We moved from being a traditional textile company to where we are today because of our ability to adapt and adjust. For example, in the 1940s we made parachute fabrics; in the 1950s we entered the panty-hose-yarn business. The company originally began serving the awning business in the 1880s and changed that market significantly with the creation of our iconic Sunbrella brand. In the 1970s, we expanded into the marine market. In the early 1980s, we engineered our fabrics to penetrate the outdoor-furniture market, and in the 2000s we entered the indoor-upholstery and window markets with Sunbrella. Later in the '80s and into the '90s, Glen Raven shifted away from the production of commodity yarn and fabrics and began focusing on consumer brands. The key question we always ask ourselves is: How do we continuously transform ourselves and remain relevant, in the long term and generationally?

What are the strategic objectives for Custom Fabrics three years out?

The challenge is how to become more and more relevant to the markets that we currently serve and to new markets where we can add value. We want to strengthen our consumer brands, extend our business into new segments with innovative products and services, and improve our overall results by becoming a high-

performance organization. For example, we asked ourselves what, besides outdoor furniture, we could sell to homeowners? This led us to create textiles for the indoor-furniture market and for window treatments. For boats, we created a unique top-grade, engineered vinyl, Sunbrella Horizon, which can be used for tops on the outside and upholstery on the inside. Strategically, we want to focus on markets and customers where we have a significant presence and then look for "adjacencies," or product extensions, to increase our impact. In addition, we will continue to make significant investments in our sales and marketing teams to drive our brands, and we will continue to invest in our people throughout the organization to drive quicker decision making and accountability.

What about your business keeps you up at night?

Buyer behavior is changing, especially given the pandemic, with e-commerce becoming a much bigger factor. We typically offer high-end products to affluent consumers. Traditionally, we have sold through more high-touch distribution channels, where we build trust and collaborative relationships and explain our value proposition to customers in person. So, learning to engage in the e-commerce space is critical. There is also a good deal of industry consolidation taking place in the trade and retail spaces. We are a consumer brand, but we remain an ingredient product that relies on our trade partners and retailers to make sure that the brand message, along with how we are displayed and presented, is correct. In addition, to remain relevant will require us to innovate faster and to better utilize research and data to understand the needs of our customers.

What was the “spark” that led you to take action to move toward a horizontal, high-performance culture and organization?

Our business grew rapidly over the past 20 years. During that time, we brought on significant new, younger talent and engaged them in an effort to improve how we do business. They pointed out many of our shortcomings: Decisions were difficult to make; roles and responsibilities were unclear; there was siloed thinking. We had become slow moving and lumbering, and, as a result, frustration had mounted.

What did you do with the feedback?

At first, I did a good deal of self-reflection: What had we, as the leadership team, done to hinder the group of younger talent two or three tiers below the top team? And why hadn't the leaders of those tiers been more proactive about initiating the needed changes? Clearly, things had to be done differently, beginning with me and the senior leadership team.

What were the two or three biggest needs you saw on your leadership team?

Hierarchical decision making, top-down ways of working, and siloed thinking were at the top of the list. Craig Yokeley, our team's executive vice president, approached me about a year-and-a-half ago, saying that we couldn't make the needed changes without external assistance. Craig researched consulting firms, leading us to GDS. I recall looking at the GDS website and reading about a small company in which a few executives had always made the critical decisions over lunch. Given their rapid growth, they could no longer do so. That was us!

What were your key business objectives?

We wanted to be nimbler, improve decision-making speed, break down silos, have those closest to the information be more decisive, and improve accountability – the way it had been at the beginning.

How did you go about meeting those objectives?

One of the things that I liked about GDS was that it was very direct – there was little “B.S.” Howard [Guttman] cautioned that the top team had to first exemplify horizontal, high-performance behaviors before we could change the rest of the organization. Our top leadership team met with GDS in the summer of 2019 and went through its first alignment in October. Back then, we met in person! Since then, we've done extensive leadership coaching and leadership-skill building, along with quarterly alignment sessions that allow us to assess progress and ensure that everyone is adapting.

And what have you done to engage those below the top tier?

We're about to take the change much broader within the organization. For our extended leadership team of about 50 people, we've had an alignment session and skills training in the areas of conflict management and influencing, in order to introduce the core concepts and begin developing the skills needed for this new way of working. Our senior leadership team is communicating about our journey and experiences; we're seeking to role-model and highlight the new behaviors in action; and we're coaching the next levels to adopt the same behaviors. To reinforce accountability and other desired behaviors, we're working with GDS to align our performance system with the high-performance way of working, tying in performance reviews and compensation. It's an integrated approach.

What are the biggest challenges that you face on your horizontal, high-performance journey?

First is to have everyone understand the benefits of a high-performance team and organization. It's a different way of working. We must let go of the hierarchical mentality and move to a more distributive approach. This entails being more direct and decisive, having clear objectives, holding one another accountable, and resolving issues rapidly. Ultimately, each person must become CEO of his or her area of responsibility. They must own it – and we need to provide them with the tools to make this happen.

