The People &
Culture Association

INTERNATIONAL PEOPLE & CULTURE REVIEW

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The People and Culture Association (PCA)

With an introduction from David Liddle and the foreword by Dave Ulrich

ABOUT THE PCA

PCA IN A NUTSHELL

The People and Culture Association provides a global hub for modern people professionals and transformational leaders to explore a wide array of progressive business models and frameworks.

These include systems thinking, design thinking, behavioural science/nudge, alternative dispute resolution (ADR), restorative justice, coaching and mentoring, EDI implementation, organisational design and organisational development, positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, emotional intelligence, principled negotiation, non-violent communication, and many others.

The PCA brings together HR professionals, OD and culture change practitioners, business leaders, HR consultants, mediators, coaches, facilitators, academics, and many others. We offer two levels of membership: memberPRO and corporate partner. You can join the PCA at www.peopleprofessionals.org

- Promotes the development of a Transformational Culture (fair, just, inclusive, sustainable and high performing).

- Connecting people professionals and leaders in a very modern form of network.

- Provides access to Transforming Work videocasts, live blogging, the Culture Conversations, P&C Book Club and more.

- Offers a variety of exciting events to the people & culture profession and business leaders with unique member- only events such as IPCW, conferences, P&C Annual review and more.

- Celebrates people and culture excellence via the annual People and Culture Awards, premiering in late 2023.

- Creates, curates and commissions research and evidence in collaboration with educational and research institutions.

- Enhances the profile of models and techniques such as mediation, coaching, facilitation and restorative justice.

www.peopleprofessionals.org

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INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL PEOPLE AND CULTURE REVIEW 2024
BY DAVID LIDDLE

David is the founder, CEO at The TCM Group and he is the founding president of the People and Culture Association (PCA). David is a 2-time HR Most Influential Thinker and is a member of Thinkers50. David is the author of two best-selling texts. His first book, published in 2017, is entitled: 'Managing Conflict: a practical guide to resolution in the workplace' (Kogan Page/CIPD), and had its 2nd Edition published last year. in 2023. His second book, 'Transformational Culture: develop a person centred organization for improved performance' was shortlisted as 2022 Business Book of the Year. David is currently working on two new texts, one for the Economist entitled 'How to Disagree Well' and the other is titled 'People and Culture'.

The Future of HR Is people and culture

This inaugural edition of People and Culture Review is a truly remarkable compendium crafted by some of the world's leading business thinkers, people practitioners and culture geeks. Each of them is generously sharing their wisdom and expertise from across the areas of HR, people, culture, leadership, wellbeing, engagement and employee experience. Each contribution stands alone as a masterful and compelling analysis. When viewed in aggregate, this review has the potential to reshape the landscape of human resources for many years to come. Thanks to each of them for their wonderful contributions!

I would also like to offer a heartfelt thanks to Jonathan Rodrigues who manages the PCA and who works so hard to create such a superb array of events and activities for our members. I would also like to acknowledge his tireless work as the editor of this inaugural People and Culture Review. On behalf of everyone involved at the PCA, well done and thank you Jonathan!

Why did I establish the PCA?

On a mission to create a global community of people professionals and transformational leaders, the PCA was created in 2021. Since that time, the PCA has grown rapidly and now has a thriving community of members including numerous corporate bodies, all of whom have access to regular events videocasts and book clubs plus extensive research and development in the field. In addition, with the

support of a global advisory board, we launched the inaugural International People and Culture Week this year and it will be running again from 1ˢᵗ May to 7ᵗʰ May 2025. We also set up and ran the People and Culture Awards in 2024 and these will be back bigger and better in 2025.

Introducing a new operating model for HR

The launch of the PCA coincided with the launch of my people and culture operating model which I published in my 2021 text '***Transformational Culture, develop a people centred organization for improved performance'***. This operating model is becoming synonymous with a new and exciting people and culture function.

The evolution a modern-day people and culture function is well underway. People and business leaders increasingly recognize the intrinsic value of fairness, inclusion, compassion, transparency, and dialogue. They recognise that treating their people well (in a humane and human way) is synonymous with a higher performing workplace, enhanced employee experience, and world leading customer experience. To those of us who have been working in this field for a while, that's stating the obvious. But the reality for many people, in workplaces across our globe, is one of autocracy, retribution, reactivity, competitiveness, fear, blame, bullying, ambiguity and power over rather than power with. So, what does this type of people and culture model look like in practice, how can organisations make the shift and what does HR need to do to create the happy, healthy, and harmonious workplaces that our people and our organizations need?

The People and Culture Operating Model offers a blueprint for leaders and people professionals to support the ongoing process of HR transformation. The operating model comprises four interconnected pillars, which help HR and culture professionals to define their purpose & objectives and embed change.

People and culture pillar 1: People

This first pillar encapsulates the work the people and culture function must do to create a person-centred workplace, where the values of the organisation used to align the needs of the business with the needs and aspirations of the workplace. Creating such an alignment requires an unwavering commitment to dialogue, engagement, flexibility, understanding, challenge and courage.

Of course, people and culture practitioners cannot do this alone. They need to play an enabling role, working alongside leaders and multiple other stakeholders to shape the daily actions and interactions that take place in our diverse, fragmented, complex and digital workplaces.

People and culture pillar 2: Culture

Under the second pillar, is the work that people and culture professionals need to do to ensure the culture of the organization is fair, just, inclusive, sustainable, and high performing. A suitable place to start is with the establishment of a cross-functional transformational culture hub, bringing together key stakeholders from within the business. The purpose of the hub is to support leaders and managers in the drive to bring about culture change.

Key activities the culture hub might include:

- Using data and evidence to design and measure the culture, the climate within teams and divisions, and the impact of people within the organization. The culture can be measured across various axes: brand and reputation, Employee Experience (EX), Customer Experience (CX), well-being, engagement and inclusion, and business performance.

- View employees as the customers and consumers of HR processes. Involve them in their design and seek and act on their feedback. In other words, people professionals and business leaders must listen to their customers and ensure they have a voice in the systems and processes they are part of.

- Developing the key skills (for themselves as practitioners, and amongst leaders and managers) that will underpin the culture change process. Design thinking, positive psychology, coaching, emotional intelligence, behavioural science, principled negotiation, non-violent communication, and appreciative inquiry, to name just a few.

People and pillar 3: Strategy

Under this third pillar, people and culture professionals use data and evidence to co-create a strategic narrative that enables individual, collective, and organizational brilliance. We are living in tumultuous, fast-changing times, and organizations are having to navigate volatile social, political, and environmental pressures. A key role of the people and culture function is to ensure the organization is agile and that its people can adapt quickly to changing internal and external landscapes, such as digitalization, hybrid working, employee activism, and climate and economic emergencies.

People and culture pillar 4: Justice

Recent newspaper headlines are witness to the high levels of conflict and toxicity we are seeing in organizations. This comes at a high price.

Bodies such as CIPD, SHRM and Acas suggest that the costs of conflict and workplace issues run into tens, if not hundreds of billions of pounds or dollars each year. The human cost of conflict is harder to measure but can be equally, if not even more significant. The misery, the stress, the anxiety, the wasted time, and the frustration. If you've experienced it (as so many have) you'll know exactly what I mean!

HR's reliance on outdated and outmoded policies and procedures for dealing with conflicts, performance, whistleblowing and conduct has had a large part to play in many of the problems in our workplaces. They sow the seeds of division, and they act as the incubators of toxicity. Our traditional HR policies are reactive, reductive, corrosive, combative and harmful. They offer a mirage of justice and illusion of fairness. In other words, the policies which have been designed to protect us and hold us to account are, paradoxically, the root cause of so much toxicity and harm in our workplaces. Thankfully, a light is now being shone on this paradox and work is being done to correct it as so many of the essays in People and Culture Review highlight:

The emergence of an exciting new justice paradigm – transformative justice

Under the 'justice' pillar, people and culture professionals and leaders promote and sustain a culture of open dialogue, procedural rigour, accountability, restorative justice, and learning - transformative justice. This model of Transformative Justice should include:

- Embedding an over-arching Integrated People Policy (IPP) such as TCM's award wining Resolution Framework™ for resolving issues at work. Burberry, the BBC and HSBC are just some of the organisations which are using this kind of framework to build trust and embed a just, fair, restorative and legally compliant approach for resolving complex and serious workplace issues.

- Acting as the enabler of an exciting new social contract between unions and management.

- Integrating insight innovation and learning from the application of workplace justice processes. This ensures that the policies of our workplaces become the drivers of continuous improvement, individual brilliance, collective performance and business success.

An inflection point for HR

This is a moment of great opportunity, but also one of great risk for HR. If it is unable to achieve at least some of the above, it may become increasingly marginalized, automated, and HR will become little more than a high-level administrative function. Conversely, if HR can grasp this opportunity to transform, it could represent a watershed moment. With courage, energy, tenacity, and perseverance, this could become a moment where the new people and culture function becomes one of the most strategically important functions in the modern organization.

Now onto my fourth book, I am penning '***People and Culture. A practical guide for HR professionals and business leaders'***. In this new text (due to be published by Kogan Page in July 2025), I am expanding on my people and culture operating model, and I am developing a practical blueprint for people and business leaders to help them turbo change their function, their teams, and their organisations.

FOREWORD. A CULTURE PLAYBOOK
BY DAVE ULRICH

Dave Ulrich is the Rensis Likert Professor at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan and Partner at the RBL Group. He has written over 30 books and 100's of articles, consulted with half of the Fortune 200, and spoken in over 90 countries on topics related to how human capability (talent + leadership + organization + HR) creates stakeholder value. He has received a variety of recognitions and awards for his insights (theory, research, and practice). His commitment to learning innovative ideas and sustainable impact includes frequent LinkedIn posts. conference talks, podcasts, webinars, and articles.

The study of culture is not new. In a classic book, anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn identified 164 definitions of culture…. in 1952!

The study of organizational culture has also received enormous attention with the classic maxim: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Although Peter Drucker did not actually say it, he and many others have clearly supported this notion, with many popular books titled as "Culture (fill in the blank_____)":

- Code
- Wins
- Decoded
- Is King
- Map
- Question
- Playbook
- By Design
- Renovation
- Change
- Rules
- and so forth

This enormous attention to culture means that "it" matters and will continue to be relevant to business and HR leaders. This volume offers incredible insights from colleagues who have studied and shaped culture. The range of ideas will be a robust menu for those who want to go beyond the superficial ideas to specific actions.

To guide you into this book, the essays will help you know why culture matters, what culture means, and how to create or change a culture.

Why Culture Matters

Everyone readily accepts that organization "culture" exists and has impact. Toxic cultures have dysfunctions of hostility, mistrust, selfishness, scarcity thinking, and insensitive leaders who lower productivity, employee retention, strategic reinvention, investor confidence, and customer satisfaction. Abundant cultures have the opposite positive effect. Creating the right culture will enable organizations to flourish and win in the marketplace.

The essays in this volume will help you present the business case for culture.

What Culture Means

As noted above, "culture" has many definitions, even in organization settings. Let me suggest three historical waves of looking at organization culture and an emerging fourth wave (see figure 1).

Right Culture: identity, brand, reputation with outside-in focus

Patterns/Norms: how things are done around here; implicit rules and ways of working

Systems/Climate: how work systems (information, decision, diversity, accountability, people) impact employees

Values/Behaviors: what matters, often core personal and organizational values that affect employee and leader behaviors
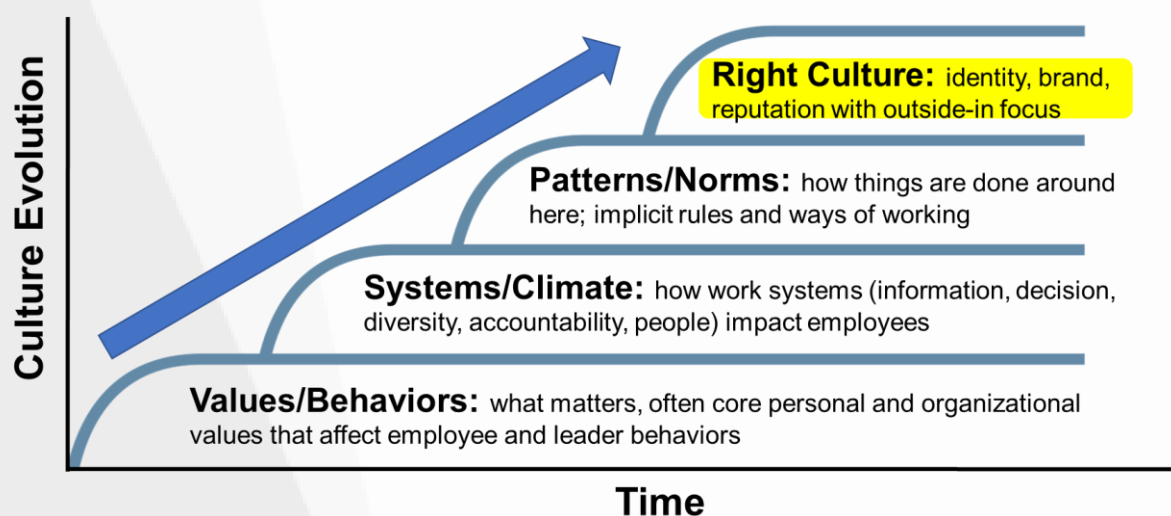
Figure 1: Evolving View of Organization Culture

Wave 1: Culture as values and behaviors. Individuals and organizations have values that shape behavior. These values can be identified as an organization's culture, and the behaviors may be tracked to determine the cultural type.

