Culture by design: Shaping a cultural edge

Matt Hemmingsen in search of the Holy Graal I In fact, corporate culture as the Holy Graal — not so much in the religious context, but more than an imaging perspective. Corporate culture is the lifeblood of an organization — its values, its beliefs, its behaviours, its rituals and its ceremonies. Culture is eventually causes its demise. This is where leadership is key — managing the two dimensions of stage and strategy — the ability to transform or shape the company’s culture for each new challenge. Think Caterpillar, IBM, Dell and John son & Johnson. All retained their core values yet shaped their culture to meet emerging challenges.

As Edgar Schein, a well known American academic and author, has noted: “Leadership requires not only insight into the dynamics of the culture but the motivation to make changes and to inter vene in one’s own cultural process. To change any ele ments of the culture, leaders must be willing to unfreeze their own organization.”

The strength of a company’s culture eventually becomes its Achilles heel. That which once made it great, eventually causes its demise. Given that perspective, leaders have the power to choose — “culture by design or by de fault.” Matt Hemmingsen is SCN’s lead consultant on strategic capability. He has held senior HR leadership roles in global corporations. He is a managing partner with Personal Strengths Canada, a member of an international company focused on improving business performance through relationship awareness.

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Can’t you treat clients well and employees differently and expect people to ignore the discon tinuity and be effective culture? Lack of this has got to be one of the greatest single mistakes HR and managing people. The day after the presentation, I ran across a comment on an HR blog that I immediately referred to in my own. Diversity being at the core of this discussion. This came from a vice president, with a Southeast Asian name, of an American subsidiary of Oracle that has offices world wide. It probably affects how widespread the problem he mentioned is. I’m sure you’ve run into the same issue many times on numerous occasions in various forms.

The question he asked how is that bosses ask their subordinates to co-operate with each other, with no real mechanisms to work collaboratively, find joint solutions and cross silos if need be for clients and then fail to have that way themselves. It’s an excellent question that goes to the heart of culture and culture challenges.

Given that leaders know what’s right, what will work best to solve problems and avoid fur ther ones. However, they have careers to worry about. They want things to be done, and they feel they must compete with peers, even ruthlessly when necessary. In many cases, they are pre pared to co-operate sometimes, they’d prefer to see the other offer first. They’re ready to be on the safe side. The higher we go in organizations, the more autonomy bosses have to be have as they feel they must. No one can seemingly tell them not to. The higher you go, the more you have to lose. The CEO may well be occupied with other issues and simply expects his team to do the right things.

Most likely, no one is going to have a golden rule every day, but caution leads them toward letting per sonal ones take precedence. Don’t broadcast weaknesses and don’t reveal information others might need if it will re flect badly on yourself. Of course, there are exceptions, but we may fall into this way. But if it’s the majori ty, their example will completely change your trust at lower levels because, if you’re leaving behind something about your department you’ve re vealed a weakness that reflects on your boss’ capabilities. Can’t, if not outright fear, of ten takeover. This is why both presenters continually pointed out that it takes so long time to improve sound based on top down. This is fundamental to effec tive culture. Lack of this has got to be one of the greatest single mistakes HR and managing people. The day

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It’s simple, clear and easy.

Why isn’t this the motto for all organizations?

Barry Barnes

It’s not only what you do, it’s that way you do it" Sherrill Burns stressed the importance of looking at how an organization is perceived by the outside world and how the organization is perceived by the inside people. Burns and Barnes are in agreement that in order to move to a new or different culture, there needs to be an alignment between the strategy of the organization and the desired culture. The “fit” has to be assessed to fit the context and the cultural dynamic. It can be distracting this way. But if it’s the majoriti y, then employees will drop the same things. It even clearer that the commitment of the leadership at all levels is required. But, if not, the commitment cannot be delegated. The best way to get staff buy-in,McNamara, president and CEO of Olympic Public Relations. Her enthu siasm about her company, the clients she represents and the myriad ways she supports cultural ob jectives by explicit, concrete be haviors can be seen. This kind of leadership, supported by understanding the dynamics of the culture she wanted to have in her firm, is reflected in the growth of rev enue and clients, in the low turnover rate of clients and staff. It is really about a clear vision, reflected in desired behav iors (and a small enough list that everyone could understand them) combined with a clear alignment to the firm’s strategic design, systems, procedures and policies that reflect the de sired culture.

Over the years, McNamara has had to modify approaches to remain consistent and she demands of everyone — including herself — that behaviors reflect the desired cultural val ues. In larger organizations, a focus on financial or operational results and processes can result in confusion as to who the leader really is. But culture is all about people. If the organization is not designed to be peo ple-centric, then attempts to instil a particular culture are likely doomed from the start.

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