

Leading Your Culture

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“While culture development relies on all members of the team, leaders have the unique position to shape the culture for the better or for the worse by their attitudes, actions, and values.”

For leaders, being able to cultivate a culture for success is a critical skill. Many of us have experienced suboptimal working environments ranging from demotivating to downright toxic. Whether that comes in the form of focusing on profits over patient-centered care or the C-suite over the team, poor culture eventually begets poor outcomes. Those poor outcomes can come in the form of poor patient care, medical errors, high turnover, increasing expenses, and decreasing profits. The late leadership guru Peter Drucker is credited with saying that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” This statement should not be taken so far as to mean that strategy is not important. Poor strategy, no matter how good the culture, will not yield top tier results. However, no amount of strategic perfection can overcome a malignant culture. Mistrust, infighting, and lack of buy-in will eventually win. Bad culture ALWAYS wins.

Seven out of eight people go home from work feeling like their company does not care about them or their well-being.¹ Enabling our team members to function at their best as they work within our organizations and serve our patients requires a culture where each individual feels valued, respected, heard, and has trust in the organization. Creating a culture where the

team is valued over metrics is a crucial leadership skill set to master. As we grow physician leaders within our organizations, developing the skills necessary to cultivate this kind of culture, such as listening with the intention to understand, developing emotional intelligence, creating shared values, and fostering collaboration, must be emphasized at least as much as strategic thinking, business principles, and quality metrics. Only then will our leaders have the skills necessary to ensure our cultures are additive to, rather than detrimental to, our stated missions. When people feel valued in their cultures they will move mountains to care for their patients and outcomes will take care of themselves. The mantra should truly be what Virgin CEO Richard Branson notes. “Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients.” And the opposite is true. Fail to take care of your people and they will “take care” of your clients, and not in a good way.

While culture development relies on all members of the team, leaders have the unique position to shape the culture for the better or for the worse by their attitudes, actions, and values. Unfortunately, examples of leaders failing to cultivate positive culture are all too

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common. In 2015 Volkswagen became infamous for their "diesel-gate" scandal in which they falsified emissions and mileage testing results. In 2007, VW hired Martin Winterkorn to lead a new aggressive corporate growth strategy using diesel vehicles to overtake their competition and attempt to become the top automotive company in the world.² The Environmental Protection Agency implemented tighter restriction on emissions, which VW could not meet. In attempting to meet these standards, Winterkorn used a coercive style of leadership to create a top-down toxic, "no-failure" culture of fear.³ This type of top-down approach to leadership "typically sees executives formulate bold strategic objectives and timelines...with little input from others in the company."² This leadership created such a culture of fear of failure, and fear for jobs, that employees were unable to express the engineering problems they were having with fixing the emissions issues. This also created a cut-throat environment and poor interdepartmental communication. This ultimately led to engineers finding and using an emissions test cheating software strategy as they feared telling leadership of their failure to come up with solutions that actually fixed the problems.⁴

Does this story sound familiar to ones you have heard about in medicine? Perhaps you feel like you are currently living it? Consider for a minute the impact of this type of culture on patient safety. How can an organization expect to have a culture of patient safety when there is constant fear of job loss or other repercussions which stifle important conversations about safety events which lead to critical process innovation? Team members must feel safe to function at their full capacity and it is our job as leaders to create an environment where they feel that way. Simon Sinek talks about this as creating a "circle of safety."⁵ This starts by building a shared mission and vision that begins with the true "why" of the company. Each leadership team needs to take stock of why their company exists and why they as a leader are working in the field. Developing your personal leadership philosophy is a critical first step, breaking down to the "why" you do "what" you do. Only then can you work on formulating the "how" or the strategic plan. To give you an example, my leadership philosophy is based on my core

values of integrity, humility, service, and the belief that all people are created with innate value (my "why"); the overarching goal (my "what") I aim to achieve throughout my career is to improve access and quality of healthcare for all people; the leadership style to achieve these results is empowering and encouraging (my "how"). You will notice that nowhere in this statement does it mention medical education, but building a new residency program as the "what," grounded in my "why" helped shape our shared vision to "develop compassionate, patient-centered, well-rounded family physicians who passionately serve their patients and communities as the next generation of Family Physicians in Central Florida."

As leaders, we need to walk the walk. We are the role models for our teams and for the next generations of leaders. While the idea of "servant leadership" may sound cliché to some, the most successful companies are led by leaders who walk in a life of integrity, doing what they say they will do to build trust and build people up. Nothing will erode trust faster than hypocrisy. Standing in humility as a leader allows you to demonstrate integrity.⁶ Giving credit where credit is due, taking responsibility for your actions, and not stealing the spot-light are important to build teams that work at a maximum efficiency.

So is it possible to achieve this corporate culture "unicorn" for our organizations? Build a culture where every team member feels valued, respected, and lives without fear of their top-down leading C-suite? In a time where institutions are reacting differently to the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be the ones who gel together in the fight who will win. While some organizations perform lay-offs and furloughs, others have built cultures which have allowed them to have the necessary means and commitments to their teams to keep their teams intact. Bob Chapman, author of *Every Body Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People* and CEO of Barry-Wehmiller, a multi-billion dollar company with 12,000 employees, similarly ran his company through the 2008 recession without laying off a single employee.⁸ This decision to value team over profits fit perfectly with their public commitment and mantra to "measure success by how many lives they touch." It would have been cognitively dissonant to place customers' lives over their own teams'. Instead, in

keeping with their Guiding Principles of Leadership, he viewed company as a family and did what many are now doing, cutting his CEO pay from \$875,000 to \$10,500 (notice that his CEO pay was only \$875,000!), suspending bonuses and travel, and having employees take four weeks off of unpaid time at a time of their choosing.^{8,9} In so doing, everyone kept their jobs and company morale stayed high. People cared for each other enough that those who could afford to take more time routinely took extra unpaid weeks for those who could not afford it. This resulted in them coming out of the recession whole and setting them up for their first in a series of record performances starting in 2010. Their leadership training has at its base giving their future leaders the skill and courage to truly care for their team as individuals. Chapman's motto is that "everyone is someone's precious child" and their leadership development bears this out. In this way, focusing on your team, their fulfillment and value in their roles, empowers them to do the best in their position to serve others on the team. This service to the team works! For Barry-Wehmiller, it has led to 15% annual growth year over year and Chapman to be ranked by Inc. Magazine as the #3 CEO in the world.

Creating a supportive, caring environment where team members feel valued and respected allows them to achieve their top level of performance. If an estimated 75% of people are not fully engaged in their work, how can we as leaders expect even our best strategies to work?¹ When our culture drives engagement and people work for the benefit of those who they know care about them, productivity naturally increases and profits follow. In this way, your organization can have a nice hearty breakfast of both culture and strategy to fuel it through the day!

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