Wave 2: Culture as systems or climate. A company culture shows up in how information, decisions, diversity, accountability (and other processes) are managed.

Wave 3: Culture as patterns or norms. Anyone entering a company recognizes that unspoken rules or expectations of how work is done. These patterns become accepted ways of working. All of these three waves of culture (values, systems, and patterns) focus on what happens inside an organization. In some nomenclatures, they are the "roots" of the tree and are embedded in stories, history, and rituals, both spoken and unspoken. These internal definitions of culture thrive when employees are together to share values, work processes, and experience common norms.

Wave 4: Culture as identity in the marketplace. An emerging view of culture is to ensure that it is the "right" culture, which means that the culture inside an organization creates value for stakeholders outside (customers, investors, and communities). In this outside-in view, culture is about the value of the values to a customer or investor and the extent to which internal systems and norms increase customer share, investor confidence, or community reputation. This outside-in view of culture is less about the underlying roots off a tree (which are often difficult to change) and more about the leaves of the tree, which metaphorically change in different seasons. As you read this volume, you will discover your definition of culture and how it shows up in your organization.

How to Create or Change a Culture

Like the colleagues in this volume, I have been involved with numerous culture change transformations. More often than not, they start with laudatory rhetoric but then fizzle with few sustainable changes. When we have seen culture transformation succeed, it starts with the business . case for culture (why culture matters), then uses the outside-in definition of culture (what culture means), then gets implemented in five steps (see figure 2).
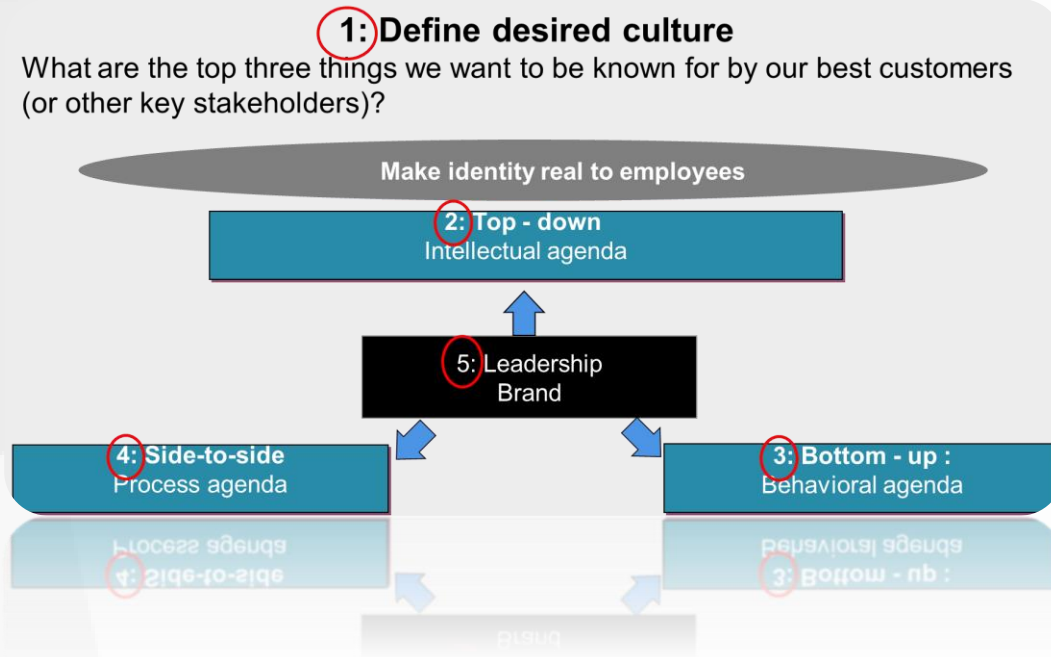
Figure 2: Five Steps to Implementing a Culture Transformation

Step 1: Define the desired culture. Ask internal leaders and external customers what your organization should be "known for" to be effective. This identity becomes synonymous with the desired brand that encourages customers to buy and investors to invest. Work to create a high unity (over 80 percent) on the answer to this question.

Step 2: Build an intellectual, top-down agenda. The desired culture needs to be communicated over and over and over again. This shared cultural message may appear in internal speeches, town hall meetings, social media, bulletins, and other communication mechanisms. Simple and redundant messages shape an intellectual agenda of what the desired culture should be.

Step 3: Encourage a behavioral, bottom-up agenda. Cultural ideas and messages flow down— behaviors and actions flow up. Ask employee groups throughout your organization what they can do more of or less of to make the desired culture real in their day-to-day activities. Cultural messages change employee behaviors.

Step 4: Design and deliver a process, side-to-side agenda. Culture gets woven into organization process around people (hiring, training, paying), strategic decision making, resource allocation, and other governance choices. The organization processes should reinforce the desired culture.

Step 5: Create a leadership brand. We have proposed that the right leadership competencies should be aligned to promises made to customers, creating a leadership brand. Employees often do what leaders model, and when leaders think and act consistent with customer expectations, their work reinforces the desired culture. We have encouraged firms creating advertising programs to allocate a percent of this external marketing budget to internal leadership training on the same issues.

These five steps are not a perfect script for the culture change agenda, but they suggest a simple (not simplistic) playbook to approach culture change that creates value for customers and turns cultural aspirations into daily actions. The essays in this volume offer specific actions for each of these steps so that you can create a cultural change plan for your organization.

Implications

So, what should you get from this volume of exceptional essays:

- Don't just talk about culture ideals, tie them to customer and investor value so that culture has marketplace impact.
- Don't just diagnose what is happening with culture but offer guidance about what should happen to create the right culture.
- Don't measure culture with rhetoric but with results from employees, strategy, customers, and investors.
- Don't let culture become an abstraction but a set of concrete and integrated activities built around intellectual, behavioral, and process actions.
- Don't hesitate to make sure that leaders at all levels think, act, and feel consistent with the desired culture.

Culture matters and it can be managed!

TRANSFORMING CULTURE AT WELSH AMBULANCE SERVICE TRUST (WAST).

BY ANGELA LEWIS AND SARAH DAVIES

Angie is a People and Culture expert, specialising in culture transformation, effective change management and colleague engagement. Angie's 34 years' experience in the HR profession and 20 years' experience focussing on people and culture have helped numerous organisations optimise their HR strategies and transform organisational cultures. Through her rich professional experiences, Angie has developed a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing modern workplaces. She is incredibly passionate about people and strives to centre organisational focus on its most valuable resource – its people.

Sarah is a rising star in the field of People and Culture, with a focus on change and engagement. With 20 years' experience within the People and Culture Directorate at Welsh Ambulance Services University NHS Trust (WAST), she brings a wealth of knowledge, expertise and strong connections. Working closely with Angie, Sarah is playing a pivotal role in shaping organisational culture at WAST, driving initiatives that promote colleague engagement and involvement. She is passionate about change management and impactful communications and her insights and creative flair have been key in engaging colleagues in this crucial agenda.

In the dynamic context of today's workplace, where agility, adaptability and a strong organisational culture are crucial, the role of People and Culture professionals has never been more important. At "**WAST**" (Welsh Ambulance Services University NHS Trust), our journey towards developing, implementing and embedding our People and Culture Plan has been a testament to our commitment to creating a safe workplace, where all of our people experience a strong sense of belonging and are able to make meaningful contributions. Rooted in our vision for WAST, our Plan is shaped by current challenges and guided by the voices and experiences of our incredible people.

Our context is unique, bringing a range of challenges and complexities that shape the essence of the organisation; these include a diverse range of roles, a predominantly mobile workforce and a dynamic environment in which decisions have far-reaching – often system-wide – impacts and reverberations. Recent safety and culture reviews across our sector have shone a light on deep-rooted, systemic

cultural issues and despite the critical nature of our work, our cultural transformation work is a top priority for us.

Developing Our Plan: Vision-Inspired and Conversation-Driven

Our journey began with a clear vision - to create an inclusive, innovative, and collaborative workplace that empowers every individual to 'be their best'. This vision is a living, breathing concept, inspired by the challenges we face and the aspirations we hold. One of our first key milestones on this journey was the rebranding of our Directorate from "Workforce and OD" to "People and Culture". This change symbolised a fundamental shift in our approach, placing our people at the centre of our focus.

To ensure its relevance and resonance, we engaged in meaningful conversations with our people across the Trust at all levels and within all disciplines. Listening became our compass. We constantly sought opportunities to gain feedback, recognising that the strength of our plan lay in the insights of those who would live it daily. Through informal and formal discussions, observation and data analysis, we gleaned invaluable perspectives and gained a good understanding of culture at WAST – both those elements we need to cherish and those we need to improve. This inclusive approach not only shaped the basis of our plan but also engendered a sense of ownership and belonging across the organisation, laying a solid foundation for implementation and delivery.

Consultation: Refinement through Collaboration

We know that the best ideas emerge through collaboration. Armed with the insights from our initial conversations, we commenced a process of refinement in collaboration with our people. Every suggestion, critique and recommendation was actively considered and this collaborative approach infused our plan with a richness that could only come from diverse voices and the evident passion of our people, coming together in pursuit of a common goal.

Our plan evolved iteratively and continues to be refined and adjusted in response to intelligence we gather from our people on an ongoing basis. This consultative process ensures that we are focussing on addressing pertinent issues; it also builds trust and transparency within the organisation, both of which are crucial to the success of our Plan.

Implementing Our Plan: Communication as the Cornerstone

With a carefully crafted and Board-approved plan at the ready, we turned our focus towards implementation. Recognising that effective communication is essential for any transformational endeavour, we developed a robust communications strategy. Central to this strategy was the adoption of a segmented approach, tailoring information for our various stakeholders and ensuring we maximised every engagement opportunity.

From live engagement sessions and videos to posters, screen-savers and digital badges, we employed an array of channels to ensure that our message resonated across the Trust. The pivotal element of our communication strategy, however, rested on a visual depiction of our People and Culture Plan: our "Rich Picture".

This visual tool proved to be a highly effective engagement tool; it is a catalyst for discussion, a visual framework for our activities and a beacon of our shared vision. It serves as a tangible reminder of our collective aspirations, prompting conversations, sparking ideas and aligning our efforts towards a common purpose. It serves as a visual reminder of our journey, helping bring people along with us and keeps energy focussed on achievement of our goal.

Our Culture Champions and networks also play a critical role as early adopters of culture change in action. These passionate individuals are our culture ambassadors, driving enthusiasm and commitment throughout the Trust. Their dedication and proactive approach have been instrumental in bringing our People and Culture Plan to life, inspiring colleagues to embrace the transformative journey ahead.

Metrics: Tracking Progress with Precision

At WAST, we recognised the importance of developing robust quantitative and qualitative metrics to gauge the impact and effectiveness of our People and Culture Plan. These metrics, ranging from network membership to sickness absence rates and appraisal conversations to qualitative data gained from Moving-On Interviews and pulse surveys, are indicators of our cultural evolution. Reported on frequently to our Executive Leadership Team, our People and Culture Committee and Trust Board, this narrative of progress reflects the voices of our people, offering evidence of impact and allowing us to review effectiveness and adapt with agility.

Embedding Our Plan: From Desk Document to Day-to-Day

True transformation extends beyond plans and metrics; it resides in the DNA of our everyday actions. At WAST, we are committed to helping our people understand that culture is what we say, how we act, how we make decisions, and how we treat one another.

