Leaders and a Lost Opportunity--Collaboration

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2012, published in the Jan/Feb/Mar, 2012 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

Every day, leaders at every level lose the opportunity to enhance their organizations, and they don't even realize it, and the sad thing is that those they lead fail to benefit.

They're not attending to the most powerful influence they have. One crucial ingredient determines whether the organization is characterized by indifferent compliance or enthusiastic commitment.

Too many leaders don't know about this culture-enhancing ingredient. Even if they did, many would not know what to do about it. This hurts the organization, the leader, and especially those being led.

Before I reveal this powerful characteristic, please pause and reflect on the culture of your organization. Imagine that you invite a skilled observer to spend the day witnessing interactions among members of your organization. At the end of the day, you ask for a debriefing. What perceptions are this unbiased observer likely to share with you about your organization's culture?

Sometimes a leader asks, "What exactly do you mean when you refer to my organization's 'culture'?" Unfortunately, that term and what it represents may not be well understood.

"Culture" is the accumulation of all the shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, agreements, and unwritten rules that the people in your organization have contributed and accepted over time. It's largely subconscious and tacit, yet 'culture' is what gives every organization its unique feel.

"Culture is often loosely described as "the way we do things around here." Sometimes workers fiercely defend "the way we do things"; sometimes "the way we do things" is a source of complaints.

So, when I ask you to pause and reflect on your organization's culture, I'm asking you to step back from the day-to-day content of your work. I want you to put yourself in the place of that trained observer and think about "the way we do things around here."

As you observe people (yourself included) work together, how much collaboration would you witness? You might wonder, "What exactly is 'collaboration'?" It's a little like cooperation, only more active. Not only are two people cooperating, they are actively looking to generate an idea or an approach that is even more effective and powerful than either person would likely create on their own.

The behavior typically looks something like this. One person says, "Hey, I've got a situation I'm facing, and I'm considering" and then describes the anticipated action. The other person nods and thinks a moment, then says, "That could work. Another approach might be" and then finishes with a different or modification of the idea.

What follows is an exchange of options that ponders how the benefits could be maximized and the downside risks (including costs and potential rework and waste) could be minimized. The ideas bounce back and forth with neither person criticizing the other person. It's just two or more people intensely focused on how to obtain the best possible outcome based on logical analysis.

You might say, "Oh, that happens in our organization all the time!" I might respond, "Yours must be a very satisfying place to work!" I would then watch closely how you look at me.

Based on your reaction, I'd know immediately if you indeed have a workforce that values collaboration of if you are just deceived, wishing it were so. If you can describe easily and fluently several recent examples of how collaborative dialogue resulted in avoiding problems and overcoming obstacles, I would celebrate the health of relationships among your team members.

Unfortunately, few organizations have a highly collaborative culture. If it does exist, the leaders have worked hard to instill it as an appreciated method for addressing issues.

You see, the perspectives and behaviors of its leaders heavily dictate the culture of any organization. If you and your leadership team are deeply invested in the traditional command and control approach to providing direction, it's very unlikely there is a lot of collaboration routinely occurring.

When you face a problem, do you provide the solution and tell others what to do to resolve it? Or do you bring the situation to the individuals who are likely to understand it best and ask them to consider possible responses? Do you create the problem-solving environment, and then invite everyone involved to participate in analysis? Do you ensure that everyone's ideas are considered?

Do you orchestrate the give-and-take, inviting creative ideas? Do you encourage springboarding, where one idea stimulates variations that expand and build on the concept? Do you press for an immediate decision, or do you encourage divergent thinking, seeking imaginative options for a while?

Your role as a leader is to model the behaviors you desire in your organization. If you would like to engage the creative capabilities of every member of your team, you had better be establishing the behaviors I've just described as a norm in your organization. Otherwise, you are missing a terrific opportunity to generate a more collaborative culture! And you are missing out on the far more constructive and valuable outcomes such a culture experiences!

****

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach in Atlanta. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. He welcomes your comments, suggestions, and questions at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com.