The Cancer of Corporate Culture

Posted on

How many organizations clearly spell out their corporate culture and how many employees are quick enough to understand it? Sam Swaminathan discusses the importance of understanding how real your organization's culture can be...

SO MUCH HAS BEEN written about corporate culture during the last decade that one would think the beast has been put to rest for ever, since everyone must have understood everything that needs to be understood about culture.

Yet, in our work with diverse companies in the region, we have begun to wonder whether or not this culture thing is really real. Or is it used as the perfect whipping boy to shove intractable and difficult issues under the carpet and a silent prayer that no bulges show?

One thing is for sure, the company came before the employees, and so it makes sense that employees learn to quickly understand what the prevailing culture in the organization is. After all, every one of us has a set of beliefs and values, and the founder or entrepreneur is no different.

The problem is that rarely does an organization spell out its culture. Why? Because no one is sure what it is. Yet, legions of salaried employees talk about their organizations in a manner that clearly confirms the prevailing culture, but cannot articulate it in unequivocal terms.

No matter whether people can or cannot articulate these things, it is true that corporate culture is a real thing, and does real things to real people and real customers. It therefore does real things to profitability and long-term prosperity as well.

Just consider a company where it is considered inappropriate to have fun at the workplace. People are expected to come and go like gravediggers. Well, not exactly like gravediggers, but close relatives of gravediggers, perhaps. Fine. So staff make sure that they behave in line with company expectations. Now, do you think you can find this desired behavior described in the company's policy or induction manual. No, of course not. Why? Because that would be organizational hara-kiri. After all, the owners, management, staff and everyone else want the company to have an impeccable image in the marketplace.

So, the brochures and glossy blurbs extol the virtues of the company's products, services,

and maybe even staff. But just walk into one of the offices, and you will be hit by a wall of silence, and inexplicable frigidity. I remember a recent experience with a reputed airline (the company spent $6.5 million to capture customer complaints some years ago), where my son's baggage didn't arrive with him, and the customer services department did everything right, but without a hint of a smile. For sure, the apologies were there, but they were a far cry from genuine apologies. Their procedures were great, but the people implementing them were robotic.

Often, the clinical perfection that accompanies error correction is great; the only trouble is that it is so clinical you feel quite dehumanized. Now, does it have to do with culture? You bet it does. This airline's unwritten policy manual says that employees must execute the procedures with razor sharp accuracy, but there is no need to waste time being human, kind, and pleasant. Now, how do people find out about this, when it isn't spelt out?

That's the point. Employees learn these things implicitly. They watch others with zeal and vigor when they are new. They slowly figure out who gets promoted, who gets the fat bonus, and who gets the pat from the boss. They watch the behavior of the boss. Soon, they have it figured out. From this point on, it doesn't matter what the procedures stipulate.

How often have you walked. into an office, not sure which way to go? Several people pass by, all looking very busy and officious, but no one stops by to ask if you wish some assistance. Man, this happens so often that it makes me wonder whether people leave their eyesight along with their brains in the car park. Or do they fix special chips in their craniums at work that disable them from seeing visitors standing right in front of them?

Here's another fairly familiar scenario. Just take a random poll in five companies you deal with, and ask employees what they think of their human resource departments. For God's sake this is the People's Department. The people who work here are supposed to do so for one simple purpose-assisting and motivating and encouraging the company's greatest resource. Legions of people tell me that no single department is as impersonal as their personnel departments. How many times has your HR manager said that he/she is too busy to worry about some silly thing like your visa or salary check? These persons then go on to justify how busy they are defining competencies and evaluating jobs.

Do employees care only about competencies, salary surveys, and job evaluations? Don't they care more about the little things that bug them – driving license renewal, or the all encompassing NO OBJECTION LETTER from the employer which will allow you to have a haircut without fear of reprisal?

On the other hand, you come across companies where staff give you a real warm smile when you interact with them. You find personnel managers who actually stop by and ask you how you are getting along.

So what drives the differences? No single thing is more responsible for this behavior than the prevailing corporate culture. This is the genetic coding of the corporation. Come on, why would I smile at you when my bonus does not depend upon how employees perceive me? Do you think I am mad? And, of course, I am a very important and busy person, so why should I find time to greet you or stop by and check if you need any assistance, when my boss doesn't care a fig for such things? I am on my way for a meeting with the boss, to tell him what a wonderful people's person I am. Just watch how I behave with him around!

Corporations don't wear their genetic codes on their shirt sleeves for all to see. They are tucked away deep in the bowels of the organization, hidden from all but the most watchful eyes. They resemble the human genetic code. One big difference though – while the human genetic code is impossible to change, the corporate genetic code can be changed with considerable effort.

The redeeming factor is that more and more organizations are recognizing this, and the better ones are even doing something about it. We recently had a situation where one of our clients had this to say: "We have been concentrating a great deal on skills training, and that has done us well. But the business environment is changing and customers are becoming more and more concerned about the way we deal with them, not just how efficient we are. It is now time to develop the behavioral abilities of our people, so that they not only do things efficiently, but also come across as pleasant and nice people to deal with.' In fact, this manager went on to say that the single most valuable thing for his staff would be developing self- esteem and self-confidence.

Why did he say this? Because he had realized that these staff members were underutilized in terms of their capabilities. They were the front-line, the eyes and ears of the organization, and it was high time the company did some- thing to ensure that they became proactive and brought back valuable information. This company had never thought of their staff this way for several years. Now, the genetic coding is changing.

Corporate culture can be a disabler or an enabler – the choice rests with management, the people who write the code in the first place. As an enabler, it can perform miracles such as:

■fostering true learning

■encouraging creativity

■promoting curiosity

■allowing mistakes to be seen as learning opportunities

■bonding staff to their organization like no other glue can Alas, culture is for real. Never mind that you and I cannot see, touch, or smell it. But we can all feel it. So here's your homework for the week, a little quiz for your staff to complete.

■Do I feel good coming to work?

■When I see something that might threaten my organization's well-being, would I immediately report it to my office?

■When I see an opportunity for my company, do I feel comfortable passing it on to my superiors? When I do the above, do I get any positive feedback? Would I want my child to work for my company, when he/she has other opportunities? Ils everyone treated fairly in my company?

■If I see someone being treated unfairly, would I be comfortable taking up the issue even if it doesn't have to do with my department?

■Do we treat our customers with fairness?

■If I were to go back to the time I joined this company, would I join it again?

■Has my company given me the opportunity to develop myself? You can score each question on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being rarely, 5 being very often). For questions 5 and 9, give yourself a 1 for NO and a 5 for YES. If your score lingers at 30 or less, your company's culture sucks. And of course, you can't tell your employer the truth. So they will never know and nothing will ever get done. What a paradox, eh?