What difference has the high-performance transformation made to you as a leader?

I've become clearer and more concise in communicating the vision and strategy of the organization, along with my goals, expectations, and the tactics needed to get there. I'm much more focused and results oriented. I reflect more on how I can improve myself and my team to hasten this HPT journey.

And what about your team?

The team has also become much more focused. We're pushing ourselves. We're asking questions such as: What are the goals of our meetings? Are we being productive? Are we putting off decisions? If we need to adjust, what do we need to do, now?

What's the ROI from your investment in high performance?

We've made quicker, better decisions about which products to introduce, which products or businesses to exit or de-emphasize, and how best to manage inventory. We're asking more incisive questions to identify and then address issues related to the bottom line. We've been able to set clear priorities, allowing us to introduce several new products in record time, even during the pandemic. We are breaking down the silo mentality, are more focused, and communicate better across functions.

What have you learned about leading in a virtual environment?

Virtual meetings are more agenda driven, which is a positive, and are in several other ways more challenging than in-person meetings. It's more difficult to read body language, and you might not grasp voice tone quite as readily. That said, over all I'm very pleased with the outcome. Howard and his team have done an incredible job with our HPT virtual meetings. We've learned to make virtual meetings more agenda driven and specific, allowing us to capture several "gems" from the discussions. However, going "off the rails" and off agenda can lead to creative thinking, which happens more easily in face-to-face meetings. Virtual brainstorming needs to be built into virtual team meetings!

Have you changed your leadership behavior in a virtual setting?

I've become more communicative with my team during both virtual group sessions and individual, one-hour virtual meetings. And my direct reports are meeting virtually with their entire team once or twice a week, using the high-performance skills that we've acquired. I'm also holding regular virtual town halls with the worldwide organization.

What's been your biggest "aha!" during your high-performance journey?

I wish I had taken the journey much earlier in my career. Learning how to develop a team to deal with tough issues and even breakdowns, without getting personal or sweeping them under the rug, and resolving issues and learning from them, especially in a team setting, are essential leadership skills, now more than ever, given the volatile times in which we live. ●



Lessons from the Virtual Front

by Howard M. Guttman

It hasn't always been easy making the trek from in-person to virtual team meetings, especially given GDS's unique "we go there," high-performance consulting approach with senior leadership teams. But while up-close interactions will always remain the gold standard, carefully planning the transition to a virtual platform makes it possible to provide quality support to teams taking the high-performance journey. Here are seven lessons we've learned while reinventing how we work.

1. *Consciously choose to be okay.*

There is so much turmoil swirling around us—COVID-19, political tumult, Zoom fatigue, quarantine, layoffs, cash-flow crunch, etc.—that remaining positive and staying focused are challenging. I recall a consulting call with a client in early January about a performance issue related to a key member of her team. Rather than focusing on the issue, this COO was obsessed with the riots in Washington that had just taken place. After patiently listening, I finally explained that it was better to avoid stressing over things you cannot control and instead focus on what you can impact: the task at hand, resolving the issue, and coming away with the sense of satisfaction that comes with accomplishment.

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screen.

2. *Choose your platform.*

Zoom and Microsoft Teams are two of the platforms that I use most frequently in working with clients on team alignments, coaching, and leadership development. The virtual experience allows me to home in on body language, nuances of gesture, facial expressions, and posture. Subtext can be a rich source of meaning. There's a lot of gold on a virtual screen. My rule of thumb: If it's consequential and relationship sensitive, I go virtual. If it's transactional or quick and task-oriented, I'll use the phone or e-mail.

3. *Check in, check up, but don't check out.*

Distance might make the heart grow fonder, but it can also fray relationships. The need to stay in touch is critical for bridging the distance divide that comes from working remotely in today's electronic cottages. Tap technology to stay on top and in touch. We recently led an electronic town hall for a national company that included 225 participants and 11 GDS consultants. The CEO wanted to kick off 2021 with the building of a shared sense of purpose and community. It was a successful example of high-tech meeting high-touch. I talked above about using Zoom or some other video communication platform for relationship management, but it is important to use all the tools at your disposal—telephone, email, texting, virtual meetings—to stay connected with colleagues.

4. *Demonstrate relationship behavior rather than just jumping to task.*

Adjusting our EQ radar to tune into colleagues is more important than ever. How's it going? How is everyone doing regarding work-life balance? Does anything need to be modified to keep up performance? There are a lot of stressors out there. I was in a virtual meeting last week, which was interrupted with a soul-piercing scream from a team member's three-year-old. We took a quick break before getting back to the task, I asked if everything was okay. Meeting participants assured me that it was, and we moved on without missing a beat. In virtual space, it just might be that we all tilt a little toward "F" in Myers Briggs terms, focusing more on feeling, empathy, and relationships.

