



LEADERSHIP insights

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Culture Rules!

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The best leaders confirm that culture matters, and many even say it trumps strategy. But how do you get your arms around making an impact as an individual on this vague thing called culture? Two starting points to consider:

1. You already ARE making an impact. Just by being in a leadership role, you influence your environment and most often, leaders underestimate this influence. Everything you say and do - words, body language, what you write - all these messages shape the culture more than you might realize. There is value in self examination here: what kinds of messages are you already sending?

2. Culture is formed "one handshake at a time." You can't shake hands with a culture, you do so with individuals. Those individual connections, relationships, "deposits" over time can mobilize a group to help you turn a Titanic away from the threat of the hidden icebergs of low morale, undermining and poor engagement.

Following are some little things that can make a big difference to create a thriving, engaged and desirable work culture:

→ **Eat with different people.** Push yourself to eat with different people on a regular basis. One of the ways silos are broken down in organizations is as simple as this: eat with people in other departments. You might have to invite yourself to join a group who always eats together, but when you do, you make yourself more approachable. When a problem does come up, people will feel more comfortable coming directly to you to discuss it, and that is a much more desirable culture than one where people grumble amongst themselves.

→ **Become known for a phrase that you can live by.** Your phrase will become part of the definition of the culture. A manager I had 25 years ago regularly used a phrase with me that to this day, pops up in my head when I face a difficult conversation. After coaching me on a sticky employee issue, he would walk me to the door and say, "remember; be courageous." He was creating a courageous culture. **What is your phrase?**

→ **Go first on the challenges.** Spooner Health System CEO, Mike Schafer, supported both his employees and the local community by sponsoring health club memberships for all hospital employees for their wellness initiative. He was among the first to do the heavy lifting of exercising, losing weight and

getting fit! When you ask others to consider a higher commitment, *walking the talk* speaks volumes.

→ **Interview new hires.** Ask them after the first few weeks on the job what they notice about the culture, both positive and not so positive. You might be surprised on what new eyes have picked up on about the environment.

→ **Describe the ideal culture.** We may think we know what culture we are striving for, but it's kind of like car shopping when you have only narrowed down that you need a new car; you may end up with something you really don't want. Grab some flip chart paper and markers, meet with your team, ask and record the answers to:

- "How would you describe the ideal workplace culture?"
- On another sheet, write their responses to "how would you describe our current workplace culture?" (Or use your employee opinion survey results as a starting point for this list).
- Then ask, "What are your ideas for getting from where we are now to where we want to be?" (Brainstorm ideas and facilitate a discussion to prioritize one or two places to start that can have the most impact and some quick wins).

→ **Delegate, don't abdicate.** It's tempting to completely surrender your authority when a responsibility is uncomfortable (i.e. you hate scheduling conflicts). Be careful, though, that a negative subculture doesn't develop in that vacuum for others to take authority, creating staff power struggles that you may not even be aware of. Delegating properly keeps the accountability with you while sharing the work load.

Additional culture improvement strategies that I think are worth making explicit:

Say a genuine good morning. Hold people accountable to a high standard at the same time you forgive honest mistakes. Give short speeches. Frequently demonstrate and speak that we do whatever it takes to serve our customers. Speak about what you are learning. Take an interest in people. Never gossip. Thank people, and create venues for people to thank each other or share "wins." Explain WHY you are doing what you are doing. Address cultural under-performers, particularly leaders who report to you. Redirect complaining about other departments into problem solving discussions. Hire for cultural fit.