Update

Deliberately Designing your Corporate Culture

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Over a career spanning nearly half a century, Harvard University psychology professor J. Richard Hackman garnered widespread esteem and accolades for pioneering the study of team dynamics. Following the events of 9/11, Hackman led a team designed to evaluate what makes intelligence units effective by surveying, interviewing, and observing hundreds of analysts across 64 different intelligence groups.

What they discovered was that the critical factor wasn't having a tenured team with the right number of people. It wasn't having a vision that is clear, challenging, and meaningful. Nor was it well-defined roles and responsibilities, or appropriate rewards and recognition, or strong leadership.

Rather, the single strongest predictor of group effectiveness was the amount of help that the analysts gave each other. In the highest-performing teams, analysts invested extensive time and energy in coaching, teaching, and consulting with their colleagues. These interactions helped analysts question their own assumptions, fill gaps in their knowledge, and understand new perspectives. In the lowest-performing units, analysts had little interaction or were relied upon to come up with most of their own answers and solutions in service of a seemingly 'autonomous' environment. Simply knowing the amount of help-giving that occurred allowed the Harvard researchers to predict the effectiveness of nearly every unit accurately.

Givers and Takers

How do we create an environment of giving, when many people are naturally reluctant to seek help? They may fear burdening their colleagues, lack knowledge about who is willing and able to help, or be concerned about appearing vulnerable, incompetent, and dependent.

How do make sure, in turn, to set boundaries and protect against employees becoming so consumed with responding to each other's requests that they lack the time and energy to complete their own responsibilities?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a corporate culture of collaboration. Remember, what makes a painting a masterpiece is not any one brush stroke but rather many different and complimentary ones. The retention "canvas" is never a complete work of art and needs continuous attention. The following are a few strokes that just might make a difference!

Corporate Surveys: Whether you have 1 associate or 100, a survey can provide you with great insight. Ask questions related to every dimension of your business, including technology, training, tools, culture, leadership, operations, marketing/branding, hiring, and compensation. By giving people a chance to weigh in, you get an opportunity to see potential problems and solutions. Too many leaders subscribe to the Ostrich Theory of *"if I don't ask, I won't have to fix anything".* Giving the people the chance to feel heard, or to brainstorm solutions to a problem (that then spawns a host of additional problems), can sometimes be the solution itself!

"If I were a CEO" Sessions: Dedicate a morning meeting or lunch with your team, division or company, ask what changes they would make if they were CEO. The answers to this question will give great insight into what they think needs to be changed as well as what opportunities they think are being missed. It is important to listen to their feedback without judgment and share your opinions later.

Retention Interviews: Conduct an annual meeting with each team member and ask why they like being there and what could cause them to leave. This is a tough question to ask, but it is imperative to uncovering someone's unhappiness before it is too late.

Corporate Charity: Adopt a local charity. Host a casino night, golf tournament, bake sale or perhaps a "blue jeans day" each week (if you don't already have one every day!) that requires a small donation. By getting people involved in a common cause, you not only give back to the community but also create or enhance a sense of community within your office or team.

Finding People Who Make a Difference®

The key question to ask is *"what do I want to create for my organization";* you are writing a chapter as you read this and what you choose to do when you turn the page is up to you! There are no magic potions or quick fixes; some changes can be easily implemented and others will require great study and careful design and implementation. To learn more about how to deliberately design your organization's corporate culture, please reach out to your Sanford Rose Associates® executive search consultant today.

—Karen Schmidt