Why Organizational Culture Is The Most Powerful, Practical Tool For Impact And What To Do About It

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You may have heard Peter Drucker’s famous quote, “Organizational culture eats strategy for breakfast.” While many leaders agree and have directly experienced this phenomenon, very few organizations intentionally address their culture.

Why? Because it’s seen as a nice-to-have. It’s seen as the something else that takes place on the side of our work -- not about the actual work itself.

But look around your organization. Your employees are the ones getting the work done, right? What do you know about them? How well do you understand their pain points? And how have you attempted to resolve them?

When people feel frustrated at work, it’s unlikely because the foosball table broke, they had to buy their own lunch, or they couldn’t wear jeans to the office. They’re more likely frustrated about a lack of clarity within the decision-making processes, ill-defined roles, poor communication or a myriad of challenges along those lines. And the opposite is true: When people feel engaged at work, it’s likely because they have open lines of communication, clarity in the purpose of their work, and trust in their leaders and the peers around them.

All too often, when we think about an exceptional organizational culture, it's the superficial perks that we focus on. Why? Because understanding, developing and supporting your culture can feel like a rather ambiguous and daunting challenge.
But it doesn’t have to be.

Your organizational culture is about the agreements your team has, either intentionally or organically, made with each other over time. These simple agreements become entrenched across the organization and either allow or inhibit the team to be successful in their day-to-day work.

As leaders, a challenge is making culture distinct and purposeful and using it to support your organizational strategy. That’s ultimately what will determine your organization’s outcome and impact.

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Here’s what you need for an effective and intentional culture:

1. Explicitly Defined And Agreed-Upon Values

Essentially these agreements outline what is important to you as a team, the norms (i.e., operating principles in support of the values), and the behaviors or specific actions that abide by these norms.

To pinpoint your shared values, have your team think about how the organization functions positively impact them both professionally and personally. Now, what about the organization frustrates them? What actions would they like to see from team members to support the positive components and to address the frustrations?

Once your team has responded (white board or sticky notes are best!), look for themes across the team’s answers to see what is working well within the organization and what is causing concern across the organization. Look for themes across the team’s answers. These themes will become your norms, and the specific actions within each theme will become your behaviors. The values will remain as they were initially defined, but will now be more easily understood as they are further defined by the norms and behaviors.

Capture these values, norms and behaviors in a “team commitment” document. Make it personal and enticing to read. Remember, your team created this. They’ll want to see it as a reminder and, more importantly, they’ll want to see it carried through in the way your team interacts.
2. A Concrete Plan To Uphold These Values

First, look for the low-hanging fruit. What commitments can the team make right away? Acknowledge those and come up with easy ways to support these small wins. Second, look for the areas that require systemic or operational changes within the organization. For example, it may be that your performance evaluation system needs a refresh or it may just mean that all individuals need access to each team members’ calendar settings.

By separating the low-hanging fruit and the systems and operational changes, you can determine how best to move forward with supporting your newly defined culture.

3. Designated ‘Culture Champions’ To Uphold Norms And Behaviors

We are all responsible for making sure our culture is upheld. And since the team will have been an active part of creating the new culture, they should also be an active part of supporting it. One way to do this is to ask for “culture champion” volunteers to keep the culture alive on an ongoing basis. This may entail setting aside time every quarter to talk about what is and isn’t working about the culture and revisiting the shared values document as needed.

What’s most important is that you have leaders responsible for upholding the newly defined culture, talking about it and revisiting it so that it ultimately has a strong place and presence across the organization and the team members.

Getting there requires open conversations across teams and strong facilitation of these discussions. No one is saying it’s easy. But we are saying it’s important. Because your culture is, above everything else, your most powerful and practical tool for impact.