Embedding our People and Culture Plan involves instilling these values into the DNA of our organisation. It means creating a culture where collaboration is celebrated, diversity is embraced and innovation is nurtured. Through targeted initiatives, ongoing evaluation and leadership development, we are taking steps towards realisation of our vision, collecting feedback from our people at every opportunity.

Helping our colleagues see and understand the connections across this broad agenda is imperative. To do this, we share visual representations, for example, the following, which shows how our cultural transformation initiatives are working together to disrupt the status quo:
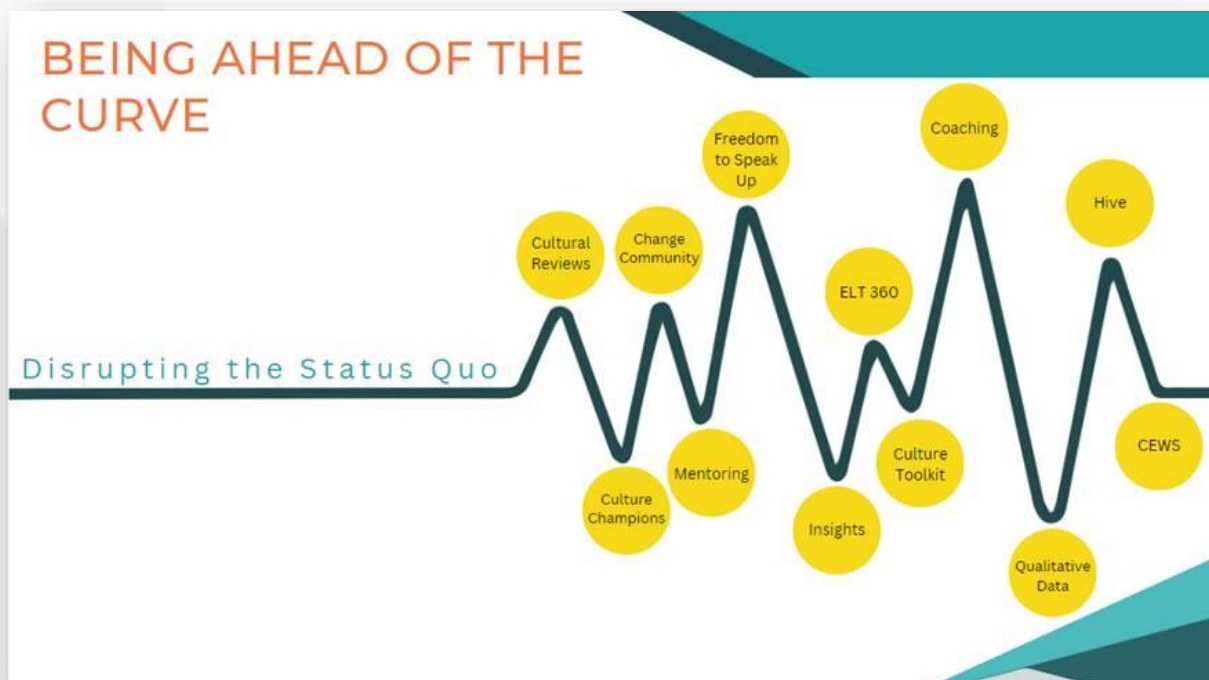
ELT 360: Executive Leadership Team 360-degree feedback exercise

**CEWS: Cultural Early Warning Score Tool*

***Hive: pulse survey platform*

We start small, iterate and adjust, reflect feedback and suggestions and positively reinforce progress when we see it, instilling in our leaders the confidence to support us.

Managing Expectations: A Marathon, Not a Sprint

Cultural transformation is not a quick fix; it is a journey of perseverance and patience. At WAST, we understand the importance of managing expectations and made sure that this featured clearly in our communications approach. We have been transparent with our people, helping them understand that meaningful change takes time and real, ongoing effort and there will be bumps in the road .

We have set the stage for realistic expectations, acknowledging that challenges may arise, and setbacks may occur. By communicating openly about the journey ahead and the challenges we face, we are building resilience, trust and understanding. We are preparing our people for the long game, knowing that the rewards of a vibrant, inclusive culture far outweigh the hurdles along the way.

Change Management: Ensuring Meaningful Impact

In order to navigate this transformative journey, we have adopted a robust change management approach. Every initiative and every cultural shift is guided by a well-connected plan that ensures it lands effectively and resonates authentically with our people.

Our change management framework is also designed to empower our people to be ambassadors of change and to champion our cultural evolution from within. Through targeted engagement, support and leadership alignment, we are creating a ripple effect of positive change that is permeating every corner of WAST.

Conclusion: A Culture of Growth, Coaching and Curiosity

In the ever-evolving workplace, cultivation of a positive organisational culture is imperative. At WAST, our People and Culture Plan is our vehicle for achieving our vision of a workplace where all of our people are safe and feel a strong sense of belonging and autonomy.

Through a vision inspired by our challenges, conversations driven by our people and a relentless commitment to excellence and professionalism, we are shaping an environment where innovation flourishes, collaboration thrives and diversity is celebrated. As People and Culture professionals, we stand at the forefront of this cultural transformation, guiding, empowering, and inspiring every step of the way.

Our People and Culture Plan is a promise - a promise to nurture a culture where every one of our people can unleash their full potential, where everyone experiences a strong sense of belonging and where the spirit of collaboration propels us towards a brighter future. We're not just shaping culture; we're shaping the future.

IS YOUR ORGANISATION GEN Z READY?

BY BETH MILLER

Beth Miller is a Senior Lecturer and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Association; she is also an Associate Member of the CIPD. At De Montfort University, Beth teaches Managing Employment Relations and Managing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Beth also delivers a programme on Workplace Conflict Resolution at the Ciffop Business School, which is part of the University of Paris. Her research areas explore the causes of high workplace attrition and the role of individual resilience. Prior to working in higher education, Beth has worked in the primary sector and has been a Headteacher.

As Gen Z, begin to populate the contemporary labour market, Human Resources need to be considering and developing strategies to create workplaces that motivate this new cohort of employees to ensure productivity and loyalty.

Being a university lecturer, teaching on a Human Resource Management programme, is a two-way process and as such I believe I am in a unique position that allows me to help shape the new generation of HR, but to also understand what Gen Z are looking for in future employment and from future employers. This short article aims to deliver awareness in relation to the question about what Gen Z are looking for in their future careers and future employers. By sharing the insights of my communication with a small group of students who belong to the Gen Z cohort and revealing the responses of students, when asked what was most important when selecting an organisation to apply to and what their hopes were once, they had hopefully secured their dream job.

According to a study, carried out by Deloitte US, in 2023, Gen Z are quickly becoming the highest population in the contemporary workplace and will therefore inevitably begin to have impact on workplace culture; nationally and internationally. Experiences that have influenced their childhood and teenage years will affect their expectations of employment and employers. This aspect was

articulated back to 1991 in Strauss and Howe's Generational Cohort Theory. This theory stated that a generation is formed within, approximately, a twenty-year birth span with members being shaped by the social events that occurred during the formative years of childhood and adolescence.

> **Gen Z**, perhaps more than previous generations, have had to adapt to a rapid pace of change that has had impact on their personal and social development.

Perhaps more importantly Gen Z are the generation who have had their education and examinations interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent 'lockdown', this was a phenomenon not experienced by any other generation. A recent report by Jessica Wang (n.d.) of the multinational recruitment company Hays acknowledges that Gen Z have been hindered in the normal practice of passing examinations and then gaining employment, due to the cancellation of a percentage of said examinations and more limited job opportunities. The report published by Hays also highlights those members of Gen Z, more than any previous generation, are more aware of diversity, mental health, ethical behaviours and issues relating to sustainability, and thus look for employers that demonstrate awareness and dedication in relation to these matters.

Previous research by Sparrow (2017), focussing on the needs of Gen Z in the workplace express those employers who wish to capitalise on the benefits Gen Z bring to their organisations need to understand that being technologically 'savvy' and efficient with social media platforms has empowered this cohort of employees as they are more aware of inequalities, mental health and the need for sustainability. Indeed, a survey conducted by LinkedIn 2023 found that 90% of Gen Z would leave their current job to take up a position with an organisation that better matched their personal values. Furthermore, out of this 90%, half of them stated that even if the employer of the organisation, that didn't match their personal values offered them a pay rise to remain, while they would reconsider the proposal they would probably still opt to leave if their personal values could not be substantiated (May, 2023).

The emphasis on employers meeting the personal values of Gen Z is a recurring theme that is highlighted in research that has been carried out in relation to what this cohort of employees expect from the organisations they work for. The article by Deloitte US (2023) mentioned in the previous paragraph emphasises that Gen Z appear to be split between the importance of remuneration and work that embodies the values of being 'good global citizens'. Importantly, the article written by

Deloitte US (2023) is keen to point out that Gen Z are influenced by employers who 'walk the talk', whose actions speak louder than words. Therefore, companies need to be demonstrating their commitment to the societal and ecological challenges, about which they publicly pronounce to be proactive.

Previous research reviewed, in this article, regarding how employers can attract and retain Gen Z has highlighted the need for organisations to match the personal values held by individuals. However, as mentioned near the start of this current article Gen Z have been affected and influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown and such experience will impact the work expectations of this generational cohort. Such events have prompted new patterns of workplace behaviour and have established that workplaces can be flexible, for example, the requirement for employees to be physically present in the workplace is not always an essential factor, for most occupations. Therefore, Gen Z are more inclined to look for employers who can offer flexibility and outwardly consider the mental health of their employees.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) article (20230, as well as the research by Deloitte US, on engaging Gen Z mentions the need for flexibility and the offer of hybrid working as a strategy to consider (Sparrow, 2017 and Deloitte US, 2023). Of interest, however, is the emphasis on mental health awareness and the need for mentoring schemes. Mentoring schemes to support the integration and development of Gen Z employees has been acknowledged by a large number of researchers examining the strategies need to engage with Gen Z. Gaining access to a mentee who is experienced and has a higher level of leadership or management experience, will increase the chances of not only retaining Gen Z employees, but will also provide a platform for these employees to share knowledge and creativity that will have benefit for the whole organisation (Deepika et. al., 2023).

Considering the views that have been expressed by various contributors to the debate on how to engage Gen Z in the workplace, I decided to see what I could collect from communicating with a group of final year undergraduate students, studying either human resource management or business. I asked an equal number of male and female, racially diverse group of students, who volunteered to participate, what they will be looking for when considering future employment and employers. I also asked a supplementary question regarding once in employment, what would the employer need to offer to motivate and engage them.

Remarkably, the responses that I obtained did not differ too radically from the findings of previous research hitherto communicated. The responses from the students, who participated in this study, will now be reviewed. The first column in the table below highlights the key themes that the students in this study identified. The final column indicates the percentage frequency each theme was acknowledged in the participant responses.

Table: Engaging Gen Z at the workplace

THEMES	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F	Student G	Student H	%
Flexibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100
Work-Life Balance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100
Wellbeing	Yes	Yes						Yes	37.5
Mentoring	–	–		Yes			Yes		25
Job Development	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	75
Ethical Values	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100
Collaboration	Yes	Yes				Yes	Yes		50
Communication	–	Yes	Yes				Yes	Yes	50
Intrinsic Reward	–	–	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		62.5

The above table illustrates the responses of the participants of the short survey.

The importance of work-life balance and the opportunity to work flexibly, along with organisational proactivity in regards the ethical values were key motivators for the Gen Z students participating in this study. The students expressed that well-being initiatives, such as the option to flexible and hybrid working were essential when they were deciding on which organisation to apply to.

> *"It's important for me to have a good balance between work and personal life, so I'd appreciate employers who support well-being and offer flexibility." (Student B)*
>
> *"Work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible scheduling, remote work options and support for personal wellness, is essential for me." (Student E)*

Further, they were adamant that an organisation needed to demonstrate that they valued and respected the well-being of their employees, providing support schemes and clear communication on job expectations. Mentoring schemes were referred to directly by one of the students in relation to well-being, but generally mentoring was associated with learning and development. Another, key prerequisite for the participants of this study was for the organisation to outwardly display 'strong ethical values' and that they had a commitment to corporate social responsibility.

