

## Let's Revisit Organizational Spirit!

Last fall, I wrote an article about the importance of an organization's culture. Essentially, it determines our success over time. If our culture is one of enthusiastic engagement of our team members, striving to be their very best, personally and as a team, then we can sustain long term success.

The article is still circulating on the Internet, which I am happy about, and recently, Charlie Tierney, an insightful consultant with Deloitte, sent me an email with his feedback. Tierney observed that the article, while accurate, would be more valuable if I were to add suggestions and advice to CEOs and other senior executives about how they could develop and maintain a desired organizational culture. Make it more of a "how to" article.

Lord knows, it is needed. Morale in business is generally low.

We know that a key to the success of a business is its culture. I prefer to call it **organizational spirit**, because the most effective cultures are energetic, aligned and loyal.

I have worked for four organizations. Two had outstanding cultures in which we worked hard, had a great time, and shared and bounced ideas off one another. Our senior management team was well liked and respected because they rolled up their sleeves, worked with us, were not egotistical and readily shared credit for our successes and accepted responsibility when things did not go as we'd like. We were dedicated to learning and growing in our work of most effectively serving our clients. In short, we loved what we did, we had pride in and loyalty to one another, and in each organization we were genuinely regarded as best in our field.

At Johnson & Higgins, Dick Purnell, a personal of great integrity, had a graphic framed on his office wall "There is no limit on how far you may advance if you do not seek personal credit." It set a tone throughout our company, great teamwork, helpful and timely feedback, bottom up ideas, loyalty to one another and to J&H.

At the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation we were a powerful team as we shared and discussed challenges, issues and successes. Every one of us felt empowered, and we were, and so we all felt a true passion and ownership. We were all treated the same.

The other two organizations I worked for were not like that at all. The top people were thought to have a sense of self-importance, they were neither encouraging of nor open to bottom up ideas, and the cultures were heavily bureaucratic.

What a difference in the organizations that had outstanding cultures! The quality of the work we did and what we accomplished was consistently excellent. The organizations with egotistical leadership were almost paralyzed by comparison. We experienced lots of turnover, which of course was rationalized, e.g. "She really wasn't that good." Really, then why did she work here for seven years?!

I fully realize that in today's business world, in which most publically owned companies are driven to hit 90 day earning estimates, it is a difficult challenge to create outstanding cultures. The pressure on financial results is so strong that companies must keep their expenses down, which often means they do not invest in their people's development and growth, and the companies continually must do more with fewer people. As a result, people are working very, very hard. That coupled with the continuous flow of emails coming at us, means most executives are simply too busy to focus on culture.

Add to that the seemingly endless meetings in bureaucratic organizations. It is estimated that corporate executives spend nearly half of their time in meetings. Don't get me wrong, I know the value of meetings, sharing information and inclusive decision making, but half of one's time?

I will be writing another article soon on the subject of meetings, how to make them more effective – and shorter – and with only the necessary people participating.

It just isn't right that everyone is so busy. and it shows. Businesses are generally not doing great and the economy is still not in great shape.

Of course, it seems every company brags, "Our greatest asset is our people", and they mean it.

That is easy to say, but how many companies really back that up by investing in their people, treating them as valued team members and making the time to help them feel appreciated and providing the resources to feel supported?

The answer is not very many. Witness that up to 70% of the people working today would consider leaving for a new job, 32% are actively looking, 43% feel a lack of recognition, and 31% do not like their boss.

Here's why I prefer the term **organizational spirit** rather than culture.

Culture begins with the spirit and enthusiasm of the people in the organization. We must strive to develop cultures in which are people are:

- Happy
- Highly motivated
- Energetic
- Positive
- Respectful of top management
- Proud of their work and company
- Helpful to one another

Research confirms that happy team members do better work!

**How do we achieve excellent organizational spirit?** It is the attitude and actions of our senior executives that set the tone. They are the signal senders. Their attitude is contagious.

Senior executives must realize that we must earn the trust and respect of our team members - every day! That is our important responsibility. No one has a greater influence on an organization's culture than the CEO and other senior executives. If we are serious about developing a truly outstanding organizational spirit, the best single way to begin is with 360 leadership assessments. These must be done properly and with follow-up. I've seen 360s that have been transformative and others that have been a waste of time because they were

poorly done, lacked commitment to improve and there was no follow-up coaching to change long-term habits and possible blind spots.

Let's prioritize the people who are doing the work of the company. Delegate, then get out of the office and walk the halls. Becoming a highly effective leader requires that we connect with our team members, that they respect and trust us and feel that we genuinely care about them, encourage their ideas and feedback, and help them learn, grow and succeed.

How do we do that? Use our soft skills, being nice and respectful to our team members. Read Emotional Intelligence 2.0, and take the assessment to learn which skills we might want to improve, and how we can.

Respect and trust do not come with an executive's title or office. Leadership is influence. It's how we carry ourselves. It's our attitude, our actions and our character that determine that influence.

As senior executives, we simply have to get out of our offices, away from the C-suites, and visit with our team members, asking for their ideas, and what help and resources they need. We must be side by side with our team members who are doing the work of our organization.

This takes humility. We, as senior executives, must have humility. It is said that ***humility is the foundation of growth***. Yes, it is.

It is vitally important to realize that top down directives are not nearly as effective as bottom up ideas. If we want our team members to have passion for their work and a sense of ownership and pride, they have to feel appreciated and heard. They have to know that their ideas matter.

Internal relationships and our culture are absolutely as important as any other responsibility.

It takes time to create this atmosphere within an organization. And it takes our commitment to spend less time in meetings, at our computers and on conference calls. We simply have to create time for conversations with our team members. That's how we build outstanding and winning cultures.

I wrote a short article this past year that generated a lot of appreciative feedback. The title of the article was **Conversations are the Work of a Leader**, a title I borrowed from the wonderful book, Fierce Conversations by Susan Scott.

**It's not about working more hours.** Definitely not.

It's about having sincere conversations with our people, demonstrating that we genuinely care about them, encouraging their ideas, and helping them succeed. The best conversations start with our attitude – the way we carry ourselves, comfortable eye contact, a smile, calling people by their names, and putting them at ease.

Communicating often and openly, and, so essential, patiently listening to understand and learn: this is how we build organizational spirit and achieve the highest level of success. We can start right now and know confidently that the effects of individual conversations will cascade positively over time.

Of course, we must also continue to be role models, certainly doing what we say we will, and dealing with problems on a timely basis. But the most immediate and effective way to energize culture is to step out of our office. Change our perspective for 10 or 15 minutes: take the time to develop relationships.

This is how we empower our team members, by asking how they are doing and what they need help with, by clearly explaining our goals and expectations, and then letting them do their jobs with our encouragement and support as needed.

When we engage with our team members in this way, we show we are not self-absorbed or solely focused on numbers. Our conversations convey that we genuinely care about the success of others and that we are all about the team.

**Organizational culture matters greatly – it is the spirit and morale of our team members - and it begins at the top.**

### **About The Author**



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