IMPROVING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

FIVE KEY ELEMENTS

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The Importance Of Organisational Culture

I often hear people, especially those in HR roles, talking about the importance of organisational culture and how much it contributes to productivity, morale and company brand.

What I don't hear as much is how you go about improving organisational culture – it's almost as though there is a belief that culture builds itself and all you need to do is "Walk the talk" and the rest will just happen organically.

It is certainly true that culture in the organisation will develop regardless of whether it is nurtured or ignored – as soon as groups of people start to interact and work together, culture starts to form and evolve over time.

But do you really want to allow your organisation's culture to develop of its own? It would be akin to a farmer sowing crop seed in the fields and then just letting nature take its course. Yes, you would get a crop but would it be healthy and what sort of yield would you get at harvest time?

Culture, like crops, will grow and develop organically but if you want a culture that allows your organisation to maximise its productivity and consistently deliver on its brand promises you have to become proactive. You simply must invest the required time and energy it takes to build the right culture for your business.

So, in order to establish some sort of starting point in that process, there are five elements you simply must be actioning if you want your organisation's culture to develop purposefully.

1. Start From The Ground Up

Traditionally, management has adopted a trickle down approach to culture through policy and procedure driven mandates – but this is not the way culture works.

Culture is built from the ground up, not the top down. As demonstration of the truth of that statement let's explore what happens when someone starts a new job; on starting the job recruits are often indoctrinated by a senior manager as to the "way" the organisation does things and what is expected of its people, before being handed over to a workplace "buddy" who will show them the "ropes". One of the first things the buddy does is to explain to the new person how things are really done around here.

Often, management is of the belief that, in their field of operations, things are done a certain way but their staff actually do things a little differently. It is this disconnect that often results in less than ideal hiring decisions because, amongst other considerations, the manager is hiring someone to fit their picture of how the work is done – when it is often done differently.

If you are going to improve organisational culture you have to start at the lowest possible level, identify the actual culture and then work towards influencing that culture so as to develop it in productive ways.

2.Move Away From Imposing To Influence

Management can (and should) impose on staff the proper procedures to be followed in order for the organisation to deliver on its promise to its customers. They should also be supporting the processes that allow those procedures to be followed.

Trying to exert the same level of control over culture is not going to work in the long term. Culture is a shared element and by that I mean that everyone in the organisation contributes to culture. Your people are either supporting desired culture or eroding it.

The more "force" or "pressure" that is applied to ensuring imposed culture norms are adhered to the more resistance is going to be encountered.

This is why an "influence" strategy is always going to be more successful over time. You influence people through purposeful communication and by demonstration. The objective here is to get your people to collaborate with the business in developing the desired culture.

3.Understand Your Current Position

You cannot develop organisational culture without a definitive starting point. Unless you know where, precisely, you are now, from a culture perspective, you are never going to be able to build your desired culture.

The best way to identify your present position is through an audit of as many staff as possible. A comprehensive audit should include all staff, at all levels of the organisation as this is the only way that you can identify the cultural influences in play at every level of the business.

However, the reality is that this is not always possible. So, I would suggest that you start with a particular team, department or division – this will provide you with a small scale exercise that is manageable and will allow you to determine what works and what does not before rolling out an audit across the whole organisation.

The beauty of the audit process is that it provides a platform for progress no matter where you are on your culture development journey – if you feel you are well advanced in this space your audit will reveal if you are correct. If you have yet to really embark upon culture development your audit will give you a great foundation from which to commence from.

Your audit is a key building block - get this element wrong and the rest of your Cultural Development processes are likely to fail!

Be prepared for some surprises here. I have been involved in many such audits and rarely does the current cultural position look like what senior management thought it would. One thing you will discover is that "culture" will not be consistent across all areas of the business – you will find that there are all sorts of micro cultures in existence within the macro culture of the organisation as a whole.

Look upon your culture audit process as a "snapshot" in time as to where your culture currently sits - any "discrepancies" between the audit results and management's perception of where the organisation's culture sat are natural and identifying them is a crucial step in the overall process.

A final word of caution when it comes to an audit – an audit is not a survey to record people's opinions nor is it an indicator for employee engagement. A true culture audit actually assesses attitudes towards workplace cultural elements which influence behaviours in the work environment, as these are what lead to specific cultures.

4.Monitor and measure

With any proactive development program it is essential that you monitor and measure progress as you go.

Make sure that you establish some KPI's here so that you have some benchmarks against which you can evaluate progress and make necessary course correction where appropriate.

Measuring culture has been a bit of a holy grail up until fairly recently. In the past far too many measures of culture were highly subjective and that is not ideal when you are seeking to achieve a measureable outcome. Whilst gut feel has its place, in isolation it can lead us down totally unproductive pathways.

Now, however, there are tools and platforms that will provide solid data and metrics around culture. What you are looking for is one that is;

- **Flexible enough to deal with individuals, teams, divisions or whole of organisation**
- **Scalable for large, medium or small scale audits.**
- **Is not obtrusive to any current systems**
- **Able to be managed without the need for expensive external consultants**

Invest in one as a matter of priority!

Culture is at work every single day, in all sorts of ways. Managers need to understand that, if they are going to be successful at influencing and developing culture within their domains, they have to be constantly having conversations which address culture issues – and this has to be more than diversity and gender.

Culture is in a constant state of flux and it is the conversations we have and the behaviours we engage in that will sway where culture heads over time.

Culture is an important contributor to organisational success but it is rarely urgent and, as a consequence, it is often addressed sporadically and more as a "knee-jerk" reaction to a specific catalyst.

For those of us familiar with the Eisenhower matrix, we know that those tasks in the "important but not urgent" quadrant often get ignored as a result of too much focus on the "important and urgent" quadrant which traps us in a constant state of hurried activity putting out spot fire after spot fire.

That's not a healthy place to be, as you lose your strategic perspective. As an organisation, it's also where you will quickly lose your competitive advantage.

If you are not familiar with the Eisenhower matrix check it out with a Google search

	MANAGE	PRIORITIZE
IMPORTANT	**DO** Deadline-drive projects Catastrophes Create proposal for potential client Prepping for TV interview	**DECIDE** Create budget & forecast for next year Plan new marketing initiative Plan training & development for team
NOT IMPORTANT	**DELEGATE** Answer emails and other messages Book flights Plan staff picnic	**DELETE** Endless social media scrolling Procrastination Gossip and speculation Perfectionism Over-analysis

Put culture into everyone's important and AND urgent quadrant!

The Time Is Right

Clearly, organisations need to start dealing differently with culture as an influencing factor of business success. After all, if you keep doing things in the same way, you are going to get the same result.

Now is an ideal time to be revisiting your organisation's culture, as the uncertain times we face, as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis, provide us with the opportunity to make positive changes to organisational culture as a component of adapting to that uncertainty.

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