Leaders Build Culture

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Apathetic people exist in every organization. One can fault workers who allow themselves to be trapped in a state of despair. Managers typically describe these people as having "bad attitudes," but the culture created by leaders is often the root cause of the problem. If these same individuals are put in a culture of trust, respect, and challenge, many of them will quickly rise up to become happy and productive workers. It is essential that each individual in the workforce find real meaning in the organizational culture. Culture is determined by numerous actions and concepts, but it starts with the values and vision of the leader.

The culture of an organization is not easy to define. Most of the Leadership textbooks I have read describe the culture in terms of physical attributes that characterize an organization. For example, here is a typical list of the things purported to make up a company culture.

- Physical structure
- Language and symbols
- Rituals, ceremonies, gossip, and jokes
- Stories, legends, and heroes
- Beliefs
- Values and norms
- Assumptions

The above list is a montage of the lists in many textbooks. When you think about it, these items do go a long way toward defining the culture of an organization. Unfortunately, I believe these items fall short because they fail to include the emotions of the people. After all, organizations are made up of people, at all levels, interacting in a social structure for a purpose. Let us extend the list of things that make up the culture of an organization.

- Is there a high level of trust within the organization?
- To what extent do people have the opportunity to grow in this organization?
- Do people feel safe and secure, or are they basically fearful?
- How do people treat each other on their own level and on higher or lower levels?
- Is there mutual respect between management and workers?
- Is the culture inclusive or exclusive?
- Do people generally feel like winners or losers at work?
- Is the culture one of reinforcement or punishment?

- Are managers viewed as enablers or barriers?
- Are people trying to get into the organization or trying to get out?
- What is the level of satisfaction for people in this organization?
- Can people "speak their truth" without fear of reprisal?
- Do people follow the rules or find ways to avoid following them?

What can leaders do to ensure that the right culture is built and people have a sense of purpose and meaning in their work? Here are eight approaches that have been used by successful leaders.

1. **Have high ethical and moral standards**. Operate from a set of values, and make sure people know why those values are important. The essence of values needs to be implanted in the hearts and minds of everyone, and behaviors need to be consistent with them. A plaque on the wall does not make for good values. People living up to their highest standards makes for good values and an environment where people can trust each other and their leaders. It has to start with the leaders.

2. **Operate with high Emotional Intelligence**. The ability to work well with people is critical. Without Emotional Intelligence, leaders do not have the skill to transform intentions into meaning within people. Leaders with low Emotional Intelligence also have the most significant blind spots in how they are perceived by other people, as documented by Daniel Goleman.

3. **Build trust**. Trust is the glue that holds people together in a framework of positive purpose. Without trust, we are just playing games with each other, hoping to get through the day unscathed. The most significant way leaders help create trust is by rewarding candor, which is accomplished by not punishing people for speaking their truth. Most leaders find it difficult to reward candor, but it is the heart of great leadership, as documented by Warren Bennis. Trust is also enabled by a shared set of goals or vision.

4. **Create a positive vision of the future.** Vision is critical, because without it people see no sense of direction for their work. If people have a common goal, and it is communicated well, then it is possible for them to support each other and actually get excited about the future. People have an unquenchable thirst for information. Monthly newsletters and occasional Town Hall Meetings do not constitute adequate communication. People must feel informed and "in the loop" every day. Having a positive vision of the future, and being able to communicate it well, enables the inevitable change process to be more effective.

5. **Lead change well**. Change processes are in play in every organization daily, yet most leaders struggle with change processes. Using a change model can help people deal with the challenges

of constantly changing conditions. An example is to use the grief counseling process where leaders help people cope with the four phases of change: 1) Anticipation, 2) Ending, 3) Transition, and 4) Beginning. People will rise to a challenge if it is properly presented and managed. Challenge is different from constant demands to perform at levels beyond reason, which leads to resentment and burnout. Properly designed, challenges help people find meaning in their work, which keeps them from becoming apathetic and helps enable strong teamwork.

6. **Build High Performing Teams**. A sense of purpose is enhanced if there is a kind of peer cohesion brought on by good teamwork. Great teams derive an adrenalin rush from achieving results against high goals. Foster togetherness in teams so people will relate to their tasks instinctively. High performing teams need a common goal, trust in team members, and good leadership. Strong teams help build enthusiasm and morale.

7. **Build morale the right way**. Motivation is derived by treating people with respect and giving them clear vision and autonomy. Avoid trying to motivate people by adding hygiene factors, like picnics, bonuses, or hat days. The acid test is whether a manager frequently uses the word "motivate" as a verb. If a manager constantly says things like "we have to find a way to motivate them," it indicates a poor understanding of the nature of true motivation. A better approach is to use the word "motivation" as a noun. Motivation is the *outcome* of a great culture rather than something one does unto other people. Building motivation also means treating people the right way, which includes good reinforcement.

8. **Recognize and celebrate excellence**. Reinforcement is the most powerful tool leaders have for changing behavior. In a learning environment, errors in reinforcement provide clues to how an improved system of reward and recognition can enhance the meaning of work. Leaders need to learn how to reinforce well and avoid the minefield of reinforcement mistakes that are easy to make. For example:

- Do not try to apply the same reinforcement techniques to all individuals or all situations.
- Avoid too much use of trivial trinkets like t-shirts or hats.
- Make sure the recognition is truly reinforcing to each individual.
- Ensure fairness when reinforcing individuals or groups.

Most of the above concepts sound like common sense; unfortunately, they are not common practice in many groups, which contributes to much of the apathy in organizations. To have people rise to their level of potential, you need a strong culture. To accomplish that, focus on the above concepts, and see a

remarkable transformation in your organization. Become a student of these skills, and teach them to other leaders. Learn how to personify the concepts listed above to rise to the level of great leadership.

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