Brown Bagger

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Philosophies that Lead to a Destructive Company Culture

By Magi Graziano

Most of us spend the majority of our time at the office or actively working inside or as part of a human work system. Whether we are conscious to it or not, the corporate culture of an organization can make or break how employees feel about an organization and their place in it.

While most awake and aware leaders say they want a constructive corporate culture, many are uncertain of what it really takes to shape it. Consequently, these executives and managers unintentionally lead their people toward the fatal, destructive side of the culture coin.

They do this by buying into five "double-edged sword" philosophies:
- Winning above all else;
- Commanding and controlling;
- Opposing others;
- Pursuing perfection, and
- Keeping the peace.

These philosophies will undermine any mission to craft a constructive corporate culture. The following sections illustrate how these philosophies "work" (or shall I say, "don't work".)

1. Winning Above All Else
Winning is an incredibly powerful motivator. The desire to win can move mountains and bring in profits, however, when the need to win overwrites better judgment, fragments and erodes core values, runs over people, and leads people to the brink of exhaustion, it must be called out and new behaviors that promote and inspire must be integrated into the culture. In pursuit of results above all else can threaten relationships, health and wellness, trust, quality, and safety.

Inside competitive work cultures, members are often expected to operate in a "win-lose" framework, outperform peers, and work against (rather than with) their co-workers. What begins with a healthy race often devolves into unproductive dog-eat-dog internal workplace behavior.

A once healthy desire to "beat the competition" gone unchecked, very often, creates opportunities for unproductive behavior and perpetuating neural pathways and automatic ways of thinking. The result is an organization that "eats itself alive." This shows up on the floor by people arguing for win/lose scenarios, in-fighting for power, control, rewards, promotions and resources. A focal shift from we to me, where silo and personalized thinking prevail.

Even though the intentions of leaders who want to "win" is most often well-meaning, a workplace culture that values *winning above all else* can be fertile ground for destructive behavior and employment brand erosion.

2. Commanding and Controlling
In power-driven organizations, hierarchy reigns and members of the management team are expected to take charge, control subordinates, and yield to the demands of superiors. Historically, this has been the "right" way to lead and for many decades it actually worked. This model is flawed, however, and those managed by people who admire and enjoy this model atrophy and stagnate. In workplace cultures where this type of behavior is rewarded, the powerful take over and the powerless surrender.

When leaders and team members are expected and even encouraged to "power up" over others, people in the organization often view themselves as pawns in the micromanagement chess game, or

simply as cogs in the organizational profit wheel. They lose motivation and initiative and give less of their discretionary time to make the organization better. Commanding and controlling is a vicious cycle, and the only way out is to call it out, and inspire a new way to lead and a new way to follow.

3. Opposing Others

In oppositional workplace cultures there is often a root of overcoming obstacles that afforded the organization sustainability and success over years. But what often got the organization here will not get them *there*; and opposition is one of those elements of culture, much like winning at all costs, that turns the organization against itself. In work cultures where members are expected to be critical, oppose ideas of others, and make 'safe' decisions, people drop into fear, and suppress their ideas and creativity.

Opposition shows up in communication such as, *"Yes, but,"* *"We already tried that and it failed,"* *"I have been here for years and I know it won't work,"* and *"No, because…."* While everyone ought to be singing from the same overall hymnal, working together in tolerance and engagement, members of this type of organization spend far too much time navigating personalities and conflict, than collaborating, innovating, and solving problems.

4. Pursuing Perfection

In other cases, there are leaders of quality-driven organizations who pride themselves with a commitment to excellence. While that intention may have been initially pure and congruent with the leader's values, all too often the unconscious underlying behavior that is fostered with this value, is perfection. In a culture of perfection, people do not take risks, they do not try new things, and they almost certainly do not put themselves or their reputation on the line to color outside the lines.

Leaders of many modern organizations often stake their reputations on delivering excellence or

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Case Example: *Commanding and Controlling Doesn't Work*

As Magi Graziano so aptly puts it in the main article, "*In power-driven organizations, hierarchy reigns and members of the management team are expected to take charge, control subordinates, and yield to the demands of superiors.*"

Sound familiar? It should, as this has been a common way for businesses to "lead" for a long time. Fortunately, history has shown that this model is flawed. Consider the following example:

I worked in the newspaper field for 10 years, and this type of management style was typical in many newsrooms. *"Control subordinates"?* For sure. Browbeating and other verbal flogging was the order of the day. I even recall an editor remarking, for anyone in earshot to hear, that it was time to whip reporter "Tim" (not real name) into shape!

"*Yield to the demands of superiors*" goes hand in hand I would say. Succumb to what your editors wanted, or you were out the door. Ideas on how to be more productive? Nope. Just …GONE if you didn't do what you were told.