> *"I care about doing the right thing, so I'd be drawn to organisations with strong ethical values & a commitment to social responsibility". (Student A)*
>
> *"I would want to work for an organisation that has a positive and inclusive organisational culture, that fosters collaboration and respect for all employees". (Student D)*

The students explained they would be more inclined to work for an organisation who could demonstrate 'strong ethical values', for example, outwardly supporting diversity and inclusion. Further, an attractive organisation, would be one that demonstrated awareness of the impact their organisation was having on the environment and could demonstrate their plans to reduce waste, carbon emissions and to both recycle and upcycle resources. This is consistent with the finding by Deloitte US (2023), the students in this study, also stressed the importance of 'walking the talk'. Intrinsic reward was referred to as having some influence on the choice of organisation and one student said that this included the pension scheme as today's generations need to ensure that they protect their futures, financially. The other two themes that this study identified was the importance

of collaborative teams and good communication. There was one interesting statement made by one of the students that doesn't appear to have been referred to in the other studies cited in this article related to respect:

> *"Of course, salary plays a large factor too, if a job advert says 'competitive' I'd rather not apply because the application processes are EXTREMELY time-consuming. So, if an employer does not respect my time enough to tell me their complete offering, I'm not going to waste my time applying."*
> *(Student C)*

Despite this being a small study, it has identified organisational characteristics that are important to Gen Z and these are the traits that members of this generation are looking for in the organisations they opt to work for. The emergence of Gen Z in the contemporary workplace will support organisations to continue to develop and remain productive in subsequent years, they are the experts and leaders of tomorrow. Therefore, can HR afford to overlook the aspirations of the workplace championed by Gen Z? The answer is simple, NO. It is therefore essential to embrace the objectives of Gen Z to ensure that employers continue to motivate and engage this generation of employees to ensure that organisations can reap the benefits of what these younger colleagues have to offer.

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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LEADERSHIP – THE VALUE OF AN OPPOSABLE MIND

BY CINDY VALLANCE

Currently working as Employee Experience Lead at City of London Corporation, Cindy Vallance also brings senior leadership experience from large and complex organisations in higher education, the arts, and commercial sectors to her people and culture writing. Cindy's experience spans strategic organisational and leadership development, executive coaching and consultancy. Cindy was formally educated in fine arts, business and psychology. Having lived in the UK for the past 16 years and of Canadian Métis indigenous identity, she forefronts inclusive, strengths-based, systems thinking and values-led, boundary spanning approaches in her work.

Keywords: *Opposable Mind; Creative Resolution*; *Feedback; Opinions; Listening; Understanding; Compromise; Common Goal; Disagreements; Integrative Thinking; Holistic Solutions and more…*

A defining physical characteristic of humans is our opposable thumbs. While not fully unique to humans, opposable thumbs do enable people to grasp, hold and use objects in ways that would not be possible without them. The same can be true of an opposable mind. The idea of an opposable mind was introduced by Canadian management thinker, Roger Martin, in his book: *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*. This is one of my most treasured books; one that was gifted to me by my employer years ago when I moved from Canada to the UK. The handwritten inscription reads: "*Cindy, I think you are "opposable" in the positive sense! I hope you find this monograph interesting considering your work and the discussions we've had on creativity.*"

Like me when I first saw this title, you might be wondering what an opposable mind is.
Martin explains it as:

"the ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each."

Essentially, it's tackling a problem or challenge by first considering the best features from the choices at hand, not leaning to one solution or another, but holding both lightly and with humility. This step then enables entirely novel solutions to appear rather than simply choosing from what appear to be the best features from two options. In a world of troubling polarities and binary thinking, this idea has never been more important.

In the workplace, this could involve welcoming ideas and feedback in the face of a new organisational aim. Truly listen and collect all the ideas put forward from your own experience and that of your team. Consider all ideas of equal value regardless of where they come within the organisational hierarchy. This approach enables you to tap into more options and better solutions. It will also build habits that eventually become cultures encouraging creativity, belonging, and inclusion.

An opposable mind can be brought to bear when facing a tough choice. You have two candidates in the final running for a new senior role. You are struggling to choose between them since they both would bring capabilities that the organisation needs. Being unable to choose may mean that it's time to stop the process completely and take stock. Perhaps the role profile has highlighted equally important but widely varying requirements that will likely never be found in one person. If you choose one over the other, you could set the chosen candidate up to fail since they will fall short on the experience, approach, or knowledge that they don't demonstrate.

Instead, it may make more sense to take a step back and revisit the role profile. The result very well might be to create two roles – either filling them concurrently (if they are genuinely equally important than often the budget will be found), or one role profile with more realistic criteria that is filled first and with a conscious and realistic understanding of what is most urgent and important within the organisation at the time.

Like any muscle, we can develop our opposable mind.

For example, in large and complex organisations, interests between organisational departments can diverge, creating competition rather than collaboration. Instead of arguing about whether limited staff

> "When we are faced with a challenge that seems to present only binary options…"

development budgets should be centralised or decentralised, in what situations can both work? We know that those who are closest to specialist professional and technical training will be in the best position to find the right solutions for their people. At the same time, broader development – for instance, a coaching programme or an inclusive leadership programme, will often benefit from the economies of scale and the cross-functional learning that comes from bringing together disparate individuals from across the organisation to learn from each other.

Instead of seeing the solution to disagreements as compromises, think about how both parties can gain something by working together towards a common goal. And if we can't achieve a full solution just yet, perhaps we can at least take one positive step forward on a challenging issue. An example might be in the highly contested and sensitive area of equality, diversity, and inclusion where beliefs are strong, and values led. In these cases, considering a commonly held goal or outcome, while simultaneously providing a forum for respectful and dignified debate and perspective sharing, can provide a direction of travel that helps achieving that outcome feel less a compromise and more a mutual agreement. David Liddle's *Managing Conflict: a practical guide to resolution in the workplace* is a terrific primer on this approach.

Instead of relying on tried and true 'go to' professional resources for all our problem solving, we can intentionally mix the fuel to our brains: particularly by engaging with the work of various kinds of thinkers. For instance, in considering how to better understand the challenges of divergent perspectives and lived experiences while retaining the sense that solutions are possible, I recently read the insightful and powerful poetry book *teeth in the back of my neck* by Monika Radojevic, the inaugural winner of the #Merk Books New Writers' Prize as a counterpoint to *Hope*, the Prix Pictet essay and photography collection that points us to the inspiration we need to act to solve the greatest challenges and issues of our times.

In conclusion, an opposable mind in effect requires us to develop our integrative thinking capabilities where we combine multiple and disparate elements to create holistic solutions. The problems we face

are not insurmountable; solutions can be found - but only by keeping our minds and hearts open to creative solutions.

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CULTURE CHANGE: THE JOY OF… PROCESS?

BY DR. EMMA LANGMAN

Dr Emma Langman, a project director at AECOM, specialises in organisational transformation. She has over 20 years' international experience in various countries, sectors and roles, ranging from engineer to HR manager. Known for her compassionate resilience and commitment to including marginalized groups, Emma particularly advocates for neurodiversity. An AuDHDer (Autistic with ADHD), Emma applies her 'systems thinking mind' to simplifying complex issues and ensuring everyone can co-create solutions. Lover of metaphors and of data, she lives by two 'freedom rules': "if in doubt, choose the door that leaves the most doors open" and "if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing. Do it better next time". Emma loves supporting leaders to create inclusive, high performing teams where people can 'survive and thrive in a VUCA world'.

Keywords: *Employee Engagement; Productivity; Decision-Making; Continued Learning; Culture; Organisational Climate; Performance; Talent Retention; Equity; Diversity; Inclusion; Psychological Safety; Processes; Communication; Dispute Prevention and more…*

Processes are not a sexy idea

The world "process" is perhaps not one that is readily associated with excitement. However, in the next few pages, I am certain that you will come to look at them in a new light. Indeed, you just might, like me, come to believe that they are a brilliant and exciting tool for creating healthy, happy and highly productive workplaces. Not convinced? Then this is the article for you!

Let's be honest, "processes" are not the most exciting idea, for most people, at least. I contend that this may be because the most commonly associated verb is "follow". In a bid for consistency, efficiency, standardisation and repeatable quality, the exhortation to "follow the process" might appear to be entirely logical. It's not. This is flawed thinking. Very flawed thinking. Let's flip that upside down and think about what happens when we "lead with process".

When we "lead with process" we have:

- More engaged employees

- Fewer performance issues
- More diverse and effective teams
- Lower turnover of staff, and
- A lot more joy in the workplace!

But before we get onto that, let's spend a few moments exploring why processes have a bad rap. I've characterised these as 3 core beliefs:

1. Processes are dusty documents that exist for accreditation/ audit purposes
2. Processes slow down decision making and get in the way of good work
3. Processes shut down our creativity and brains, making work ineffective and dull

In other words, processes create stress, slow decisions and stultify innovation. Not for nothing has every government in recent years declared that they would be cutting red tape and building bonfires of bureaucracy. And the perception that processes cause rather than solve issues is not entirely unfair. I am sure I am not alone in having spent early career weekends 'back-creating' documentary evidence or correcting file names (SOP001 V3.0 R0.0 etc) for an ISO 9001 audit. Anyone who has learned about the Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster (1986) will be aware that in that case processes led to catastrophic failure and loss of life. In an attempt to mitigate risk, multiple layers of management had to approve decisions while, at the same time, there was tremendous pressure not to delay the launch. We could have a whole further discussion about the futility of hierarchies as decision-making mechanisms or the risks inherent in multiple people 'signing off' work, but for now let's stick with the fundamental problem that engineering concerns were never fully heard and ultimately the project failed, leading to loss of life.

So, from mildly annoying to potentially fatal, processes quite rightly have their critics. So, what is this essay doing here in a collection of uplifting pieces about people and culture? Read on, and you will discover why this is exactly where this discussion belongs.

What is Culture?

The OED has more than a dozen definitions of the word 'culture' and modern anthropologists have 'builds' in relation to the importance of symbols and so forth. However, I still like Tylor's definition (though I will replace 'man' with 'a person') which is: "that complex whole which includes knowledge,

belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a person as a member of society.

A shorter way of stating this is "what we believe and how we behave". The ardent administrator can quickly see that this translates to "policy and process". And, in some ways, traditional "human resources" has always been about those two things as applied to employees (and volunteers). Reimagining and refocusing our profession to centre not only on people but also upon culture is important. And yet, and yet, Tylor's "capabilities and habits acquired…as a member of society" is as applicable today as it always has been. From our investment in formal and informal learning, through to the application of performance and disciplinary approaches, capabilities and habits are still our bread and butter.

We have a rather dull discussion; perhaps you are thinking that my 'pitch' to you is that processes have their place in enhancing capabilities and supporting positive habits. Absolutely – and, no.

Processes are absolutely necessary, but not sufficient. And, as we have already explored, they can result in significant harm. But, they also help people to find their feet quickly during onboarding, understand what to do and when and, ultimately, they should lead to a better (or at least consistent) experience for customers. Formal procedures or not, written or not, ultimately, our ways of working – our habits – our processes – the DNA of our culture. We had better make them work for us.

So, having defined culture, perhaps we had better do the same for process. According to the International Standards Organisation, a process is "a set of interrelated or interacting activities which transforms inputs into outputs".

Not excited? Ok, let's try this one from Geertz's seminal work, 'The Interpretation of Cultures' (1973), where he contends that "Culture is not a thing, it's a process".

Of course, culture is about more than just process (as Geertz also believes). Perhaps we can boil it down to two things:

- having a sense of shared identity, or purpose or 'Why' and
- having shared beliefs, behaviours and customers for our 'group'

To put it another way: it's about *belonging* and *behaving.* Framed this way it becomes instantly obvious that the topics of equity, equality, diversity and – above all – inclusion, are intimately

interlinked with the concept of culture. And these also sit in the fuzzy intersection of the Venn diagram of Culture and Climate.

What is Climate?

According to Blanchard, "a positive organizational climate is the heart and soul of high-performing organizations". According to King and Glowinkowski Climate is "how it feels to work here". They say that it answers two questions:

- Do people feel *committed* to their work, and
- Do they feel *proud* to be working for their organization?

It is interesting to note how closely these questions align to common KPIS for profession: turnover rates and NPS (net promotor score). They are also tightly linked to intrinsic motivation the importance of which has been exhorted by man authors and perhaps most recently by Ryan and Deci (Richard M. Ryan, 2017). The popular version is 'Drive' (Pink, 2011).

