

Defining Your Corporate Culture

There is no denying that culture is a powerful catalyst of organizational excellence. After all, culture is the organization's personality—it's "how things are done around here." Culture consists of the values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and practices of the organizational members. So how does this critical determinant of organizational success get established in most organizations?

"By default," according to Chris Edmonds, Senior Consulting Partner with The Ken Blanchard Companies.

"And if organizational cultures are created by default rather than intention," explains Edmonds, "then it's no wonder that people don't share information. If I win and you lose and that's OK, better luck tomorrow. It's absolutely what you would expect people to do with those kinds of expectations.

"So it goes back to that default intention idea. If you've got people who aren't consistently behaving in ways that deliver high quality solutions; if you've got people who don't share information, people who are not fun to work with, or easy to work with, or reliable; if you don't have those things appearing in your organization at the frontline day-to-day, then there is something in the organizational expectations that is making that OK."

The good news, according to Edmonds, is that culture can be changed, but you have to move away from seeing culture as a soft and fuzzy irrelevant concept to seeing it as vital because of the unspoken and possibly undesirable expectations that get expressed.

"You have to make sure that the expectations are clear and that people are held accountable. This helps people see how culture contributes to making sure that performance gets accomplished. You have to focus on how expectations flow down from senior management to the front lines."

Defining and Measuring Culture

In working with senior leadership teams all around the world, Edmonds has found that the biggest challenge is helping managers become confident in defining and measuring culture.

"Culture can be kind of vague, and there are so many different definitions, and so many different elements that you have to pay attention to," says Edmonds. That's why he works hard to boil it down to something really simple when he works with clients. "What are the behaviors that you want to see from a standpoint of productivity, performance, and values?" he asks.

If you position it like this, Edmonds explains, then managers can begin to list all of the things they are looking for in terms of culture. But that is just the beginning. Next, Edmonds pushes for more clarity by asking leaders and managers if the things they want are observable. Or are they attitudinal, which are difficult to observe?

"Where there are attitudinal things we ask, OK what does that look like? When a person is acting this way, how do you know? How do you know if that person is behaving with integrity? We push and push to get to a behavioral description of that lofty, rather vague, attitudinal value.

"What we are trying to do is to help leaders get as clear an idea of what behavioral expectations they want to have as good corporate citizens, get those defined in observable behavioral terms, and then create systems by which you are measuring how well people are demonstrating those behaviors."

By taking the same approach to defining and measuring cultural expectations as most organizations take with role clarity and goal accountability Edmonds is able to make values as tangible and as measurable as those goals.

It can require a leap of faith on the part of managers who may have had only vague views of what culture was in the past. But by identifying desired behaviors and then creating a system to measure whether managers, supervisors, and frontline staff are behaving in those ways begins to pay off.

"We work with them to define an environment where people are safe, where people are trusted, where people are invited to show up and think. If I am demonstrating those behaviors, then you pat me on the back, praise me, and encourage me. If I'm not, then you coach me. Guess what's going to happen? You're going to get more consistent embracing of those good practices for both performance and good citizenship."

It's Worth the Effort

"If you really go into culture change, this takes some time and some effort. But where we've been able to coach and guide clients into doing this over a longer term the results have been amazing—both from a performance standpoint and a cost-savings standpoint.

"We have so many fabulous stories of how demonstrating a commitment to performance, values, and culture has engaged organizational members who might have been around for a decade—or three—to all of a sudden showing up and being proud."

Edmonds has found that by redefining culture you can create an engaged workforce that is really proud of the work they do. But you have to take proactive steps and intentionally create a culture that allows the organization to differentiate itself from competitors, to really live its values, and to really deliver on the promises it makes for products and services.

As Edmonds concludes, "The trick is if you're not getting what you want, then it's time to change those expectations."