

Urban Putty

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Organizational Culture 101

Is the business culture the best remaining vestige of the Darwinian theory - that only the strong survive?

Is the business culture, based on profit, take-over, competition and the raw application of power over others (the aardvark of the human environment) missing the opportunities to expropriate from so many other models?

Power in the pursuit of wealth, as the business equation is proposed, seems to be a reduction of itself into a capsule of "whatever it takes" to make it happen. The corporate model of generating new business and ever more sales, whether or not those sales are mutually beneficial to both consumer and provider, seems so open to ridicule and shame that one has to wonder if the model itself is not self-defeating.

Entrepreneurs are taught how to market, budget, read profit and loss statements, make decisions, compete and win! They are not taught the value of intuition, imagination, or common sense. Reason, ethics and stored memory trump the former three.

But they are not conscious, for the most part, of their participation in the reductionism of the corporate world. Let's make an obvious, if not exhaustive, list.

First, each individual is reduced to a function with a skill set, from the moment the hiring process begins. Then plunk this human "carburetor" into the corporate engine as quickly as possible, with the least amount of disruption and at a minimum cost.

Next, those with power, the lower level managers, frequently cut back on the application of policies that provide legitimate, negotiated and merited leave for personal emergencies. This results in a de facto redundancy of those very policies, without the people at the top even noticing.

Then there is the politics within every office, whereby those on the "inside" do not talk to those on the "outside", and the water fountain talk creates at least two levels of gossip: the one with a modicum of veracity, and the one without any.

Reputations are carelessly and ruthlessly torpedoed by the most off-hand remark.

And then there is the political schmoozing of superiors by individuals whose ambition is stronger than their character. When the supervisor permits this dynamic, there is clear evidence that the supervisor's own ambition is also trumping his/her character.

There is also the matter of those workers whose personal black-hole drive them to excessive work schedules, demonstrating an obsessive need to prove themselves to themselves, as if that were feasible.

And there is also the matter of corporate culture. This is less obvious, but still evident. Is the company where you work running like a high school football team, where the equations of “team building” and “life-lessons” are posted on the staff bulletin board by the (coach and cheerleader) CEO?

Or is the climate and culture more one of “we tell people only what they need to know”, thereby retaining control by simply possessing the necessary and important information, and waiting secretly for each manager or department head to ask the right question before providing the details?

Perhaps the culture of your department resembles the hospital operating room, in which the lines of authority are absolutely clear, and the task and procedures are so well-defined that the atmosphere closely resembles the cock-pit of a Boeing 747 jet liner. Check lists, short clipped verbal communications, flat-affect in all voice responses, humans moving to a desired machine-like performance level, while monitoring the condition of the patient or the weather. Here, it is follow the procedures and work at peak capacity for the duration of the shift, and then and only then, can you let your hair down.

On the other hand, perhaps your workplace culture resembles a rehearsal for a college play, where all kinds of activity - painting, carpentry, singing, blaring instruments and wandering actors delivering lines – combine until suddenly, on the recognized signal, the director brings order out of chaos, and a more formal atmosphere of the playwright and the script takes over. The set-designers and painters cease their chatter, and the hammers go silent, and the musicians leave for their private rehearsal rooms.

Maybe it is more like a retail outlet, where customers and background muzak on the store sound system are interrupted by marketing voices inviting shoppers to, “Aisle 8 where the special today is on Snickers bars.” The only time you interact with another employee when your supervisor tells you to unload a truck at the back door, help at the front where the cashiers are, or bring in the shopping carts from the parking lot. And then you go on break, punching the clock, and grab a coffee or a pop and hang out with your shift co-workers.

And the culture is something that you feel comfortable inside or not. Only you can answer that question. Those who like exploring generally need a fairly wide margin for error and experimentation; those who like precision and perfection prefer the operating room or the cock-pit, where the margin for error is extremely narrow, if not non-existent. How you give and take orders has a lot to do with workplace culture; so does your history with giving and receiving orders, instructions, leadership interventions and management directives.

Creative minds and spirits do not do well in military, perfectionistic, controlled environments; on the other hand, bohemians generally do not seek the operating room or the cockpit. They are more likely to be out in nature somewhere with a camera or hunched over a laptop writing their reflections, perhaps even creating phrases in some advertising office where the perfect word is as important as the perfect scalpel incision. Of course, the process of arriving at perfect phrase is completely antithetical to the processes and culture of the operating room.

Business leaders who have multiple work teams are aware that each team takes on its own “mini-culture”. The overall corporate culture, including the dreams and

aspirations, the inherent fears (and how they're dealt with) the secrets and the water cooler talk...these are all signs of the larger culture. Their capacity to include the range of characters from across the whole organization, with respect not only for their respective expertise, but also for their characters is one of the best measures of that culture to grow their different talents to their highest potential.

Is the culture of your workplace feeding your personal and professional growth? If not, give us a call, and let's talk about how you might make a difference, without overturning the organization, or bringing the wrath of Zeus down on your head!