CLIMATE IS AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT AS CULTURE - AND CAN SOMETIMES BE EASIER TO SHIFT FOR AN ORGANISATION

The three key levers to pull to improve culture are, according to King and Glowinkowski:

- Span of control (1:1 relationship result in fire-fighting; many:1 result in being ignored unless there is a crisis)
- People processes (good, clear onboarding, caring elements such as 'check in' during maternity leave) but, above all else
- Leadership behaviour – specifically balancing 'getting things done' with 'caring about people' at the same time, all the time (or, at least 75% of the time to be world class)

It would be easy to think that focussing on process could be the opposite of motivational and positive climate. After all, looking up a series of steps in a manual or company portal is not exactly a thrill a minute. But then, not knowing how to do a task is deeply demotivating and makes work very hard to commit to. To quote one of the fathers of process thinking, W Edwards Deming (2018) "It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do, and then do your best". Which is lovely, clear and necessary; but not sufficient. Similarly, he was very clear that the job of management (and leadership,

for that matter) is not to work within the process but to support those who do the work to improve the processes themselves. Leader as facilitator, if you will.

Deming's exhortation for Clarity is an essential part of Climate. Helpfully, King and Glowinkowski share all the factors as follows (summarised below in my own words):

- **Clarity** – where the organisation is going and how I fit into that
- **Constancy** – we don't keep changing direction
- **Consistency** – everyone above and below me is also going the same way
- **Commitment** – I am engaged and want to be part of this
- **Capability** – we can do this.

Deming, like other authors of his era (writing in a relative monoculture and from that same perspective) did not explicitly consider inclusion. Despite their books being more recent, King and Glowinkowski overlook this important aspect in their work too.

> *I can know exactly where the company is going and believe that it is possible, but if I am exhausted because I do not feel included in the company culture, I will not be staying to be part of that journey.*

Employees who feel excluded for any reason are not going to be committed or able to give of their best. By definition, if I feel like an outsider, then I don't fit in this Culture, and even the most positive Climate in the world will feel like it's for everyone else, but not for me. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion are also an essential part of the puzzle.

While more research is needed to confirm a causal relationship, it is becoming clear that there is certainly a correlation between inclusive cultures, staff retention rates, and even company performance. In 2023 McKinsey reported that companies in the top quartile for diversity were 39% more likely to outperform their peers financially (up from 35% in 2015). This builds on the 2017 Harvard Business Review meta-analysis of research indicated that greater diversity leads to 15% increase in profitability. In 2018 Forbes reported that millennials in inclusive workplaces were more likely to stay. More broadly, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found as recently as 2020 that organisations with strong diversity and inclusion practices have lower turnover rates (19%) compared to 26 % at companies with weak practices.

In a world that is currently obsessed by productivity, we can agree that "best efforts" are not sufficient. One of the current work trends is trying to encourage / force people to return to the office. It's worth noting that Gallup reported a peak of 36% of people in the USA being engaged at the height of the Pandemic (2020) and that has now dropped to 33%. Globally in 2022, 23% of employees were engaged, 59% not engaged, and a whopping 18% of employees are "actively disengaged".

Wait a minute. Approximately 1 in 5 employees are unhappy and potentially bringing down morale (or worse). Am I seriously about to tell you that processes will help to resolve this? Well, yes!
Who could stay motivated when there are stupid and avoidable barriers to the work flowing. We all know what it feels like to be in a "flow state"? How great would it be to feel that more often?

The Sweet Spot

At this point, I hope you will agree with me that Culture, Climate and EDI are all really important. Collectively, they should mean that I:

- Understand how things work around here
- Feel like I belong and am part of this
- Can do my best work and feel proud and happy!

So far, so HR… but what has this got to do with process?
"The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures" (Lipmanowicz, 2014) demonstrated how 'microstructures' (often facilitation techniques) can support collaboration, innovation and more agility in the workplace. You can access liberating structures free of charge and use them to help groups to achieve excellent outcomes.

Of course, liberating structures are a subset of processes. They are simple, easy to apply, powerful facilitation techniques. And, you've guessed it, facilitation techniques are processes. Or, in De Bono's 6 Thinking Hats the 'blue hat', the facilitator – orchestrates the process.

In her book, "Binding Chaos", Heather Marsh writes that "we are in a prison of our own minds holding our own chains around us. We create our oligarchs and fight for their right to oppress us". Swap oligarchs for 'organisations' or even 'management teams' and we get close to the problem.

The world is complex, chaotic, even. It is understandable that people both want to be told what to do ("phew! Simplicity at last") while also absolutely not wanting that either ("let me use my brain. I'm not stupid". Contrary creatures, human beings, aren't we!

The beauty of processes is that they allow us to find simplicity the other side of chaos, as well as being able to always and forever use our creativity and imaginations. We must listen to Ackoff's warning "the greatest enemy of the good is the dream of the perfect" but at the same time, Deming is right that "it is not necessary to change. It is not necessary to improve. But if you do not wish to be left behind in this competitive world, you must do both".

The underlying message is that we must be continually *learning*, *adapting* to change, and focussing on our *customers*. This is the purpose of process. However, all that learning, change and customer focus takes effort.

The Money Shot

So, here we are. The build-up is complete, and I hope you can see the threads that have been leading us, inexorably, to the obvious conclusion that… processes are awesome! Here are some specific ways in which they help with culture, climate, and inclusion!

Continual Improvement without exhaustion

Companies often claim to be "learning organisations" or thriving for "continual improvement". Characteristics like creativity are prized and corporate websites frequently list "innovation" as one of their values. Any MBA course would be incomplete without exhortations to "innovate" and be ready to jump the chasm, or the shark or… well, something exciting to jump.

The thing is that human beings thrive on repetition. The continuing celebration of traditional religious ceremonies in increasingly agnostic or atheist societies is an obvious example. Rituals have their place.

Similarly, it is widely recognised that major life changes (bereavement, moving house, changing jobs, children fleeing the nest) create stress; even when those events have been long anticipated or might be seen as 'positive' in the long-run.

Another way of thinking about process is habits, or drumbeats. Structures like Agile or Lean (Last Planner) may seem dull and repetitive - but in the spirit of "Binding Chaos" they are actually about driving ownership to the lowest possible level and empowering the people who do the work. When employees are empowered to "lead with processes" and identify, propose and implement improvements, they are freed from those "prisons" and feel more engaged and motivated. Processes like Agile and Last Planner put the employee in the driving seat, empowered to say how much really can get done, rather than desperately trying to achieve an unreasonable workload.

I believe that a large part of the role of the modern People & Culture Professional is to facilitate inter- and intra-organisational conversations, busting silos & helping to break down barriers to good & rewarding work.

It is my view that the shared understanding created by process thinking is very powerful. Process are amazing because they allow for bottom-up, top-down and middle- out thinking and conversations where, no matter our seniority, we are all working together on the same thing. Processes are great levellers; they move us from working head-to-head, to working side by side.

The key to Communication and Engagement

Communication isn't easy. If it was, everyone would be doing it.
Well, of course, whether through words, actions, facial expressions or body language, we are always all communicating. We cannot not communicate. But (speaking as a neuro-divergent person) I appreciate that communication can be tricky, even for neurotypical folk.

And this is the reason:
- Human brains are pretty good at BIG numbers. We can understand them through probabilities and statistics.
- Human brains are pretty good at SMALL numbers. We can understand them through anecdotes and stories.
- Human brains are not very good at MIDDLE-SIZED things.

Common debate patterns look a bit like: statistic – anecdote – statistic – shrug. For example, a friend tries to use statistics to persuade you to give up a vice or start a better habit (quit smoking, do press-ups and so forth), to which you share the story of Great Aunt Agnes who smoked 458 cigars a day and

lived until she was 104. Your friend responds with another statistic, and, for the sake of the friendship, you change the topic and shrug. Organisational conversations are often similar.

What is true for numbers is also true for time. The apocryphal story of Kennedy being told by the floor sweeper that he was "putting a man on the moon" is sweet (although not true), but it doesn't solve one of the biggest problems organisations have. Without actually having the President him/herself wandering the floor, how exactly DO you translate the beautiful strategy into something that makes sense in the workplace.

The difficulty that People and Culture Professionals often find is that organisations are clear about day-to-day tasks (operations) and might be quite clear about the Strategy – but there is a huge Tactical Gap between the two. Creating that 'golden thread' from boardroom to frontline can be difficult. Helping managers and teams to 'cascade' objectives in the hope that somehow the whole will be at least as big as the sum of the parts is not easy. I've turned it into something of a speciality (because my ADHD loves big picture, my autism works bottom up, and the two thinking skills combined with my stubbornness mean that we iterate until the work is done) … but it isn't at all easy. It seems that some brains are just more suited to living in the future and painting visions, while others prefer to be in the present and doing detailed actions. We are all different, but we need to work together.

When it comes to zooming in and out of scale and forward and backward in time, processes are the ultimate helpful tool. And it's very empowering. To quote Barry Oshry, with systems sight we can become captains of our own ships and understand the nature of the waters in which we sale". Of course, individual process maps don't show us the whole system. But, using a range of process maps at different levels of granularity can be incredibly helpful for creating shared understanding, increasing trust, respect, mutual appreciation, and greater engagement in the way the work works.
At the highest level a "Target Operating Model" is (crudely put) a form of very high-level process map of how the organisation can "make the work, work".

Next, we might have Customer Journeys (also process maps). Below that perhaps there are clear descriptions of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) at a high level. Nested below this come more detailed processes, until eventually we get down to the procedure for operating the new-fangled water dispenser in the kitchen without scalding your thumb. This approach, known as "hierarchical process models" feels intuitive and I feel it should be much more widely known. It was at the heart of my doctoral thesis but then, since I haven't read it for a decade or two, I suppose there is no reason why anyone else would have done either.

> "Once we realise that processes (like liberating structures) allow us to become the facilitators of the conversation we become more effective. "

Still, I do recommend this as a core tool in the People and Culture armoury – making us able to shrink and grow like magicians and move between now and the future like time travellers. Most importantly of all, this approach helps everyone to understand not only their 'piece' but how that fits into the whole. Jigsaws are much easier when you can see the picture on the box lid.

A well drafted process automatically results in a clear RASCI. And a RASCI is the ultimate script for a phenomenal play. For that is all we are, at work, acting out our parts to create something that delights our customers, and prompting our colleagues when they need help. It's a collaborative effort. A RASCI, by definition (since the C stands for Consult and the I for Inform) is the perfect blueprint for a really effective Communication Plan. Communication plans fall out of RASCIs naturally, easily and efficiently – and are then very effective. Why would you start anywhere else?

- Essential for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion… and Retention.

Readers who are familiar with the work of W Edwards Deming will also know that he was very interested in the concept of variation (as well as psychology, learning, systems appreciation and more). Variation is about understanding that life is 'wobbly'. Unfortunately, the world at large doesn't seem to know this, which is why call centres are generally horrible places to work (some callers need more help than others, and being 'beaten' for not meeting arbitrary call-length targets is pretty demotivating and won't drive up customer satisfaction either). We will come back to this shortly.

Most process approaches talk about variation but neglect to discuss the equally important topic of Variety. This concept is just as important for People and Culture professionals. The simple way of thinking about this is to recognise that if you want to pop into Waitrose and have your choice of 27 different types of mustard, you can do so, but you may well pay a premium. Slip down the road to Lidl

and you may find all sorts of fascinating condiments in the 'Middle at Lidl' but there is no guarantee that it will be the same one as last week, or the one you really love. When we design our systems and processes it's important to recognise that there is only one way to attenuate (absorb) a large amount of variety, and that's to have it! For example, if we want our customers to feel like they 'belong', then it's helpful if our workforce reflects the variety of our customer base. When it comes to mustard, stocking a huge range is expensive (lots of supply chains, bigger warehouses, more complex logistics) but when it comes to variety in our people, we can, should and must do that for free.

Currently, companies are spending serious money on EDI programmes (and, terrifyingly, there is increasing evidence that these can cause resistance and disengagement with some demographics. For example, the Guardian recently reported that young men are now more likely to be anti-feminist than the "Boomer" Generation). In truth, sheep-dipping managers through a range of 'awareness' programmes for multiple protected or unprotected characteristics is an exercise in futility. As a female single parent, carer, neuro-divergent, physically disabled person… (with other characteristics that I don't routinely disclose) how many courses should my manager go on to engage with me? It's nonsense.

Let's flip the script. When we look through the lens of process, we are side-by-side and our individual characteristics become far less important than the work we are doing together. There is a win-win here. Not only do we need diverse groups of people to create fabulous inclusive processes, but by engaging diverse groups of people in the development of our fabulous inclusive processes, we improve our climate for… all those people. This is a positive feedback loop or a happy Catch-22. The more we engage different types of people in evolving our processes, the more we will encourage different types of people to come and work in those processes.

