

Under the Influence

Shaping corporate culture for performance

In the corporate world, there are certain traits that any leader would like to boast about his organisation. Proactive participation, engagement, regulatory compliance and creativity are just a few attributes that are universally desired. However, trying to inculcating a new attribute into a company's culture can prove as hard as teaching an old dog to learn a new trick. This is because changing the present culture means altering the collective feelings, attitude and, therefore, behaviour of a group of people.

All too often, companies do not employ enough strategically led measures to effect positive cultural change, stopping at summarising their ideals in the form of corporate values, and allowing culture to be freely formed by chance. In a poorly developed corporate culture, there is a significantly high likelihood that its employees are not as engaged and proactive in their work. Bad corporate culture is also fertile ground for high turnover.

A lesser known fact is that corporate culture can be controlled and developed. And when harnessed, it is the most effective form of motivation for employees. Steering corporate culture in a certain desired direction is hard work. But with a little bit of patience and the use of influence and subtle persuasion, it is possible.

Cultural change starts at the top

People naturally emulate their superiors. When a new employee first joins a company, he has to first adapt to the existing culture, forming his initial ideas of the accepted ways of doing things by taking behavioural cues and signals from those in positions of authority.

Thus before any specific change in culture can be expected, managers have to first recognise their role as trendsetters and lead by example. It is not easy for a manager to lower himself or herself to the level of his subordinate while maintaining a sense of authority. But when leaders are able to find that balance, they increase their sense of accessibility and consequently their ability to influence positively.

Since change first starts from the top, it makes practical sense for the intended direction to be formally addressed to every member of the management. Therefore cultural change should begin as a strategic undertaking, involving established consensus at a company's upper echelons of leadership before a new trend is cascaded down the ranks.

Do not instruct. Influence.

Culture does not refer to what is done, but rather how things are done. It involves the feelings and attitudes that are attached to tasks that are carried out. It is concerned more with the motivation behind action, rather than the result it brings. This implies that cultural change cannot be brought about simply through direct instruction. You can tell a subordinate to oversee a project operation, but you cannot tell him to be proud and content about doing it.

Therefore true cultural change is only possible through inspiration, not instruction. What managers can do is to set certain conditions to evoke positive feelings in their employees, such as presenting a task as an opportunity rather than as a delegated task, or setting up a reward or commendation instead of issuing consequence. Leaders should be sensitive to the feelings of their subordinates so that they aware of the effects and subtle associations that their actions bring about.

Teamwork is like wildfire

A trait or attribute is not part of a company's culture unless it is assimilated and embodied unanimously by the organisation's staff members. Therefore the equally essential second part of effectuating change is to allow the initial adopters of the desired attitudes to carry forward the chain of influence to those who are less receptive to behavioural cues.

The setting most conducive to the propagation of peer influence is by creating opportunities for colleagues to work together. Scenarios where colleagues are directly and intimately exposed to each other's working styles and habits give positive influence the highest chance of spreading. Whenever possible, managers can create inter-department activities outside of their employees' main responsibilities, such as projects to improve energy saving within the company. This would give colleagues the opportunity to work together without any stress on specific expectations where results are concerned.

Managers should be aware that their direct hand in inculcating good working attitudes does not stop at simply setting the example. As much as positive influence can spread from employee to employee, so can negative habits. It is still imperative that the interaction between teammates is monitored and guided closely. This means that instances of good attitudes are actively accorded due commendation and the bad explicitly discouraged.

Patience is a virtue

Compared to clear instruction, influence is very much like experimentation. It could take time before visible changes are observed, especially since variables such as individual beliefs and habits are crucial factors that are addressed. Leaders who intend to effectuate positive change should have their expectations flexible, being mindful that results and the degrees at which they are successful may vary. This is because for a trait to successfully be part of a culture, employees have to practise it unprovoked and spontaneously.

Just like growing a plant, developing a company's culture is an often overlooked undertaking that requires commitment and ongoing nurturing from its drivers. Support from the highest level of management is just as important an element for its success.

But ultimately, a corporate culture that is deeply rooted in good soil and given the right amount of attention is worth every ounce of invested effort. Over time, good culture grows to be part of a company's unique personality and soul. Not only could it be the most powerful motivator of performance on a potentially exponential scale, it could also influence the way your company is perceived by the public as an excellent place to work at.

This article is contributed by Ms Annie Yap.