

BY PATRICK IBARRA

CRAFTING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE

Shared values can lead to unprecedented results



“Culture eats strategy for lunch.”

—Peter Drucker, management consultant, educator, and author

Most local government managers have experienced more than their share of being actively involved with efforts to improve organizational performance through the implementation of a range of change mechanisms—reorganizations, process improvements, and the most complex of all, workplace culture.

While a healthy workplace culture does not guarantee high performance, it’s almost impossible to achieve without it.

An organization’s norms and values influence how employees should behave in situations and heavily influence the workplace culture. Values in use, as opposed to espoused values, tell members what is important in the organization and what deserves their attention.

The dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make one realize that leadership and culture are

two sides of the same coin. Understandably, culture change can be difficult and challenging work, yet the dividends are extremely beneficial in helping transition or even transform an organization to achieve unprecedented results.

Also, with the breadth and pace of changes impacting the role of local governments, leaders would be wise to change their cultures to adapt to the situation and operate at a higher level of effectiveness or run the risk of falling behind in their primary role as a community builder.

Yankton Crafts a New Road Map

Culture change must be led from the top of the organization. Senior executives and managers must be strongly committed to the new values, the need to create constant pressures for change, and the staying power to see the changes through.

In 2016 and again in 2017, I had the good fortune of working with Amy Nelson, city manager of Yankton, South Dakota, along with members of the executive leadership team and the city’s governing body.

Amy and her team recognized that we must always be reaching toward our potential. While a segment of the advance—as opposed to a retreat—sessions with each group focused on strategic planning, a significant investment of time, effort, and energy was directed at identifying the organization’s basic assumptions and crafting a road map in a different direction. In short, reestablishing the culture around a shared set of values and beliefs.

The leaders in Yankton realized they must communicate the new culture through their own actions. Their behaviors need to symbolize the kind of values and behaviors being pursued.

Recognizing their role as catalysts for change, group members, through a series of exercises, sought answers to practical issues: What really matters around here? How do we do things around here? What do we do when a problem arises?

These types of provocative questions galvanized people's thinking about the basic assumptions and values that influence the daily behavior of the city's employees. They helped reveal the workplace culture so leaders could consciously and deliberately reset the culture. The question was: Reset the culture to reflect what?

After much discussion, Amy and the team members developed a set of values depicted by the tree shown in this article.

Why a tree you ask? "Well," as Amy stated, "we thought a tree was a nice visual because like a tree, our organization is dynamic and growing. We also know that as the seasons of our

organization change, new growth and new values will occur. We are not trying to be perfect (every tree has a flaw or two); our goal is to flourish."

In fact, a tree was planted by city hall to celebrate this undertaking.

Forward-looking leaders like Amy and her team, realize they must enlist their workforce members in the journey to shape a healthier workplace culture. It is vital that culture change not be perceived by employees as another in a sequence of fads-- "management by best seller" as in a flavor of the month.

Even when procedures and strategies are altered, organizations can quickly return to the "we've always done it that way" status quo.

Since its adoption, Amy and her team have been disciplined in their approach to continue their work together and with workforce members to, as Amy says, "Delve further into the meaning and importance of each of our values."

Focus and Commitment

Creating and maintaining a healthy workplace culture is painstaking work. It requires focus and commitment throughout an organization. Healthy cultures lift people up, expand the capacity of the workforce to execute new challenges, and, overall, enhance the organization's performance.

In closing, I want to share a quote from author Max DePree from his book *Leadership is an Art*: "Leadership is much more an art, a belief, a condition of the heart, than a set of things to do. The visible signs of artful leadership are expressed, ultimately, in its practice."

Your e-mails with questions and comments are always welcome at patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com. **PM**



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