The Importance of Organizational Culture

Recently, I spoke with a friend about his new job. He was not enjoying it at all. While he loved the mission and the overall vision of the organization, he was frustrated and miserable. So it got me thinking—**is the root issue one of leadership or of culture—or both?**

I am a big believer in organizational culture and how important a strong culture is for the success of your organization and people, and I realize leaders have direct impact on creating, sustaining or destroying cultures.

Some clear signatures of leadership failure include:

- High turnover,
- Gloomy or unmotivated workplace environment,
- Lots of complaints,
- Negative talk behind people's backs,
- Lack of respect for senior managers, and
- Sometimes even unethical practices.

How can you, as a leader, elevate the members of your team to feel empowered and committed to your vision and mission while creating a positive culture?

Emotional Intelligence
Be a leader who cultivates Emotional Intelligence (EI). Through training and hiring practices, a leader with a high EI can cultivate positive change in her team and culture.

I watched a good friend of mine enter three different workplace environments in large corporations that were lacking in performance and morale. Each of the three teams was frustrated and negative. The managers in charge prior to him would sit in the back office all day and instruct from there. Instead of sticking with the status quo, one of his first actions was to move his office to be centrally located. Second, he spent a few days watching the daily inner-workings of his team. Third, he met with each employee and asked about her/his strengths and development needs and reviewed his own observations. Fourth, instead of dictating from his office, he led by showing each of them how to be successful. I watched him take these offices from the companies' weakest to best performers by pulling on his emotional intelligence, by listening to what his teammates wanted and needed to feel successful and showing them how to achieve it. As a result, his team members enjoyed coming to work again and became proud of their accomplishments.

Listening
Be a leader who listens. A "stay" interview, a conversation in which you discuss why employees continue to work for the company and what motives them, is a great option for eliciting feedback from your team. As a leader, take the time to ask people about their job satisfaction in both formal and informal contexts. This will provide you significant information and a better understanding about the culture, in lieu of waiting until someone is out the door and answering questions during an exit interview. (In my experience, the exit interview

information seldom goes beyond the person doing the interview and is dismissed by management).

The opportunity for leadership to listen to their employees provides the employee a voice and helps the leadership maintain the targeted culture.

Identify other leaders
Be a leader who is aware of great as well as potential leaders around you. Separate a good salesperson from a good leader (you are blessed if you have one in the same). Promote the leader as opposed to simply someone who has mastered her particular role or position. Don't hesitate to take action if you see that someone is toxic to the team. We all have been in situations where we sat dumbfounded as a colleague continued to be promoted with disregard to staff attrition.

The number one reason people leave a job is due to bad leadership. A toxic manager can destroy a happy culture.

Vision
Be a leader who shares the vision for the organization. I was lucky to work for some great leaders. Two in particular scheduled a meeting with me in my first week to ask me why I had taken the position and what I was looking to accomplish, and then they shared their vision. They asked how I saw my role fitting into this overall plan.

This was inspiring, and I felt they believed in me. It also gave me insight into the type of culture they had at the organization.

Culture
Earlier this year, I heard a talk by Tim O'Shaughnessy, the founder of LivingSocial. Tim shared that when interviewing prospective employees, the most important thing he focuses on is "fit." He makes sure that new people coming in will be comfortable and successful in the environment he has established. This has helped his company have an easy transition from a start-up to an established successful organization.

In sum, I recommend strengthening and relying on your emotional intelligence, seeking feedback and listening carefully, keeping a watchful eye for leaders and potential leaders, communicating your vision, and finding and keeping teammates who are a good cultural fit.

I cannot overemphasize how important I believe the culture of our organization is and the effect that senior leadership has on the attitudes and energy of the team members. Treat people well, ask for their ideas, and help them succeed and you are surely on the way to a winning culture!

About The Author

Amy Gregg is a Senior Associate with Langley Innovations. She is an exceptional development officer, dedicated to the success of her clients, which are important not-for-profit organizations. As a leading innovator in the design and implementation of successful fundraising initiatives for educational institutions as well as national and international nonprofits, she helped organizations of all sizes from all sectors establish relationships and build a foundation for long-term sustainable growth.