

A Positive Work Culture - brief guide

Organisations are controlled communities. In the face of increasing incidence of psychological distress amongst people at work there is a growing under-performance from organisations. This is largely due to the disconnection between the cultural foundations of organisations and the display of cultural behaviours. This will become more obvious as economic constraints bite hard and personal survival will dominate how managers behave.

The building and sustaining of a Positive Work Culture is a major step towards increasing wellbeing and performance of individuals and organisations. The steps to be taken become the bloodstream of organisations resulting in trust, commitment and engagement of staff to their organisation that produces a result of improved performance and higher quality of service.

The cultural foundations described here will enable leaders to display behaviours and subtle signals that encourage and engage staff from different professional groups to work in harmony for relatively minor investment.

A Positive Work Culture

A Positive Work Culture is built on wellbeing and performance. Building a Positive Work Culture requires attention to be paid to the principal cultural foundations of the organisation – the purpose, the structure, the processes and the behaviours of the managers. If these are built to a specification of virtuous intent, values, psychological contract, trust and commitment, then employee engagement is almost assured.

18 rules of a Positive Work Culture

Purpose

Rule 1 - The purpose of the organisation needs expression as ‘a big idea’ – a simple expression of purpose that is easily understood, and which staff can engage with. The approach is akin to developing a brand, where the brand represents the purpose, and ultimately, the associated culture of the organisation.

Structures

Rule 2 - The architecture of the organisation is a map setting out the relationships between parts of the organisation. All the evidence shows that structures that are as flat as possible are more likely to build commitment and trust, as decisions are more likely to be made by those who are affected by the decision, and are, therefore, more likely to be committed to the decision.

In large organisations, the approach should consider building smaller sub-organisations that are linked by common cultural foundations, policies and processes.

Processes

There are some specific rules that help to build a cultural foundation that promotes trust and commitment. They are:

Rule 3 – ensure staff are correctly trained to be competent at the work they are expected to perform.

Rule 4 – ensure staff are able to develop their skills, knowledge and experience.

Rule 5– ensure that the recruitment process includes the recognition that there are always at least two expectations about a job – the expectation of the applicant and the expectation of the person with the vacancy. A successful recruitment process matches these expectations Recruitment is a showcase of the organisation as a whole, and the processes should include ensuring that all candidates leave the process wishing they could join the organisation. The process should also ensure that candidates are thoroughly examined as to their behaviours as well as their skills, knowledge and experience.

Rule 6 – ensure that pay is fair for the expectations of the job. Employees always have a sense of what is fair, and this should be explored.

Rule 7 – ensure that each job contains challenges. Staff respond positively to challenges that stretch them, as challenges indicate their value to the organisation. Ensure that the challenges produce pressure, but do not continue into strain or stress, as this has the effect of de-valuing the individual.

Rule 8 – ensure that staff work in teams. Teams should be properly constructed of complementary skills, knowledge and experience, where the whole is greater than the sums of the parts, and controlled to ensure they are groups which encourage constructive criticism and where opinions can be expressed without fear of humiliation.

Rule 9 – ensure that communication is always two way, not broadcasts, where the opinion of the recipients of information are encouraged to respond, and the response is replied to Communicating information not relevant to the recipient should be avoided. Communication should, as far as possible, be personally focused, as though engaging in a conversation.

Rule 10 – ensure that staff are involved in the decision making of the organisation, and feel as though they partly ‘own’ the organisation.

Rule 11 – ensure that there is consistency in appraising performance on a regular basis, as part of the bloodstream of controlling the organisation. Performance appraisal is always a discussion with, at least, two points of view. All points of view need to be considered.

Rule 12 – ensure that staff have opportunities for career development, if possible within the same organisation, or on secondment elsewhere. The aim is to demonstrate the value to the organisation of the individual, and to nurture the individual to realise his/her potential.

Rule 13 – ensure that staff are able to complete their assignments or projects without interruption, diversion or repetition. This will demonstrate that their work is secure for the duration of their assignment.

