

SYNERGY 5

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3

5

Communication is the spine in your corporate backbone

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Mission and vision is actualised by day-to-day behaviour

The function of the spinal chord is to enable movement by carrying messages from your brain while providing support to your head and limbs, giving protection to the central nervous system, and offering co-ordination and control to your whole body. Without your spine you cannot function to your most comprehensive capability.

In the same way our communication and behaviour represents the backbone of how we operate in organisations. We know that purpose, beliefs and values form the cultural nerve centre for creating direction and guidance but it is the quality and manner of our every day communication that will actually protect, enable and bring to life the vision and principles of an institution.

The true culture of any entity cannot just be described in scientific terms. We can look at production and financial outputs to find tangible evidence of success and sustainability but this may tell us little of the environment - what it is like to work there, or how these results were achieved. So often the language used to describe culture carries an intangible element to it. The number of new and creative products, for example, might measure innovation, but an innovative environment is about how ideas are shared and encouraged. Surely, we might argue, the former only happens because of the latter? Not necessarily so if these outputs are largely the product of a small, specialist team of experts, for example.

When we speak of an 'innovative', 'caring' or 'fun' culture we are attempting to describe the positive experience of being with others and how we interact to be productive. Yet why is a positive culture difficult to create, achieve or at least to maintain consistently? How can it be nurtured and supported while protecting productivity, or more to the point, adding to it comprehensively and extensively?

Want..Do..BE or Be..Do..Want?

Want..Do..BE or Be..Do..Want?



“We need our people to have a behavioural perspective that will support any learning and development initiative going forward”

The fact is that behaviour is inconsistent. We are both emotional and rational animals, often driven by ambition or self-preservation, and by our very make-up we must create all manner of diverse results that can constantly disorient the culture and sense of mutual wellbeing within a corporate environment.

So how can we strengthen the link between the ‘what we are’ and the ‘how we are’ to reinforce the positive culture and higher productivity we seek?

The ‘Want-do be’ formula has suffered in the past from misappropriation by ‘pop’ psychologists. However it does actually offer a quick and yet powerful representation of the challenges we face and how we might learn to overcome them in corporate life.

We know corporate vision and mission statements are standard beacons for future direction and purpose in our organisations; we are also familiar with the practice of disseminating these into strategic goals and tactical action plans. (So far we have the “what we WANT and what we need to DO” part of the formula). This process is then often wrapped with a list of values that represent how we intend to BE. (The last part of the formula).

But how this actually reflects in our behaviour is where the process can be ‘hi-jacked’. It is one thing to accept that ‘fairness’ or ‘being a team player’ are sound and just value factors, but quite a struggle when we are also aiming to ‘be the best’, ‘be innovative’ and deliver ‘the highest quality’.

Medical reports advise that most of us do not look after our spines particularly well. Poor body posture when standing or sitting, for example, accounts for much of the physical pain and discomfort that we gradually begin to experience as we suffer from spinal mis-alignment.

So it is with the quality and focus of our communication at work. The dual mantras of continuous progress and achieving goals can play havoc with our multiple expectations in this regard. Under pressure we begin to prioritise value systems, favouring those that will most obviously and effectively support our desired outcomes. ‘Being the best’ may mean sacrificing the ‘fairness’ code temporarily, for example, and create mis-alignment.

Leadership and management training may partly provide a vehicle for ‘ironing out’ such potential contradictions, helping attendees to understand how the values can be better espoused and ‘co-habit’ in difficult circumstances.



It's a beautiful design and I love looking at it...but is it functional?

It needs to be both

With such training we begin to see the reversal of the formula – more focus on how we need to BE and what we need to DO to become that 'better' leader or manager who marries this with what is WANTED.

Yet here is also where the fault line exists.

Who attends such programmes? Should this 'elite' population alone be trusted to consistently and powerfully live up to the ideals being 'trained', especially when confronted with a world of complex and competing pressures? How often are these programmes re-evaluated and re-hashed anyway, as they become victims of the next 'wonder' theory? This is not an intention to 'rubbish' leadership initiatives, but rather to point out that certain elements of 'personal development' can and should be consistently applied to everyone in the organisation, not just 'leaders' and 'hi-pos', and indeed remain a consistent and 'protected' central spine of training that connects all parties, capable of surviving alongside the plethora of excellent ideas and approaches for improving our effectiveness.

A healthy spine, coupled with a healthy nervous system, is crucial in terms of maintaining whole body health. Imagine your vision is to complete the Marathon des Sables, the equivalent to running a marathon everyday over five days. According to expert 'ultra-runners' it is not so much your fitness that is the greatest contributor to getting to the finishing line but rather your mental health and strength, a large part of which is incentivised by your self-talk and the interaction with fellow competitors - the sense of belonging, of camaraderie and of sharing ideas, advice, concerns and, of course, the same goals. Without this, fatigue sets in more easily, and when you get hot and tired the brain

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In our very day communication, there is a way of getting it more right, more often with more people. We just need to have a robust and practical methodology that clearly reflects human behaviour and which provides a guiding light to the decisions we make



does not work right and neither do the feet. This is not so far from the 'hothouse' of corporate life. How often can we find that the 'goalposts' are changing and that we are in now a different race or starting a new marathon of strategic planning and goal-setting? How often do we feel out of the loop or confused by inconsistent or half-baked messages that leave us exhausted with yet new teams or unexpected challenges and responsibilities? Fatigue will set in, and the willingness to respond positively becomes ever more difficult.



Eddie Izzard, the comedian and entertainer, who ran 27 marathons in 27 days for Sports Relief, talks about the critical need to stay happy and positive by sticking to healthy thoughts and ideas and being able to properly link in to what's around you. In organisations this ability to stay 'linked' to each other is achieved through the quality of our daily behaviour and communication.



In a world of constant change, getting what we want and being the type of people and organisation we want to be requires a modus operandi that everyone is asked to sign up to; essentially, a code of conduct that is clear, flexible, reality-based and manageable. Clear, so that it is both easily understandable and applicable; flexible, so that it provides opportunity for choice and variation according to the context and the audience; reality-based, in that it is practical and measurable; and manageable, so

that it provides not only guidance in multiple working and personal contexts but also room for continuous learning and improvement. It tells us not what to do or say but what to consider and include, to ensure we stay linked!

In addition, it needs to be a model for behaviour that will quickly and seamlessly be absorbed into an organisation's culture; a tool that can act partially as the conscience of the institution, a conduit for consistent awareness and assessment that combines the need for hard-headed decision making and action with due respect and consideration for others. Perhaps the most repetitive fault-line in any organisation is the chronic reaction to continuous change where these facets are not bound together. So often the need for action creates panic, a focus on what needs to happen next to get what we want without threading in the implications for how this will be received and how we might best communicate this. Even then, with change, there will always be 'winners' and 'losers'; so is there any gain investing extra time and effort in how we can best 'grease the skids' and reduce the friction?

Well, yes there is. We cannot expect everyone to like or agree with change but if our beliefs, values and commitment are to remain healthy, we need to feel linked to each other during the process of re-direction or re-birth. An unhealthy spine encourages injury and, eventually, the inability of the body to respond to injury.