For example, involving neuro-divergent people will help us to ensure that we are very clear about expectations and deadlines (many of us struggle with 'time-blindness). Suddenly, the frustrating habit of an Autistic colleague (like me) to ask lots of questions and challenge every detail, is a strength that the group appreciate and encourage. The idea of developing a process to address flexible working, without thinking about how to involve people who need flexible working, seems daft. But it's an effort. Guess what? Making the effort to include flexible workers in the process of developing a process for flexible working will result in… a much better process for flexible working. Including different perspectives in the development of processes is an obvious, practical, and inexpensive way to in and

of itself demonstrate their importance, increasing their sense of belonging – and reducing staff turnover. It's obvious once you see it, isn't it! Recruiting for diversity but not having inclusive onboarding and work practices is like pouring water into a broken pipe. Being involved in the design of the way the work works is empowering, motivating and leaves people feeling engaged and less likely to leave.

Processes, Performance and Psychological Safety

While we are on the subject of inclusion, let's look at it's ugly twin – exclusion. In toxic cultures (or where there are biased and unpleasant managers) it is possible for individuals to be bullied and gaslit into serious ill health. Indeed, there have been a number of prominent news stories in the last year of individuals dying by suicide as a result of their treatment at work.

> *Bias is a serious problem. And it is a problem that can never be eradicated without processes, data and system site.*

Self-fulfilling prophecies and confirmation bias are commonplace in the workplace. So common, in fact, that most people never see them and those who are affected by them are often frightened to speak up. Let's start with a simple example of one of the most popular of all professions; estate agents. Let's say that on her first day in the job, Amina happens to get the desk nearest the door (because Bob, who used to work there has gone off long-term sick and, Claire, the Manager, just says "use Bob's desk". Dexter, who sits on the third desk away from the office door is furious. He had been hoping to sit at Bob's desk but didn't like to ask. Amina is a fairly experienced estate agent but has only ever had average sales in her previous firms.

However, with this new desk, clients spot her as soon as they come into the office. With more chances to welcome customers, she has more chances to show them properties (or offer to value theirs). Statistics are now on her side and she creates the highest value of sales. When Bob eventually comes back to work (his knee operation had complications and he was off for much longer than expected), Claire (who has enjoyed having a female colleague for the first time in a while), 'suggests' that since he is still not completely mobile, he should take the lovely warm desk at the back of the office, out of the wind, and let Claire deal with the door. Bob and Declan exchange a brief exchange through eye

contact. This is a new world, and they're not happy about it, but there is no way they can challenge it without giving voice to the fact that they know that desk location impacts results.

Depending on the bonus scheme (back to extrinsic motivation) the situation in the estate agent may remain fairly harmonious (only pride is injured) or could escalate (Bob could get really disengaged and perhaps disruptive if his habitual bonus is now much reduced).

Beyond bonuses, there is also the matter of annual targets, appraisals and performance management. When Claire's regional manager challenges her at the half-yearly Talent Review, will she acknowledge that the shift in fortunes is due to desk moves, or will she say that since the knee op, Bob is slowing down a bit. Perhaps instead of being future talent, he's now a solid performer – destined to be a mentor rather than being prepped for promotion.

Nothing builds trust more quickly or effectively than spending time together with the shared goal of making the work to the benefit of everyone. But, beware those counterproductive performance management systems with unintended consequences!

Of course, most of the time, the sales within the office will be roughly the same month on month, with seasonal dips and maybe larger changes when there are swings in the economy. The Shock of the Truss / Kwarteng Mini Budget is an example of a 'special cause' that might lead to a sudden and dramatic change in fortunes. But, most of the time, variation will be within predictable upper and lower bounds.

The Big Names of the post-war rebuild of Japan (Deming, Juran, etc) recognised that most performance is due to the process (or system) within which you work. By the time of his death Deming had reportedly concluded that only about 3% of performance was to do with the individual, and 97% was the wider context (the process, tools, environment etc). Unfortunately, we tend to be conditioned to attribute results to individuals rather than teams or processes. Taking a process lens – or a 'systems sight' (as suggested by Oshry) results in opportunities for EVERYONE to do better. All the time that Bob is resentful of Amina's sales, neither one of them is going to be open to cooperating on better tactics to increase sales for the office. Sometimes – often – people end up so fixated on beating their internal 'competitor' that they would rather that an external competitor 'won'. Wherever there exist unhealthy competition, Machiavellian sabotage or people being too distracted by politics to work effectively – the route out is to get everyone together and work on the process.

Hybrid working

In an age where this is a hot topic, processes and their associated metrics (complete with an understanding of common and special cause variation) provide a great deal of help. Once we know what a process can typically create (remember they transform inputs into outputs) we can relax about who works where and when. When we understand what our processes can do, and have aligned our expectations to those of our customers, everyone can feel an awful lot safer about hybrid working. Both managers and employees can stop worrying about the need to put in 'face-time' or overwork to 'prove' that working from home is effective. Just work the process, identify ways it can improve, and keep on rolling.

With data we know what to expect. We can save a fortune on biased, unscientific, ineffective performance management that encourages parent-child - instead we are having adult-adult adult conversations about the way the work works.

Productivity and Improvement

How stupid would a person have to be to not involve the people who do the work, in the design of the work? About average stupid... because this is normal! Focussing on the work at work is just obvious! We fixate on 'people' or 'money' but when we look at customers, flow and process, most conflict fades away and we are aligned to a common goal. I find it fascinating, and distressing, that consultants will come and make sweeping recommendations about job cuts and organisational restructures without first listening to the 3 voices that matter:

1. The Voice of the Customer of the Process
2. The Voice of the People working in the Process
3. The Voice of the Data produced by the Process

A lovely example happened to me some 20 years ago with a company that was perplexed by a problem we had in filling potholes on the strategic road network (that's motorways and many A-roads). The managers of the various companies involved in the process assembled in a room. I was due to facilitate and asked them to map the process end to end (from report of pothole to completion of the hole – not the financial processes). Every person in the room pulled out a 'process map' they had printed

from their company quality management systems. I confiscated them immediately and insisted that they draw the process from their own understanding.

There was a pause. Then a grabbing of pens. And a good attempt. But, fundamentally, the team didn't know what the process was, so how could they work out the solution? By listening to the people who were supposed to do the repairs we discovered that a major problem was poor location information. Tracing back through the process I quickly discovered that the people receiving the telephone reports didn't have headsets. They were holding their phones in one hand (which is an issue for the spine in any case) and making notes on paper with the other; then typing it into the database afterwards (often with gaps, errors or duplication). I asked them what would help and they shared that they had been asking for headsets for a while but had been told they were too expensive. We got the headsets and the time taken to fill potholes fell by almost 80%.

Processes help us to learn.

Once we understand how the process works now and are doing it consistently (anything else is like changing channels on the TV and hoping it will magically be a better movie) then we can listen to our customers, our people, and the process itself to work out how to improve it. Nothing has the same lasting effect on happiness and engagement in the workplace as having work that works!

Processes give us resilience as organisations and individuals - we don't have to waste time in 'handover' when we are going on leave. They save with onboarding costs and that expensive learning curve for new starters. Processes are empowering - we can challenge the tangible without worrying about our seniority or the organisational politics.

Processes are, in short, the 'instant pudding' that the country is looking for to solve our current productivity and staffing crises – but, they just don't sound that interesting!

Better Decisions

Work life is a never-ending stream of decisions, with each email demanding at the minimum a series of micro-choices (open it ignore it, file it or leave it in the inbox, action it or delegate it, do it now or later…). Yet, in reality, there are really only a handful of make-or-break decisions. Most decisions can be reversed if they don't work out. But the big ones, like major investment choices are hard. So hard,

in fact, that I have seen very senior people debate minutiae like carpet-tile choices or the colour of the bike sheds, rather than face up to the big stuff.

Thinking is, in fact, just a process. As De Bono's 6 Thinking Hats illustrates, we need to look at things in lots of different ways (emotionally, logically, pessimistically, optimistically and so on).

A key skill of the People and Culture professional is to facilitate great thinking. And this requires an awareness and the ability to encourage just two states within a group.

1. Divergent thinking
2. Convergent thinking

The more mindful we are about when we are thinking divergently or convergently (and whether that is the appropriate thing to be doing) the more we will harness our creativity, review all options, listen to all perspectives, and make good decisions.

In particular, getting a group of people to spend time clearly defining the problem space before leaping to 'a solution' (which inevitably causes another problem) is really important. Creating cultures and climates where it is possible to sit in the uncomfortable space of digging deeper and deeper into problems is a really important goal for our work as a profession.

Implications for Leaders

Generally speaking, I am usually told that people will 'resist' this type of thinking. That "we've done Lean and it didn't go well" or that people "don't make the time for this stuff" or even a roll of the eyes and a desire for something newer, shinier, and rather more, well… sexy.

But the reality is that this always works. The key is to start. Anywhere. Begin. As soon as you start to help the organisation to learn to deeply listen to itself and its customers, change comes.

Managers and leaders find themselves fighting fewer fires as the most critical (and destabilising) processes improve. Infighting and silo wars decrease as individuals learn that their colleagues in other departments do, in fact, do something! People apologise for carelessly or unintentionally causing problems in other places by not knowing that something they were supposed to do matters (hint: if

you don't write on the front page of a document sent from an anonymous scanner, the receiving team won't know who sent it).

Quickly managers learn that they can see what is happening and that their role is to offer support. Leaders have the time to be curious and engaged, empowering rather than dictating. Processes help them to invert the hierarchy and be the servant leaders they had heard about at business school. It can be invigorating to put theory into practice and discover that it works.

Above all, processes are for everyone. They help us to listen, engage, empathise and include. They are a game -changer.

Closing Thoughts

I hope that this article has taken you on a journey from perhaps a curious but slightly sceptical stance, through to recognising the beauty and power of these simple but important tools we call processes.

This can be transformative. It is said that changing an organisational Climate can be relatively quick (using levels of identity, office moves and new leadership behaviours) but that changing Culture is slow. And yet, changing the way the work works is transformative for both culture and climate.

With processes we can measure the things that matter - not just the things that are easily measurable. Process data can be important for overcoming bias and ensuring customer and employee voices are heard; imagine if the Horizon data had been aggregated (and required in court).

Because it's not really about the process, but it is completely about the process. When we are working together on the way the work works, then we get to know each other, respect each other, trust each other and so much more. Frustration goes down, engagement goes up, grievances reduce and turnover drops. It is simple, powerful and… in your hands.

What's your next step?

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SUCCESSFUL CULTURES AND THE SYNERGY OF RECRUITMENT, RETENTION & REWARD

BY HEATHER WRIGHT

Heather has spent years studying the neuro-psychology of behaviour and influence, and uses this information as well as her highly entertaining style to be the catalyst to inspire and deliver results in individuals, teams and organisations. Heather converts years of research and experience into usable, teachable material to change the habits and behaviours of others. She is a skilled facilitator and an expert on performance and achieving tangible results. She uses humour to relax people and has a plethora of tools and techniques which she uses to capture innovation and resourcefulness they didn't think they possessed. Heather is a captivating speaker delivering training, key note speeches and workshops to public services and large multinational companies globally. She has achieved an excellent reputation for her professionalism and accessibility when working with clients and she has enough energy to run a small power station.

In the ever-evolving landscape of business, the saying has never rung truer that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. A successful culture relies on recruiting and developing the right people. Attracting and retaining top talent is about so much more than competitive compensation packages and flashy perks; it's about fostering an environment where employees feel valued, supported, and able to thrive. The critical elements of recruitment, retention and realising potential all intersect and influence one another in creating a workplace where individuals can reach their fullest potential and both the employees and the company can reap the rewards.

Years ago, an extensive 6-year study into what makes companies successful showed that the core ideology of an organisation (sometimes erroneously simplified as values) has to be at the heart of every decision they make. Since that study was published nearly every organisation has jumped on the band wagon of developing a set of values. This looks great on their website, in their marketing

and even on posters in the loos but rarely goes beneath the surface and impacts meeting etiquette, strategy decisions, recruitment, people development and leadership behaviours. The key is the total and obsessive alignment of culture, strategy and systems.

Recruitment: The Gateway to Talent

Your recruitment serves as the gateway through which your company welcomes new talent into the fold. Past recruitment strategies focused primarily on qualifications and experience. The aim was to find candidates with the necessary skills to fulfil job requirements with little thought given to future-proofing the business. However, when this was the recruitment strategy, leadership styles followed suit which has led to team members feeling undervalued and unfulfilled. While technical prowess remains essential, modernising your recruitment practices involves equal emphasis on cultural fit and shared values.

