

leadership instalments

Purposeful About Culture

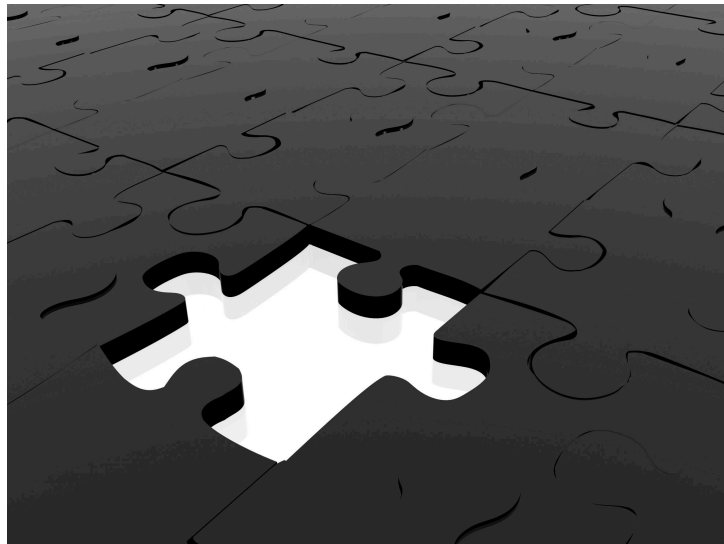
By Dan Gaynor

HOW OFTEN DO YOU FIND YOURSELF THINKING ABOUT YOUR WORKPLACE CULTURE? Every workplace, every group of people has one - families, teams, classrooms - wherever people come together culture forms. Some are inspiring, some are discouraging. Culture is a powerful force, which is why the best leaders are purposeful about building the right culture.

Culture is not what we do but the way we do it. Like the pieces of a puzzle, it is the way a unique set of values and practices come together to define the character of a group. So many workplaces are marked by selfish ambition, unhealthy competition, gossip and other destructive qualities that affect both performance and job satisfaction. Changing the facets of culture that detract from a healthy workplace is what good leaders do. Where teams are divisive, they unite them. Where people gossip, they end it. Where people don't care about quality, they make it matter.

Build your team on a foundation of solid values. Stamp out the things that drag teams down and foster those that bring out the best in people - qualities like achievement, teamwork and co-operation. I spent a lot of time building culture across a number of newspapers - it was at the heart of my team development work. My experience confirms that as you draw ever closer to the right culture job satisfaction and performance follow naturally. People notice culture change. They may not always be able to describe it, but they notice it. The most lasting way to change performance is to build culture.

One of my favorite targets has always been office politics. They seem to be a part of human nature, but they don't have to be a part of your workplace. Within days of my arrival at each new leadership assignment, I'd hold a meeting with my new executive team to make it clear that I had no tolerance for them. I define office politics as one person undermining another, often subtly, to gain some sort of an advantage. I'd make it clear that I didn't want to see any evidence of this on my watch. I'd advise the team that I wanted to see members assisting one another, and that we'd just let opportunities go to the people most qualified. It was one of the early steps I took with each new team to start forming the right culture and stamp out common problems. I knew that as we put a



damper on office politics and people stopped looking over their shoulders, the workplace would improve and so would performance.

All work on culture starts by knowing what's important to you - by getting serious about values. It needs to be said that they've got to be the right values and that the members of the leadership team have to meet very high personal standards. There is no room for hypocrisy on this team, it will kill any progress you hope to make.

Wherever people gather they develop a way of doing things. Sometimes it is downright dysfunctional or toxic. Often the culture isn't all bad or all good. There are some positive facets to build on and others that need to be changed. You shape culture by describing what you want and then encouraging and correcting around the standards you set. The best leaders are always working on culture - its a never ending passion and one of the most creative expressions of great leadership.

Discussion questions:

1. Think about the workplace cultures you have experienced, which were the best and worst?
2. What facets of your current team culture would you most like to change for the better?

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