

Leaders and a Lost Opportunity---Collaboration

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Every day, leaders at every level lose the opportunity to enhance their organizations, and they don't even realize it.

They're not attending to the most powerful influence they have. This 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, most would not know what to do about it.

Before I reveal this powerful characteristic, let me ask you to pause and reflect on the culture of your organization. Imagine that you invite a skilled observer to come and spend the day witnessing interactions and making notes. At the end of the day, you sit down and ask for a debriefing. What perceptions is this unbiased observer likely to share with you about your organization's culture?

Sometimes I'll have a leader ask me, "What exactly do you mean when you refer to my organization's 'culture'?" Unfortunately, that term and what it represents is not 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 over time. It's largely subconscious and tacit, yet 'culture' is what gives every organization its unique 'feel.'

Because culture is so hard to describe, it usually is loosely described as "the way we do things around here."

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 think about what you'd observe as people 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 more 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 think I'm going to do" and then describes the anticipated action. The other person nods and thinks a moment, then says, "That could work. You know, you might want to consider" and then finishes with a variation of that initial idea.

What follows is an exchange of ideas 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.

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

Based on your reaction, I'd know immediately if you indeed have a workforce that values collaboration or 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'd 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 culture of any organization is heavily dictated by the perspectives and behaviors of its leaders. 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.

So, I ask you, when you face a problem, do you provide the solution and tell others what to do to solve 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, 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 for a while?

Your role as a leader is to model the behaviors you desire in your organization. If you'd like to engage the creative capabilities of every member of your team, you'd better be establishing the behaviors I've just described as a norm in your organization. Otherwise, you are losing out on a terrific opportunity!

Dennis Hooper has thirty years of experience in establishing enthusiastically committed workforces. Contact Dennis at 478-988-0237, or send him and e-mail at dhooper2@juno.com. The only thing you have to lose is indifferent compliance!