> "…many young people have sought careers that can nurture their whole self and where they can feel psychologically safe to be courageous, innovative, and open to growth. "

Today's candidates expect more than just a job and a salary—they seek a sense of belonging and purpose. As such, organisations must actively prioritise initiatives that support diversity and inclusion. For example, decision makers need to embrace cultural diversity as it not only enriches the workforce with varied perspectives and experiences but also enhances innovation and creativity. Everyone in the workforce needs to buy in on a deeper level rather than simply paying lip service to it to tick a box. Word spreads and fakers will be found out.

I have seen the power of this, not only in my 25+ years as a consultant to organisations large and small, global and local but with a front row seat to both of my sons' experiences working for large retail and hospitality brands through university. In both cases websites clearly stated that "Our people are at the heart of everything we do" and "People are our greatest asset" however, their HR policies and managers who did not walk the talk quickly exposed this as a superficial veneer.

If you genuinely want to recruit in alignment with people centric values, it is necessary to consider your recruitment processes. Are they designed to help people relax and be their best or to encourage candidates to try to please you with half-truths and exaggeration?

Retention: Development of Talent

Recruitment is only half the battle; retaining talent is equally, if not more, crucial for sustained success. High turnover rates can disrupt productivity, erode morale, and incur significant organisational costs. To combat this, companies are investing in robust retention strategies aimed at fostering employee satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty.

Central to effective retention is the cultivation of a positive company culture. A vibrant culture built on trust, respect, and transparency fosters a sense of belonging and commitment among employees. Organisations that prioritise employee wellbeing, offer opportunities for growth and development, and promote a healthy work-life balance are better positioned to retain top performers.

Moreover, fostering strong interpersonal relationships within the workplace is vital for employee retention. Human beings are inherently social creatures and meaningful connections with colleagues contribute to job satisfaction and overall happiness. Companies are encouraging team-building activities, mentorship programs, and open communication channels to facilitate bonding and collaboration among employees.

In today's knowledge-based economy, investing in employees' personal development and career advancement is non-negotiable. Employees are more likely to stay with companies that offer opportunities for skill enhancement, professional growth, and upward mobility.

Forward-thinking organisations are implementing robust training and development programmes, providing employees access to workshops, seminars, online courses, and mentorship opportunities. By empowering employees to expand their skill sets and pursue their career aspirations, companies not only foster loyalty but also cultivate a talent pool capable of driving innovation and adaptation in an ever-changing marketplace.

Furthermore, companies prioritising career development send a powerful message to employees: they are valued members of the organisation with the potential to make meaningful contributions and progress within the company. This sense of purpose and upward mobility serves as a powerful motivator, enhancing job satisfaction and retention rates.

Rewards: Understanding Employee Needs

To effectively recruit and retain talent, it's imperative to understand the evolving needs and expectations of employees in today's workforce. Research time and again tells us that reward is rarely about money (provided we have taken Maslow's Hierarchy of needs into consideration) but is personal to each individual. Leaders need to build great relationships to understand their team so that they can personalise rewards to engage people for longevity of service. Beyond competitive compensation packages, many employees seek:

- Meaningful Work: Employees crave purpose and alignment with the organisation's mission and values. Providing opportunities for employees to engage in meaningful projects that contribute to the company's larger goals fosters a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction.

- Work-Life Balance: Achieving a healthy balance between work and personal life is paramount for employee well-being and productivity. Flexible work arrangements, remote work options, and supportive policies that prioritise work-life balance are highly valued by employees.

- Professional Growth: Employees desire opportunities for learning, skill development, and career advancement. Investing in training and development programs, mentorship initiatives, and career progression pathways demonstrates a commitment to employees' professional growth and fosters loyalty.

- Recognition and Appreciation: Acknowledging and appreciating employees' contributions and achievements is crucial for morale and motivation. Regular feedback, recognition programs, and a culture of appreciation cultivate a positive work environment where employees feel valued and respected.

Driving Cultural Evolution

So how can you intentionally build and develop a self-sustaining people centred culture? It may be sponsored and driven from the top, but it must be so compelling that it is owned by every member of the team, no matter their role.

Just some of the core ingredients are:

1. Values Alignment

A strong organisational culture is built upon shared values that guide behaviour and decision-making. Employees are more likely to thrive and contribute meaningfully when their personal values align with

those of the organisation. Many people I have worked with need coaching to help them verbalise and establish their values as well as understand how they affect their identity.

2. Hybrid Working

The widespread adoption of hybrid working has transformed traditional notions of work and office culture for the better. Many organisations are adapting to remote work dynamics by offering flexible work arrangements, remote onboarding processes, and virtual collaboration tools. However, this can also create divides in the workplace between the roles where it is possible to work from home and those that simply must be done onsite. Therefore, when considering this offer you must spend time helping everyone to fully understand the difference between equity and equality. The effective balance of hybrid working changes from person to person, team to team and organisation to organisation. It isn't as simple as one size fits all.

3. Open Communication:

Cultivating a culture of open communication promotes transparency, trust, and collaboration within the organisation. Encouraging feedback, active listening, and constructive dialogue fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. Once these ideas are encouraged, people need training. All of the above are skills and you cannot expect even the most academically gifted people to know how to communicate openly and develop a psychologically safe environment. Fewer than 30% of people in leadership are taught how to handle conflict and yet it is a daily challenge both in and out of the workplace.

4. Empowerment and Autonomy:

Empowering employees with autonomy and decision-making authority fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. Providing opportunities for employees to take on challenging projects, make meaningful contributions, and exercise creativity enhances job satisfaction and engagement.

5. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI):

Embracing diversity and fostering an inclusive culture is essential for attracting and retaining top talent from diverse backgrounds. Creating a sense of belonging where all employees feel valued and respected contributes to a positive work environment and drives innovation. Forward thinking employers are implementing DEI training programmes, diversity recruitment initiatives, and inclusive policies to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces.

6. Training and Development Strategies

Investing in employee training and development is not only essential for enhancing skills and competencies but also for fostering employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Your training and development initiatives should consider:

7. Team Culture Development Work:

When you are trying to embed a people centric culture you cannot expect it to simply happen. It must be intentional. How many times in the last month have your teams spent time discussing what sort of environment they want to work in? I encourage teams to develop their own behavioural standards and talk about how they will embed them as well as deal with times when they fall short of their own standards. After all we are all human and will mess up. This is one of the most powerful (and yet blindingly obvious) elements to cultural architecture.

8. Personalised Learning Paths:

Recognising that employees have diverse learning styles and preferences. Organisations should offer personalised learning paths tailored to individual needs and career aspirations. This could include e-learning modules, workshops, seminars, and on-the-job training opportunities. Little and often is the key to embedded learning.

9. Leadership Development Programs:

Developing leadership skills among employees not only prepares them for future leadership roles but also cultivates a pipeline of talent within the organisation. Leadership development programs should focus on honing communication, decision-making, and interpersonal skills.

10. Mentorship and Coaching:

Pairing employees with experienced mentors or coaches provides invaluable guidance, support, and feedback for professional growth and development. Mentorship programs facilitate knowledge transfer, skill development, and career advancement.

11. Continuous Learning Culture:

Fostering a culture of continuous learning where employees are encouraged to pursue ongoing development opportunities is essential for staying competitive in today's rapidly evolving business landscape. Providing access to resources, certifications, and learning platforms promotes a growth mindset and lifelong learning.

Conclusion: The Recipe for Success

In conclusion, recruitment, retention, and reward are the pillars of company culture. Negative or misaligned ones breed a poor and potentially toxic culture with inconsistent results. But when they are constantly driven by positive values and are inextricably intertwined, they become the foundation for commitment and success. By prioritising healthy team communication, cultural diversity, fostering employee engagement, investing in personal development, and adapting to emerging trends, you can create an environment where employees thrive, driving innovation, productivity, and long-term growth. As the saying goes, culture indeed eats strategy for breakfast, but when both are aligned effectively, they can be the perfect recipe for success.

ACHIEVING THE PARADIGM SHIFT: EDI DELIVERY IN ORGANISATIONS

BY JASON GHABOOS

Jason Ghaboos MBE is a Senior Civil Servant working in the Cabinet Office leading on Civil Service Employee Experience and People Performance. A former Bye-Fellow at the University of Cambridge (Murray Edwards College) where he focussed on workplace culture. Jason led the development and delivery of the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and the Civil Service People Plan.

Introduction

Employee Experience and People Performance has a key role in organisations in promoting an engaged workforce and culture of performance excellence. The two are not mutually exclusive, but inextricably linked. When executed well, activity on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) calibrates the connection between policy, process, people and practice; to deliver exacting standards in performance to meet agreed business priorities. It does so by optimising efforts to attract and retain the brightest and best. Promoting exacting standards in leadership. Ensuring impact and value for money from talent and learning and development offers. This promotes a return of investment in initiatives around people delivery, for example, when seeking to address under-representation, tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination or delivering fair reward.

Excellence in the delivery of EDI is business critical. It can act as the fulcrum in an organisation - enabling the delivery of business priorities and objectives by ensuring investment in resources (people, buildings, policies, finance) are balanced effectively, prompting improved creativity, innovation, utilisation, productivity and overall performance.

This article examines how organisations can improve their EDI delivery, learning from wider disciplines and experiences in economics, media, social sciences and in continuous improvement practice.

Drawing on these experiences to reflect on how the EDI discipline can continue to improve the impact it makes in achieving business objectives.

The case for and against EDI

There is a wealth of evidence that outlines the potential benefits of EDI. Over three reports McKinsey & Company have demonstrated the case for EDI is stronger than ever before; outlining a clear link between diversity of organisations and their profitability – with evidence that continues to develop over time.

Yet the criticism around delivery of some diversity interventions remains, and has become more acute over recent years. The focus is now less on the *case* for it, but increasingly on the *execution* and particularly the *effectiveness* of EDI activity. The CIPD recently outlined the impact of 'wokeness' and asked the important question: is work becoming too woke? Many commentators reflect on the 'culture wars' increasingly permeating aspects of business and some calling for employees to simply be allowed to do the job they are paid for. Views are numerous on all sides of the debate.

In this cacophony of disparate views and conflicting opinions, is there a need for change?

The case for change

It is imperative that criticism is not turned away from, or simply dismissed. It is too easy to cling onto the ways of working that may have proven successful in the past, and ignore what can seem like hurtful or ill-considered reflections. When I was a senior leader in operational delivery roles my mentor used to return to the old adage 'a complaint is a gift'. He was right of course and the work it stemmed from made clear that criticisms [complaints] were a valuable resource to improve delivery.

Whatever side of the discussion you find yourself on, it is evident that there are examples of wasteful and non-impactful EDI work. Just like in every other discipline. Whether your view is that occurrence of that is frequent (90% of activity being wasteful, 10% being good). Or you believe it is infrequent (10% being wasteful, with 90% being impactful). Either way there is room for improvement.

The truth of course is this differs across organisations, departments, sections, and individual leaders. What is key is practitioners should embrace the challenge and any criticism to improve on the approach and delivery of EDI. Use criticism to reflect: 'Are we focussed on the right things?' 'Are we

making the impacts as intended?' Is money being invested well?' 'Is this the right intervention at the right time?' 'Have we prioritised our focus?' 'Is activity required?'

This article does not offer to arbitrate between positions. It simply suggests that to dial down on well-meaning but performative and tokenistic activity; and dial up on transformative, impactful delivery - a shift is required.

Defining the Paradigm

If we need to shift the paradigm, what is it we need to improve on? A look into lessons from other disciplines can provide helpful reflections and insights. Particularly on the tensions that exist and act as barriers to effective EDI delivery. Let's take a look at a few:

Enthusiasm vs Expertise

Passion and energy for a topic does not in itself translate into effective delivery. Practitioners can be supportive of EDI, what it stands for and believe in the importance of its work, but not necessarily have the right skill set to be able to design, develop, test, embed and evaluate the interventions that are really required by organisations. This can lead to activities that are focussed on the wrong things, for the wrong reasons, developed incorrectly, embedded clumsily and continued without any review or evaluation.

This has been witnessed in other fields, for example in Continuous Improvement (CI). The two fields have many similarities. Like EDI, CI has its committed followers. Both have what can seem to some as an impenetrable language. The similarities continue to include the significant 'toolkits', training, and approaches that beset both disciplines. Like EDI, CI draws from the insights of an organisation's people. Using their expertise and insights to improve all aspects of the business; from policies to process, organisational structure, products and services. Both disciplines have a significant opportunity to improve performance and output, whilst heightening employee experience and engagement. If done well.