5. *Be meeting-flexible.*

Consider moving to a short-duration, high-frequency meeting model, especially for international meetings. What is the biggest win we want to accomplish and how much meeting time do we need to accomplish it? Answering this question is crucial for international organizations that span multiple time zones. I recently worked with a global client on a team alignment, with team members spread from the East Coast to California, Europe, and Singapore. Running full-day meetings would be an endurance test. We decided to segment sessions into four, four-hour time blocks, held in fairly close succession. Our plan was similar for a London-based company with an international reach that sought to develop the leadership skills of its directors and managers in several time zones. There, we held three-hour sessions every six weeks. Moving to this model requires explicit objective setting, being intentional about achieving these objectives, straight talk, and cutting through conversational clutter.

6. *Prep!*

Preparedness is next to godliness. It's true for all meetings, but especially those conducted virtually. Which technology platform to use—each comes with strengths and weaknesses—visuals, prework, breakouts, all in pursuit of clear meeting objectives, must be carefully planned. Because there's little opportunity for “hallway conversations” to make mid-course corrections, getting things right the first time is important. It's not a bad idea to codify the myriad ground rules of meeting behavior—when and how to raise your electronic hand, engaging “mute” when not speaking, testing voice levels, and the like—by distributing something akin to a Roberts Rules of Virtual Order.

We view meetings as mini productions. In fact, we employ a meeting producer who helps orchestrate the details prior to team meetings and in real time; everything from making sure there are no technology glitches to moving participants in and out of virtual meeting rooms to ensuring the visuals are properly displayed. The producer is also another set of eyes to alert the leader about participant issues and concerns. Even routine team meetings require more attention to stage setting than do typical face-to-face encounters. It's no longer simply distributing an agenda and reserving a meeting room.

7. *Avoid burnout.*

I'm probably not unusual. These days, I typically spend a good deal of time in virtual meetings. No more travel, plane trips, client dinners, or downtime. You are always in play. Eight hours of working in the virtual world does not equate to eight hours in the real world. Activity becomes telescoped and transaction speed increases. Sure, you can cover more ground working virtually, but reflection time on those long plane rides disappears, as do the valuable informal meetings with clients. Burnout becomes an issue unless you properly pace yourself—and your team—by carving out downtime and think time between meetings. I also work out daily, which provides time for reflection, decompression, and staying in shape. I recommend finding an activity or hobby that allows you to zone out and that offers respite from whatever storm might lie ahead. 🎯

If I Were You:

Rewriting Your “Victim Narrative”

by Howard M. Guttman

“I’m suffering from Zoom fatigue.” How many times have you heard *that* complaint? Recently, I was asked to coach a virtual team meeting when mid-way through the session one of the executives confessed to being a Zoom-fatigue sufferer. Others soon chimed in: “It’s very tiring”; “I have a knot in my stomach.” Negativity has a way of metastasizing. Left unchecked, it can become a team-energy deflator. Before the meeting devolved into a pity-party of victims, I intervened to change the narrative. My question to the team: “For how long are you going to choose to walk around with a knot in your stomach?”

Victims believe that “bad things” happen, that they are subject to events beyond their control. Call it bad karma, fate, or “it’s just my luck.” Rather than own the fact that they are the screenwriter, director, principal actor of their story, victims prefer to hold onto a personally disempowering internal conversation.

No question, COVID-19 is fertile soil for the victim narrative. However real the virus and the need for virtual meetings, you are the one who chooses to be tired or vigorous, to have low or high energy. True enough, endurance and resilience are needed these days. But it’s up to you to be powerful, present, and engaged and to not let self-created victim stories derail you into inaction. ***The one thing we can control is how we react to events.***

The victim narrative allows people to avoid accountability. It justifies why you haven’t met a due date, delivered a project on budget, or lived up to a commitment. And because victims have a way of seeking out like-minded victims, the effects can spread well beyond a team. The further down you go in an organization, the greater the feeling of not being in control. Soon, a victim culture that sanctions widespread underperformance develops throughout the organization.

If I were you, I’d be on the lookout for people who play victim. Your aim should be to help them rewrite their story.

First, look for the telltale signs of victim behavior: complaints, avoiding personal responsibility, excuse making and justifying, unkept promises, serial underperformance, fighting feedback, lack of holding peers accountable, and colluding to support dysfunctional behavior. The list goes on and on.

Next, explore why someone would choose to create a victim narrative. Hold up a mirror to what they are seeing. “Hey, this is what I’m picking up about your behavior.” Then search for causes: “Why are you choosing that story?” “How does that story benefit you—and at what cost?” Every story has some perceived utility, however dysfunctional. It’s important to understand the payoffs—and the liabilities—of that story. Now it’s time for coaching. Work with your colleague to create an alternative narrative that will be more self-empowering, productive, and lead to a healthier outcome. Finally, if support is needed, make the offer.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference.” There’s a lot of wisdom in the Alcoholics Anonymous Serenity Prayer. It’s solid advice for victims who need to rewrite their narrative. 🍷