'She'll be right': Australia and ambition

Topics: AMBITION CAREER MANAGEMENT ENTREPRENEURSHIP PRODUCTIVITY WORK/LIFE BALANCE

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written on December 17, 2015

It's a phrase that sums up Australia's 'leave it to fate' attitude. But it raises the question: Do Australians lack ambition? Are they less entrepreneurial than other nations? Are Australians so laid back that "good enough" is as good as it gets? Is this the real reason Australia's capital productivity is low compared to the rest of the world?

These are some of the interesting opinions expressed in a new Insight report *The Challenges of Attaining Growth* that interviews 80 Australian business leaders, chairmen, directors and CEOs. Produced by the Blenheim Partners, an executive search and board advisory firm and MGSM, it takes an in-depth look at the challenges faced by company boards, their composition and diversity, their inflexibility and sluggish response to digital disruption.

But one chapter stands out from the rest, discussion around a less commonly-aired problem: Is it the Australian culture that is holding the nation back? Do Australians lack the drive to succeed?

As one CEO put it, "If you make a million dollars in Australia, the sense is you have made it, in the US the million dollars will be the motivator to go on and make 10 and then 50 million." Others heads of companies are quick to point out that Australia is a much smaller market and has a strong history of generating great ideas but lacks access to capital. "Risk is not rewarded in Australia so we are not as entrepreneurial."

There is, however, a strong feeling among many participants to the report that the horizons of success are somewhat limited compared with other countries and some of this is self-imposed. Once an Australian has got the nice car, nice house, maybe a nice boat that equals success. The feeling is, says one that "if you live at Point Piper, it makes you a better person". Or that, "culturally Australians do not have the DNA 'to step ahead".

Australia's lovely environment doesn't help, nor does its reputation as an easy place to live. Both help to nurture a low-risk appetite with many people enjoying a good lifestyle. Business leaders described it creating a "lack of animal spirit" and a place that makes the people "soft".

Another point, that perhaps reflects cultural inhibition, is that Australians don't like to sell. "If I go to buy a sandwich in America I am normally sold the sandwich plus a coffee, maybe a sweet," remarks one director. "If I go to an Australian shop I will not be asked about the 15 types of bread, the ten types of salami, the coffee, the water bottle etc. I will be given a sandwich. My point is we are order takers and if we look from the top down how many "order makers" do we have in the boardroom?"

Perhaps Australian society is just too egalitarian, suggested a number of participants. This characteristic, so often seen as an advantage, makes us less liable to recognise and celebrate talent and success, and invest in the best. The lack of safety nets in the US compared to Australia, such as pension and health entitlements, also fosters a culture that respects money more than it respects support, suggested several.

In case this sounds like the bosses blaming blue-collar workers for productivity issues, the report also reveals some self-reflection. A number of business leaders believe the focus needs to be more on managers.

"White collar is good at playing the blame game, particularly when questions are regarding blue-collar productivity. But it's management who are paid to make decisions and provide the structure." While another participant says: "White collar are inefficient; more interested in the title and whom they report to."

The debate suggests that there's a whole load of contributing factors to Australia's sluggish productivity stats and just isolating one or two isn't going to explain the whole picture. Nevertheless, that old idiom, 'She'll be right', doesn't ring quite so convincingly anymore.