Rule 14 – ensure that controllers provide consistent encouragement to staff.

Rule 15 – ensure that staff are encouraged to be open in offering their opinions, ideas and concerns, without any sense of humiliation or fear of adverse reactions from controllers.

Rule 16 – ensure that the organisation responds positively to domestic crisis.

Behaviours

The cultural display will be the behaviours of managers and the attitudes of staff that need to be focused always on building and sustaining commitment and trust between them. The behaviours will be those that apply the cultural foundations in all aspects of organisational life.

Managers

Rule 17 - The following personal characteristics of managers need to be developed and applied in interactions with staff.

- The demonstration of genuine attentiveness to others
- Trustworthiness
- The demonstration of wisdom
- Assertiveness
- Intelligence with intellectual flexibility
- A sense of humour
- The demonstration of passion for the work of the organisation and the work of staff
- The demonstration of meeting individual needs as they arise
- The demonstration of nurturing staff to realise their potential
- The demonstration of skills to resolve conflicts

Behaviours in interactions between controllers and staff

Rule 18 - The personal characteristics of managers need to be displayed in their behaviour and subtle signals towards staff in all interactions. The following behaviours are those that build and sustain trust and commitment, which results in engagement, wellbeing and performance of individuals, and consequently, the organisation.

- Attentiveness
 - Politeness
 - Courtesy
 - Personal communication
 - Body language
 - Empathy
 - Addressing needs
- Intellectual flexibility
 - Emotional intelligence
 - Negotiating skills
 - Sharing
- Reliability
 - Integrity
 - Clarity
 - Fairness
 - Humility
- Encouraging contribution

Implementing a Positive Work Culture

The starting point is for leaders and managers to listen to their staff. This is achieved in several ways. The most effective is for individual managers to engage with their staff in focus groups, meetings and learning sets to listen to what they have to say about their work and the organisation in which they work. In return, controllers need to discuss their own concerns and ideas, so that staff understand fully their perspectives on working lives.

Staff representative organisations should be encouraged to engage with leaders and managers in critically appraising the working lives of staff and offering ideas that will lead to a Positive Work Culture.

At the same time a staff survey, designed to encourage revealing information about working lives, should be undertaken. The results need to be shared, and actions on the results implemented. Staff surveys must be promoted with genuine interest by managers. Until trust and commitment is established between staff and their organisation it should be expected that staff will want a staff survey to be completed anonymously.

Leaders and managers, at all levels, need to be committed to reviewing and changing, as necessary, the cultural foundations to embed a Positive Work Culture based on wellbeing and performance. Leaders and managers should review the processes required to build a Positive Work Culture and make the necessary changes within their organisations.

The leaders and managers will require training and development in building a Positive Work Culture.

Training and development should adopt a triple loop learning strategy that combines the introduction and training in behaviours with their application in practice. This cycle of training typically involves workshops with learning sets and specific action plans that are reviewed and reinforced in a continuous cycle over an extended period of time, until a Positive Work Culture is embedded in the organisation.

Regular training sessions between managers and staff should be instigated where the cultural foundations are reinforced, and any concerns raised and resolved. A typical example is a weekly 15 minute session between managers and staff on a specific topic relevant to the cultural foundations.

Return on investment

There will be improvements in wellbeing and performance. These may be measured using hard data relating to productivity, quality, profits and costs. Other data that are useful measurements include staff sickness absence and staff turnover rates.

In addition, organisations will gain benefits from:

- Staff satisfaction
- Customer/client satisfaction
- Fewer errors, delays and repeated activities
- Increased skill, knowledge and experience capacity
- Lower use of complaints, grievance, bullying, harassment and tribunal procedures
- An increase in innovation and development of products and services
- A greater resilience to change
- An increase in the energy, inspiration and inquisitiveness of the workforce
- Enhancement in the personal development of the workforce
- A strengthening of personal standards
- An increase in the wider contribution to the organisation from the workforce
- An increase in the stability of the workforce

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