Changing Culture

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When most leaders hear Peter Drucker's quote, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," it makes perfect sense to them. They understand it because they've seen it. They've seen the ways in which a department's or team's plans, goals, or strategies get undermined by "the way we do things around here."

Preliminary Considerations

"The way we do things around here" is one of the descriptions sometimes used for organizational culture. As a leader, before you start talking about changing the culture, it's important to keep in mind some preliminary considerations. In other words, it's helpful to know what you're getting yourself into!

Is this really what you want?

- The existing culture—no matter how much you think it needs to change— has "worked." As renowned scholar of organizational cultures Edgar Schein notes, culture represents "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration." In other words, your culture grew out of some learning associated with what worked, at least at some point in time. Building on this type of insight, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky note that an organizational culture is never totally dysfunctional. It has worked well (enough) for a lot of people for a long time. In fact, in any given organization, "enough important people like the situation exactly as it is, whatever they may say about it, or it would not be the way it is." Even people who say that they think the culture needs to change are likely to have a commitment (conscious or unconscious) to keeping it the same. Any leader interested in changing a culture would be wise to remember this.

- Related to this point, as Schein notes, because our culture helps us make sense of the world and because we all desire the "cognitive stability" that comes with knowing how things work around here, challenging the culture will (by the very nature of the act) create uneasiness and anxiety. Are you prepared to create discomfort for people in your department or on your team?

- Finally, if you want to understand the culture of an organization, look at its leaders! As Schein notes, culture is created and shaped primarily by the leaders of the organization. This means that when the leadership team of a department or organization sits at a retreat or meeting and talks about the need to change the culture, they are really talking about changing a culture they have helped create and foster (whether they realize it or not). Leaders who have helped foster a certain culture can't change that culture without changing their own behaviors. Changing their culture must begin with changing themselves.

Given all of this, leaders should really ask themselves...is this really what we want? Are we really willing to change our own behaviors, create anxiety and discomfort for ourselves and our teams, in order to change our culture? The need to change might be great enough that you are willing, but it's worth checking before you jump into such a task.

Why It Matters:

As Peter Drucker famously stated, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." If your culture doesn't work, your strategy can't work. Departments, teams, and organizations will sometimes spend a lot of time discussing mission and vision, or identifying goals and action planning. Unfortunately, they won't (or don't know how to) focus any time and effort on whether they have a culture that will support their strategy. If your strategy requires multidisciplinary work, for example, but your culture is one of working in departmental silos, your strategy can't work until you begin to shift your culture.

How Does a Leader Change Culture?

Perhaps, as a leader, you decide it's worth it, that the change in culture is worth the change that's required in yourself, your fellow leaders, and the discomfort it causes for team members as basic assumptions are challenged and changed. So, how do you do it? In their book, Change the Culture, Change the Game, Roger Connors and Tom Smith outline a practical approach for dealing with this most challenging leadership task.

Connors and Smith use the "results pyramid" to provide a helpful way of not only understanding culture, but changing it as well. The Results Pyramid describes how the three essential components of organizational culture—experiences, beliefs, and actions—work in harmony with each other to achieve results. Experiences foster beliefs, beliefs influence actions, and actions produce results. How does this work? As an example, if a new employee sits in a team meeting where there is no exchange of ideas and the leader even shuts down discussion from others who disagree, that experience (with maybe one or two others like it), will shape a belief for that new employee that it's not safe to disagree with the leader and that team input on decisions is not really welcome. That belief then shapes actions—e.g., that person will not raise ideas or disagree openly with the leader. That set of behaviors and actions by that employee and others will shape the results that the organization gets. This model describes the deeper aspects of culture (e.g., beliefs) in a way that helps us understand how they develop (e.g., through experiences).

Experiences foster beliefs, beliefs influence actions, and actions produce results. In order to initiate a change of culture, though, the leadership team will need to begin its thinking by working in the other direction, starting with results. Using the Results Pyramid to help change the culture

requires first that the management team "deconstruct" its current culture by answering the question "What organizational results do we want and how do they compare to what we are getting?" From that point, the leaders of the organization can ask the next question: If these are the results we want, what actions or behaviors on the part of our team members would lead to these results? Then, what would people need to believe in order to take those actions? Finally, what experiences do we, as a leadership team, need to create for people to shape the types of beliefs that lead to the actions and behaviors that will help us accomplish the results we want.

For example, perhaps a leadership team decides that it would like the organization to be more proactive, more focused on achieving key results, rather than reacting to all of the urgent needs of the moment.

It can then ask itself: in order to accomplish those results (more proactive, focused on achieving a few key priorities), what actions would our employees need to be taking, how would they need to behave, what would we need to stop, start, or continue doing?

Team members might decide:

- To continue leadership meetings, but stop using those as a data dump

- To clearly define priorities and communicate them across the organization

- To develop a better system of managing projects

- To stop addressing everything at once

Then, the leaders can ask themselves, "What would people need to believe in order to take these types of actions?" Some possible beliefs might include:

- "I must make planning a priority, for myself and my staff."

- "Project management helps us focus on key priorities and manage better." • "I am more effective if I have clearly defined priorities."

- "I can focus, with excellence, on only two or three priorities at a time."

Given the need to cultivate these types of beliefs, then, what kinds of experiences does the leadership team need to create for the team members? Some possible "experiences" might include:

- We will provide employees with training on setting priorities and project management tools

- Managers will take time to set priorities with staff

- Managers will coach staff on how to set priorities

- The management team will present training on project management

- Managers will recognize employees for identifying key priorities and staying focused on those priorities

- Managers will recognize employees when a key priority is accomplished

As a first step, this model is powerful for helping leaders to connect their actions and behaviors with the kinds of experiences they are creating for their team members and, therefore, the kind of culture they want to create. Connors and Smith discuss a number of ways to continue to align the organization around the transition to a new culture.

An important aspect of creating experiences and changing beliefs is how the leader "frames" those experiences. As Connors and Smith point out, experiences can often be misinterpreted. It's not only appropriate, but actually required, for leaders to be mindful of framing the work that's being done, the experiences that are being created, in light of the new cultural beliefs. This means talking about them, telling stories and giving examples that illustrate the new beliefs in action, giving feedback that explicitly connects with the new beliefs, and recognizing success that grows from those beliefs in action. When a leader provides positive feedback or recognition to an employee for acting in a way that reflects the new cultural beliefs, that leader sends a message to everyone that these types of beliefs and actions are noticed and important. That's the kind of experience that reinforces new beliefs about "how we do things around here"!

Changing the culture is not for the faint of heart, but sometimes it's essential for a department, team, or organization to thrive, or even survive. It will mean challenging some basic assumptions (and therefore creating discomfort and anxiety) and creating experiences to replace old, comfortable assumptions with a new paradigm that will do more to help the department or team succeed. The "results pyramid" is one very helpful tool for demystifying culture and creating a clearer (though definitely not easy) path to creating a stronger, more effective departmental or team culture.

References:

Connors, Roger and Smith, Tom. 2011. Change the Culture, Change the Game. New York, NY: Penguin Group. Schein, Edgar. 2010. Organizational Culture and Leadership. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.