

CURATING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE IN GOVERNMENT

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By Patrick Ibarra



It's practically impossible to name even a single highly successful organization, one that is a recognized leader in its field of endeavor, that does not have a distinctive, readily identifiable organizational culture. Most scholars and practitioners now recognize that the culture of an organization has a powerful effect on its performance and long-term effectiveness.

Indeed, many efforts to improve organizational performance fail because the fundamental culture -- values, ways of thinking, managerial styles, approaches to problem-solving -- remains the same. Even when procedures and strategies are altered, organizations quickly return to the "we've always done it that way" status quo.

Curating a healthy workplace culture in the public sector poses unique challenges. In contrast to the business world, governmental organizations have constantly evolving priorities, excessive bureaucracy, shifting political winds as elected leaders come and go, ebbing and flowing budgetary resources, and, too often, a lack of understanding by leaders and managers of culture's power and influence.

But the dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership. The touchstones of an organization's workplace culture include its treatment of employees, the credibility of its leaders, selection criteria for hiring and promotional decisions, and the nexus between its mission statement and employee performance.

Before attempting any kind of culture-change initiative, executives need to understand the current culture and determine what type would best support organizational strategy. They should always keep in mind the familiar saying, often attributed to the late management consultant Peter Drucker: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Leaders need to recognize and use the levers that influence culture.

The city of Coppell, Texas, for example, has a deliberate, established philosophy for cultivating a high-performance workplace culture that it calls "The Cornerstone." It encompasses a mission statement, a code of ethics, an oath of service, behavioral guidelines and what the city describes as a "culture of credibility." The culture is activated and sustained through a program called "4C Success" (for "Cultivating Coppell Core Competencies") that is reinforced through extensive learning/training programs and a variety of other means.

Coppell's approach demonstrates the goal of a culture-change initiative: to purposefully and actively build capability for new ways of working. It allows for the new thinking, beliefs, tools and processes. It is critical that culture change not be perceived by employees as another in a series of "management by best seller" fads. Failed attempts to change are likely to produce cynicism, frustration, loss of trust, and deterioration in morale. Employees must understand that culture change is not only essential for the organization to adapt to new realities but will help them and their fellow workers perform better and enjoy greater job satisfaction.

Before embarking on culture-change work, executive leadership teams should be able to answer a series of questions: What will our organization need to be like to be highly successful in the future? What will our customers/citizens require of us? What trends (including headwinds) should we be aware of? In what areas would we like to be at the leading edge?

You can be certain that there will be resistance to culture change. But readiness for organizational transformation can be fostered by identifying the advantages of the refreshed culture, sharing the disadvantages of not changing, showing the gaps between current performance and the organization's potential, providing the resources needed to implement change, and rewarding behaviors compatible with the preferred culture.

Attempts to shape a culture require activating a vision of what is preferred and then being relentless in pursuing that vision. The goal is a culture that is constantly evolving, one in which leaders learn from shifting circumstances and employees don't merely buy in but instead "join in." Such organizations are poised and nimble, they embrace uncertainty and opportunities, and they recognize that change is not an event but a process.



Patrick Ibarra is an "entrepreneur of ideas" and architect of innovation who takes the headwinds governments are facing about the current climate of unprecedented changes and translates them into a tailwind with practical, tactical and impactful solutions that can be used immediately. A former city manager, Patrick owns and operates The Mejorando Group consulting practice (www.gettingbetterallthetime.com). Mejorando is Spanish for "getting better all the time" and Patrick's firm partners with governments helping them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation, and training. Ibarra is an author, speaker, blogger and educator who brings fresh thinking, innovation, and new ideas to help public sector organizations succeed in the 21st century.

For those agencies interested in immediately improving your organization's performance, Mr. Ibarra can be reached at **925.518.0187** and/or patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com and follow the Mejorando Group on Facebook and Twitter.