Your Organization's Culture--Compliance or Commitment?

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2012, published in the Apr/May/June, 2012 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

Healthy relationships are an indication of good leadership. Do you agree with that contention?

As I help individuals build personalized leadership development plans, a primary objective that I keep in mind is, "Will these actions enhance relationships, develop culture, and improve processes?"

Imagine a meter that measures the health of your organization's culture. The scale ranges from "passive compliance" on one end to "enthusiastic, collaborative commitment" on the other. Where would your organization stack up?

The stereotypical "command and control" style of leadership tends to deliver a compliant culture. A more collaborative leadership style, where people know their responsibilities, where they are competent in their roles, and where they are honorably motivated to serve both their paying and internal customers tends to deliver a more committed culture.

Innovation, breakthroughs, and excellence are rarely associated with compliance cultures. In those environments, people operate not because they want to do what's right, but because they know that if they don't follow the rules, there could be serious repercussions.

Threats and bribes cause people to abide by established procedures. Feedback is used not to help people stretch their strengths, enhance their skills and contributions, and seek improvement in processes, but to keep people in line with the established regulations.

How would you move in the direction of a commitment culture if you so desired? Before you read further, you might creatively consider your answers to that question. One immediate step you could make in that direction is to engage someone else in your organization to think about answering that question with you!

Commitment develops because of contributions from both the leader and the other members of the organization. Don't try to do this with a survey; one-on-one dialogue will yield the best ideas.

First, the recruiting and hiring process must bring into the organization individuals who want to function consistently with the values and vision of the organization. Some people, based on their previous experiences, just can't seem to operate without rules and someone supervising their performance closely. They believe the function of leadership is to oversee their behaviors and correct them. They look for the minimum requirements so that they can carefully make sure they comply.

Committed individuals, however, once they master the basic requirements of the job, look at the intent behind their responsibilities. They look for ways to improve what's been done in the past. They push to enhance their skills. They seek new and better ways to serve their internal and external customers. They welcome feedback, and they volunteer feedback to their colleagues because they understand that everyone in the organization wants to improve.

The other part of creating a commitment culture is the leader's contribution. His or her behaviors tend to avoid the "command and control" approach, preferring to serve and release accountability to those who are performing the work. The "serve and release" approach requires that a given individual understands the expectations of his or her customers and has all the resources necessary to meet them.

Time and energy are spent on building skills. The leader stretches each team member by looking for growth opportunities, offering challenging assignments, and providing supportive recognition. The presumption is that each person wants to contribute, using his or her talents in support of the organization's vision of "what could be."

The leader confronts poor performers quickly because the good performers in the organization do not want to be constrained by their negative influences.

Collaboration is rampant, as each member of the team is looking for ways to improve quality, reduce costs, and increase reliability. One idea inspires additional thoughts. It's hard to determine who THE leader is because practically every team member exudes initiative, creativity, and follow-through.

Are you in the business of building leaders? If you're not, your organization is likely closer to a "compliant" culture than it needs to be! Team members think of themselves as "followers," and you probably do, too. So, what can you do to move the culture meter in the direction of greater collaboration?

You'll have to change first. Frustrating as that may sound, I think it's true. Please go to my website (address below), click on "Article Archives," and scroll down to "But Why Do I Have to Change First?"

If your colleagues are behaving as compliant followers, often awaiting your direction, it will be hard for them to change. Further, they are not motivated to do so. You will have to establish over time a very different environment. And you can do it, because you have a new desire, you have influence, and you can imagine, better than anyone else in your organization, the vision of what is possible in the future.

****

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach in Atlanta. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. He welcomes your suggestions and questions at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or 770-286-2250.