Effective workplace leaders don't browbeat, they call you into their office to voice criticisms. Then, they spell out what is needed for you to improve, and explain the consequences if you don't.

I was fortunate as my reporting was considered solid. BUT… I tired of knowing I was only a few lousy stories away from being the new "whipping boy." *"Commanding and controlling is a vicious cycle,"* Magi writes. It sure is. Working there for two years was long enough. The saddest part was that management was likely clueless why I left.

superior service. There are not many CEOs who would stand behind sending out sloppy work, or delivering code to customers littered with errors; but there is a subtle difference between standing for quality and being in pursuit of perfection.

Perfection, by nature of its definition, leaves very little room for risk taking and creativity in your organization. When curiosity is stifled and looking good is the primary focus, mistakes are hidden, learning is mitigated, and growth is constrained. In an environment where perfection is celebrated and rewarded, conventionality emerges as a safe bet for staying out of the boss' cross hairs.

In a workplace that prioritizes perfectionism, members are expected to conform, follow the rules and make a good impression, and the byproduct of making a good impression and following the rules is that creativity and risk-taking are thwarted and innovation becomes impossible. Resistance to change blocks progress and complacency sets in. While certain roles demand perfection or someone could die, perfection as a culture, limits and constrains what is possible for the organization and the people in it.

5. Keeping the Peace and Getting Along

Everyone who is anyone in business understands the need to cooperate with others in the workplace and the need for teamwork and collaboration. However, creating a work culture where everyone has to be liked and everyone has to get along with little to no emphasis on performance or results; most often leads to over-the-top consensus building, perceived favoritism, a loss of focus and ambition, inconsistent accountability, and a very destructive fear of conflict.

In a work culture where needing approval is a core component of how the organization works, team members are expected to agree with, gain the approval of and be liked by others. In a workplace such as this, disagreements are frowned upon and people are encouraged to go along with the crowd—even when the crowd is prepared to drive off a cliff.

When team members fear conflict, even constructive conflict, they are incapable of engaging in debates or openly voicing opinions. The team avoids conflicts; which involve speaking up against bad decisions thus leading to inferior organizational results.

It's imperative to understand that "keeping the peace" workplace cultures can be an insidious thief of organizational and talent optimization. Keeping the peace has the potential have rob the organization and its people experiencing the highest levels of role fulfillment and role satisfaction.

When people and the system they operate in does not actively engage in productive ways of being including; constructive conflict, speaking their truth, giving new ideas, and sharing insights of what is not working; they can never really get to real engagement in the workplace.

Summary

These philosophies can sweep the rug out from under your company's overall mission and set you drastically off track. Shaping constructive culture is about intentionally causing the kind of corporate culture that exemplifies your brand promise.

This takes a solid and palatable intention for that culture as a holistic human system, a system of people operating as a living and agile organism. Intentional culture is about monitoring what you are creating and making necessary shifts along the way to ensure you are accomplishing what you set out to by creating the intentional culture in the first place. ■
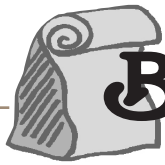
Another Failed Philosophy

Opposing others doesn't work

"In oppositional workplace cultures there is often a root of overcoming obstacles that afforded the organization sustainability and success over years," Magi Graziano writes. "But what often got the organization here will not get them *there*…"

All too true. But I'm not so sure "opposition" is the correct term, as in many cases I think organizational reluctance is more about "fear" than out-and-out <u>opposition</u>. This is understandable to a certain degree. Most of us fear the unknown. *Why should we change when X has worked for years?* But like the ostrich with its head in the hand, refusing to change won't make a problem go away.

This failed philosophy has played itself out many times in today's ever-changing society. Remember when many of us would go to a store like Blockbuster to rent a movie? Netflix was ahead of the curve and recognized people wouldn't go through the hassle of driving to the store and later bringing it back, if they could order movies and not have to leave the comfort of their home.

Online banking is another newer trend, something I can relate to well as my wife works in a bank. Personally, living in a small town I enjoy walking to the bank and "shooting the breeze' with the tellers. Disclosing bank account numbers online for a hacker to steal? Not me! But many people have chosen EASE over risk of privacy invasion. No visits to the local bank. No stamps. I get that, too.

I am doing more online banking all of the time, but it was a slow road for me. Had banks been *that* slow on the switch, MANY would be out of business. Maybe it did drive some under?

In other cases, like a nonprofit organization I belong to, there is little fear of "going under" per se, but membership is stagnant, and policies that worked in a bygone era aren't cutting it today. And it's largely due to many "higher ups" who oppose or are fearful of new ways of doing things. Frustrating!

Summary

The point is, what afforded an organization sustainability and success <u>yesterday</u>, may well not work *today*, and it surely won't work **tomorrow**. Organizations have to adapt, change with the times, or run the risk of becoming as extinct as a dinosaur. Easy? No. Necessary? For sure. ■