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leadership instalments

Mapping Culture

By Dan Gaynor

"Everyone was extremely pleasant, polite and genuinely nice, but no one seemed to have a competitive spirit or a sense that time mattered. Everyone talked about technology and values – they didn't talk about customers or competitors. It was my first experience with what I would come to learn was common behaviour: people did not confront issues at Hewlett-Packard." Carley Fiorina, Tough Choices.

"Common behaviour" - it is an apt definition of culture and it is a powerful force - nothing has more impact on organizational performance. Culture ranks at the top of the list of reasons why people join and leave companies. In the years to come, as baby-boomers leave the workplace and the competition for talent heats up, leaders will begin to give culture the attention it deserves. Without the right culture they'll be left behind in the competition for talent. Increasingly, people will gravitate toward the organizations that offer the best cultures.
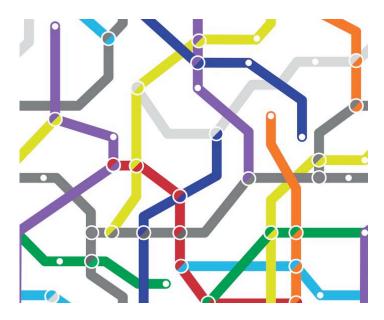
Let's begin with the reality that every group, from families to large multi-nationals has a culture - their own way of doing things and it can be inspiring or discouraging.

Culture taps our need to fit in - to feel part of the group. If everyone in the organization works hard, then newcomers soon discover that working hard is the path to acceptance. If the newcomer works hard and is chastised by colleagues for working too hard, he either slows down or leaves for a place that is a better fit. This is why good leaders get purposeful about shaping culture. They know that when they get the culture right, everything else is much easier to achieve.

Work on culture begins right away as the leader assesses the current culture, we see evidence of this in Carley Fiorina's opening quote. Clearly the Hewlett-Packard culture she encountered included both strengths and weaknesses. Politeness and a passion for technology are strengths; a lack of urgency and an unwillingness to confront issues are weaknesses, that if not corrected, would be severely limiting.

In each new leadership assignment I took on, the work on culture began much the same way. From my first days on the job, I watched the way things were done. At one newspaper we lacked a competitive spirit; at another, people would't bring any bad news forward (it was all good news or no news at all); at a third, people

were too fearful to take even the slightest risk. Each also had its positive attributes. In each case mapping the culture and then correcting its limiting facets was the key to engineering a turn-around or a successful integration. Good leaders develop an eye for culture and with experience the mapping becomes easier.

You cannot change a culture for the better until you know where it is today and where you want it to go. Your vision for a better culture becomes a source of inspiration for the talented people throughout the organization who will help you create it.

Not everyone will make it through. There will always be those who do not share the same values and are unwilling to change. Everyone deserves the chance to get on board, but this is not a choice you can make for others. You can only provide the vision and then have the courage to see it through. Building a better culture is hard, and it is among the most important work every leader does. Get it right and you give your organization and everyone in it a powerful and lasting competitive advantage.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about a negative culture you have had experience with, what were it's characteristics?
2. How would you describe your current culture - the common behaviours?
3. What are the three to five facets of culture you should correct or instil?

To go deeper on culture why not contact us for more on a half day workshop.

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