

Taking Care of Business: Leader, Heal Thyself

By Kristie Darling, Cool Spring Center, Inc.



Cor-po-rate cul-ture: ('kor-p(ə-)rət 'kəl-çər): the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a company or corporation.

Corporate culture – buzz words for sure but different from many catchy slogans – is a phrase that carries a significance many leaders fail to understand. Corporate culture is often confused with a company's mission or the list of values proudly displayed on a plaque in the lobby, but these ideals may or may not be manifest in a company's culture. Although we might believe that our corporate culture influences not much more than how we manage dress-down Friday, the titles we give our employees, or the annual employee picnic, it is, in fact, the culture of an organization that determines the creation or lack of a high performance work force.

Like any type of group sociology, a corporate culture emanates from written and unwritten, conscious and unconscious codes, behaviors, norms, and interpersonal structures. Corporate culture can be easy to recognize, cut in stone, or be fluid and changing, but for good or bad, it is never MIA. How employees feel about coming to work, taking responsibility, and being accountable in their job is primarily influenced by the culture in which they work.

How can this be? Why would the "personality" of a company have such a critical influence on business success and the bottom line?

What is a High Performance Culture?

A recent study concluded that senior executives believe that there are four top requirements in establishing a high performance work force:

1. Attracting and retaining skilled staff,
2. Changing leadership and management behaviors,
3. Improving work force performance, and
4. Changing organizational culture and employee attitudes.

Unfortunately, many leaders do not understand that #4 needs to be #1, generated by #2 to achieve #3. Once we place organizational culture and employee attitudes at the top of the list, leaders can own up to the fact that it is their own behavior that will create the high performance culture they desire.

The people who are responsible for the success of the corporation must understand that a high performance work force can only be achieved through leadership's decisions and behaviors. Intentional focus is required to create the overriding culture in which talented people want to work. When employees at every level are allowed to use their talents and are recognized for their contributions, the entire organization benefits.

Healing begins at the top! When we turn our managers at every level into leaders, we can begin to move through and check off our four requirements:

Leadership behavior > desired culture > talented people > improved performance

Leadership Affects Everything

If climate drives business results, what drives climate? Roughly 50 to 70 percent of how employees perceive their organization's climate can be traced to the actions of one person: the leader.

More than anyone else, the boss creates the conditions that determine people's ability to work well – Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence (2002).

It's all about leadership. Our business climate certainly has a clue because we're spending millions in leadership training programs. If there



are more than 17,000 titles on "leadership" at Amazon.com, and a quick Google search of "leadership" brings up 828 million responses, where's the disconnect here?

When talented employees find themselves working in a stagnant or negative climate, they leave. If a company doesn't have a reputation for being a great place to work, talented, prospective employees won't apply for open positions. How can you develop a high performance work force without talented people? Another realization coming full circle to leadership's primary behavioral role in successful outcomes.

An Engaged Work Force

The Gallup Organization tells us that in the United States:

- 29% of the workforce is ENGAGED,
- 55% is NOT ENGAGED, and
- 16% is ACTIVELY DISENGAGED.

What does it mean for leaders or the corporate culture that less than one third of the people on the payroll actually "show up" in the figurative sense? That every other employee is not listening when leadership speaks? That there are a significant number of people on your team who regularly sabotage your efforts? That the corporate culture does not support the work force, and management is not comprised of leaders who are empowered to turn these statistics around?

It doesn't take much to realize that even a successful organization has the potential to achieve much more if only their people were fully engaged in their work. However, organizational transformation like leadership transformation is a long-term process – not an event or a two-day program. There's not much sense in doing leadership development in a vacuum without the organization itself changing to support leadership's growth. When the two transformations are intentional, in sync, and driven through every layer of the organization, there's a much greater opportunity for a truly engaged work force to emerge.

How to Begin?

First, we need to realize that these transformational processes are experiential in nature. Adult learning is based on emotional as well as intellectual buy-in. When we can immediately begin to use what we're learning to diagnose and solve the next problem, we are much more

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likely to instill that learning into our mode of operation or our skill set. When we are challenged to examine our own and others' critical behaviors, we tackle the issues head on. When we can teach others, we establish ownership of and expertise in those techniques that can improve teams, departments, and even multinational corporations.

In Tom Peters's video, *The Leadership Alliance*, four top leaders are interviewed. One leader interviewed in the video was Vaughn Beals, chairman of Harley Davidson (the last of the American companies to succeed in the highly

competitive motorcycle industry), who revealed a stunning fact. Beals had tried every new leadership product and had spent heavily on his training budget for more than 13 years with no discernable improvement. He finally took a hard look at himself and changed the way he operated, transforming the company into a responsibility-based organization from top to bottom. Only when Beals understood that every one of his employees could be a leader did Harley Davidson turn itself around. He looked quite relaxed and stress free in the video. Maybe it's time to take a look in the mirror. ■