

Reflecting on Your Organization's Health

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Leaders of organizations are usually busy people. Maybe that's true for you. It may seem that there's never enough time to accomplish the backlog of people and situations that need attention. I know that my clients sometimes look at me incredulously when I encourage them to pause and reflect.

"Pause? Reflect? You must be kidding me! You coaches and consultants have no idea what life is like in the real world! If I pause for even a few minutes, people show up in front of me with problems that need to be addressed. I don't have time to pause and reflect!"

That's too bad, because reflecting may be one of your most important activities as a leader. And reflecting is not possible if your attention is focused on another activity. However, it's only through reflecting that intentional improvement is possible.

Here's the short version. Just ask two questions. The first one is, "What have we been doing well?" It's good to celebrate what's been successful, and it's important to maintain the actions that contributed to that success.

The second question is, "What could we do differently (better) in the future?" Here some creativity is required, even if what you've been doing has been effective. If you don't do something different, you can't expect to obtain better results.

That's the problem with failing to pause and reflect. If you don't do some conscious evaluation of what you've been doing, you'll either continue it (which may not be bad, of course) or you'll drift away from what you've been doing because somebody starts taking short-cuts.

Okay, suppose I convince you to pause periodically and reflect. What should you examine? I suggest you start with your key results areas. You'll know what these are for your organization. They'll likely include revenue, expenses, productivity, customer satisfaction, and employee turnover and satisfaction. Compare current results with results for past years. Is improvement obvious? Is improvement occurring at the rate you expected?

Then examine your key processes that create those results. Are there repetitive problems that occur that have not been fully resolved? What would be required to identify the root cause of those problems? Are the right people aware that they should be working to eliminate them? Do you need some outside help? Would a subject matter expert from a trade association be helpful in offering some insight?

Finally, examine your organization's culture. "Culture" is a description of the predominant attitudes and behaviors that characterize the functioning of the organization. Why is culture important? Your culture influences what people think and feel about what they do. And what they do delivers your results.

Every organization has a culture, but few organizations have generated an intentional culture. In most organizations, the culture has just evolved over time based on the actions and reactions of the most influential individuals. In fact, most organizations never even consider the importance of "culture."

You personally can easily study your organization's results and its processes. But it's unlikely that you personally are even able to accurately observe your culture. Why? Much of what happens in your organization isn't visible to you. Though you hate to admit it, people act differently when you're around.

To study culture, convene your key leaders and some loyal, honest employees. Imagine that a skilled, unbiased interviewer asked every employee, "What's it like to work here?" How would folks respond? Ask your team to generate a listing of "desirable" and "undesirable" characteristics of your organization.

The most tangible evidence of the health of your organization is consistently improving results over time. Positive results come from reliable, repeatable processes. Productive execution of your processes is accomplished through your culture--the motivation, competency, and commitment of your people.

Only if you pause and reflect periodically on your organization's culture, processes, and results do you have a technical right to expect improvement over time! Isn't it worth an occasional "time out"?