On occasion, CI practice has witnessed enthusiasm trump expertise. A lack of coordination and guardrails can diminish the potential returns. Leading to activity to veer from small or big changes being led by front-line employees, delivering a systems-wide improvement through the removal of waste and focus on value to the customer. Being replaced instead, by multiple 'energised'

practitioners making local well-intentioned 'improvement', impacting performance downstream and detrimentally impacting on cost, value for money and customer service. There are several reasons why CI can fail to take hold. Key reasons can include 1) not establishing the root cause of issues fully 2) not involving the right people 3) not building a problem-solving culture. This can be driven by enthusiasm taking over expertise and leads to an experience of employees and customers of continual *change* rather than continual *improvement*.

Experience in continuous improvement can enhance the approach taken in EDI work. The ADKAR Model of Change Management, which supports organisational change by removing resistance to it through five clear steps, can help navigate the balance between practitioners' enthusiasm and the expertise needed to make the impacts hoped for and invested in.

The ADKAR model can be useful to help to break down EDI delivery into stages, and through that examine if the right skill sets are represented in EDI teams. In the early stages of the model, the ability to articulate the issues facing employees (A) and the impact that has on the business (D) is fundamental to success. Practitioners that can tell the story of their people in a passionate, clear way to help leaders understand the requirement for change and the business case for it is integral.

As you progress through the Model (K, A, R) additional skills are needed. Expertise in designing required interventions; the ability to lead significant change management to support embed interventions; analytical skills to diagnose issues and support prioritisation; data and digital skills to use innovation to drive creative solutions offering value for money; and evaluative skills to ensure a return on investment.

ADKA			Required Practitioner Skills
A	Awareness	Of the need for change	Passion, Story Telling, 'Activist Voice'
D	Desire	To participate in and support change (the business case)	Passion, Story Telling, 'Activist Voice',

K	Knowledge	On how to change	Analytical, Change Manager, HR, EDI expertise
A	Ability	To implement desired skills and behaviours	Analytical, Change Manager, HR, EDI expertise, Data, Digital (AI), Programme Management, Operational
R	Reinforcement	To sustain change	Analytical, Change Manager, HR, EDI expertise, Data, Digital (AI), Programme Management, Operational, Evaluation

Some organisations may find that as they are progressing through the model they are not experiencing the return on investment expected or the impacts desired. Ensuring the blend of skills in EDI teams is essential to shift from tokenism to delivery offering real impact.

Expectation Vs Execution

The expectations of EDI activity can be high. Attracting the very best candidates for roles. Improved employee engagement scores, productivity increases, enhanced creativity, a reduction in anxiety, stress, bullying, harassment and discrimination; with a better service provision to customers. An all-round improved workplace culture with tangible, clear benefits.

When EDI is delivered well, this is achievable, but it can take time. Often, expectations can be hampered by insufficient resourcing. An appetite for Michelin-star cuisine but with a budget for Greggs. This can lead to a satisfaction gap with a focus on over-promising and under-delivering. This is not unique to the EDI discipline, but it is important to watch. When EDI delivery is not optimal — and there is unintentional clumsy execution of ideas, recruitment procedures, employee policies, staffing process, training or talent programmes — the impact can be severe.

Lazarsfeld and Merton wrote of the 'Narcotising Dysfunction Approach', which proposed that the media in providing content in increasing dosages of mass communication, had an unintended consequence. Rather than spurring action from these messages, it could lead to the audience becoming apathetic and failing to act on the information provided, irrespective of how compelling the issue is.

In EDI, this narcotising impact has been witnessed. Investments in well-intended unconscious-bias training, or allyship programmes can be inconsistent in their impact and on occasions simply ineffective. Delegates can feel as though participation is sufficient to 'inoculate' them from the behaviours an organisation is seeking to quash; they leave the training room (virtual or otherwise) and return to the workplace without any real change in behaviour at all.

"Findings of the Ernst and Young Survey showed that nearly one-third of men overall (32%) had felt personally excluded in the workplace, and more than one-third of all respondents (35%) stated that the increased focus on diversity in the workplace had overlooked white men."

While some may be narcotised, there is evidence that others are feeling increasingly marginalised. Ernst & Young LLP's October 2017 survey looked into the sense of belonging of different demographic groups in a sample size of more than 1,000 full-time employed U.S. employees. There are examples that highlight a similar 'backlash' with other demographics experiencing being marginalised by these attempts to include.

Equality Vs Equality

In the Everyday Workplace Inclusion Report, I highlighted the risks of competing tensions to the success of improving workplace culture.
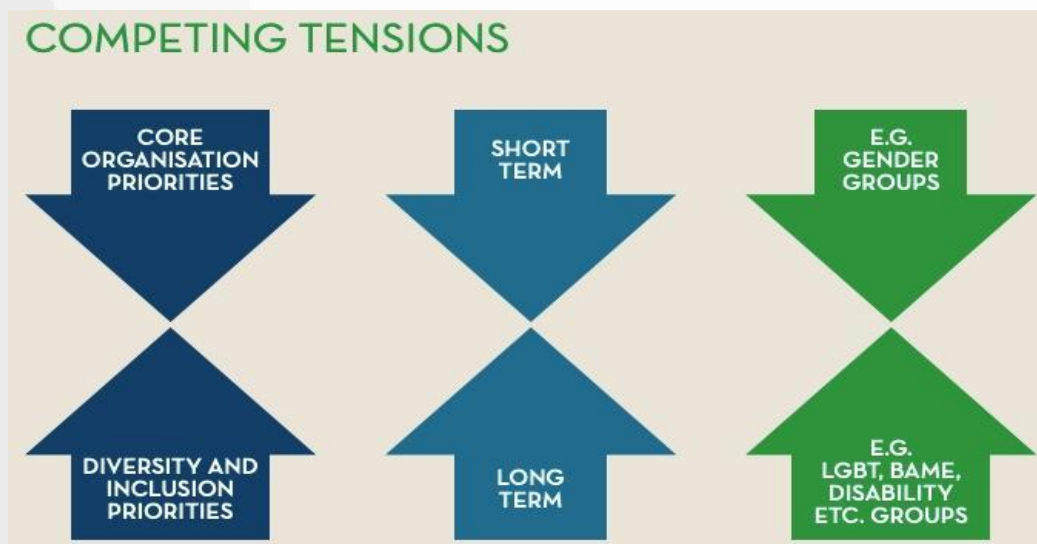
There exist competing tensions between:

1. **Core 'organisation priorities' and EDI priorities:** with EDI seen as a 'nice to have', resourcing inconsistent and second to core priorities - rather than a driver and enabler of their delivery.

2. **Short term and Long term:** with a desire for quick wins and immediate impact sometimes being at the cost of longer-term planning and effective design. For example, an awareness course over consideration of applying artificial intelligence to remove bias in recruitment or improve reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace.

3. **Individual EDI 'Strand' Groups:** with a competitive edge instilled to compete for time, sponsorship, funding, or focus. Rather than working collegiately to apply collective focus to common themes.

(Paradigm) Shifting into a new Operating Context

Delivering EDI in organisations that lead to significant, successful and sustained improvement can be challenging. There are multiple barriers to overcome, but organisations can follow a blueprint to navigate some of the difficulties outlined.

1. **Professionalise Delivery**

   - EDI must be mainstreamed to optimise the impact of efforts and investment. Integrated sensibly into all aspects of business delivery: outreach, recruitment, talent, leadership, culture, learning and development.

   - The topic of delivery is emotive. This can lead to over focus on the tactical (when delivery is often driven by personal passion or preference) rather than delivery against a strategic framing with early casualties witnessed: impacts to the broader system, ideas not taken on board, lack of clarity, EDI being turned away from in a crisis rather than turned to as a solution.

   - Professionalizing the approach includes moving away from activism to assured delivery. That means moving beyond a focus on performative action to transformative delivery.

- There can be a tendency to oversimplify complex organisational matters and, with good intention, implement ill thought through solutions. Too often interventions can be homogenised - viewed as 'silver bullet' solutions. In large organisations this is rarely effective. What is required in an office in Sheffield is unlikely to be exactly the same as one in London or Edinburgh.

- Inhospitable workplace culture can only be replaced by addressing the specific issues of your organisation - not others. Addressing a generic set of concerns or basing actions on assumptions risks limiting the impact of your work. So be data driven.

2. **Minimise negative impacts**

- Pitching EDII delivery is increasingly complex. A focus on 'business priorities' perceived as 'too cold' or a moral case focus labelled as 'woke'. Particular focus on protected characteristic seen as not holistic, but moving away from that viewed as uncaring.

- What can help is a focus on aspects of the employee life cycle impacting all: outreach, recruitment, talent, culture, learning and development. Using a holistic definition of diversity (a broader focus than Protected Characteristics alone, considering geographical, social, cognitive and experiential diversity) to provide reflections against each of these points in the employee lifecycle to test requirements and assess improvements made.

- The right strategy is key. Strategies can too often be a collection of ill evidenced - albeit well intentioned - action plans, that can promote competition and derision between stakeholder groups - as opposed to the unity and inclusion seemingly being sought. Too often wrapped in targets that gain focus, and attention but accidentally drive perverse business behaviours.

- Be data-driven, evidence-led and delivery focussed to enable a meritocratic approach, and ensure no-one is left behind making targeted interventions to level access to opportunities. A meritocratic approach ensures all our people are supported and considered. There can be a concern this too often means groups are left behind - and

that has been seen. Yet meritocracy does not mean ignoring trends/patterns and blindly delivering against a strategic rhetoric.

- This is a paradigm shift and the significant effort is required in convincing stakeholders that this approach does not mean an ignorance to or avoidance of experiences and challenges, just an approach to optimise delivering the improvements we all want.

3. **Promote Collaboration**

- Put simply you cannot deliver inclusivity by being exclusive. Organisations must build on what binds them and diminish that which divides. Overcoming the conflict between agents for change, and building collaborative partnerships to achieve agreed communal priorities.

- We have seen that competitive tensions can disrupt and hinder performance in EDI. The lessons of economics can provide some reflection here. The Nash equilibrium (where the optimal outcome of a game considers the interrelations of 'players of the game'. Where no player has an incentive to deviate from their chosen strategy after considering an opponent's choice); is a much more helpful position for EDI delivery than Adam Smith's assertion that *'development was best fostered in an environment of free competition that operated in accordance with universal "natural laws."* EDI 'strands' should not see themselves in competition and organisations should not promote that behaviour in the establishment of their infrastructure (HR, EDI teams, Senior 'Champions/Sponsors' and Employee networks).

- Collaboration does not mean harmony and agreement on certain beliefs. In an environment where there are increasingly contested views (and where those views can be protected) the actual aim should be to achieve a workplace culture where we can disagree, but work together to deliver improved performance. This in itself can be a paradigm shift, with the expectation that one view succeeds over another, rather than sitting alongside a variety of views which may conflict, but must do so respectfully and in a way that enables business delivery - not detracts from it.

- A better way is to focus on the employee life-cycle. Those stages as outlined above, that all of us experience, using our expertise as a discipline to improve those points for all based on data, insights and evidence from our employee experience.

Conclusion

The potential EDI has for organisations to unlock productivity improvements is significant. The challenge is to make that opportunity become a consistently recognised experience for employees and customers across organisations. The delivery landscape is complex, and of course, it is difficult to operate when criticised on your value, but practitioners should use challenge (which is not always valid or always due) to reflect on practice and provide agency for improvement. When done right, EDI is not tokenistic or performative. It is business-critical, transformative and enabling. When done right, it embodies our British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance.

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INTEGRATING COACHING AS A CORE COMPETENCE FOR PEOPLE TEAMS, BUSINESS LEADERS & MANAGERS

BY JO WRIGHT

As Co-founder of Coaching Culture, founder of Jo Wright Speaker and Coach, and bestselling author of 'No More Sh*t Managers: Seven Steps to a Coaching Culture', Jo's a passionate advocate for the many benefits a coaching culture creates. With 30 years' experience in leading and coaching teams, and as a professionally accredited Coach, Jo is a true coaching champion, on a mission to inspire people to think differently about the power of coaching.

Keywords: *Coaching; Communication; Mentoring; Mindset Change; Coach Approach; Misconceptions of Coaching; Coaching Capacity; Coaching Budget; Core Competence and more…*

Coaching in the workplace. Despite it being widely recognised as a positive way to develop others, it's only just starting to gather some momentum. And despite it proving time and time again how valuable it is, it's still a topic that harbours misconceptions and myths, and consequently we seem to be still some way off ensuring it's considered a core competence for all People teams, business leaders and managers.

This article will share why coaching should be a core competence, what the most common myths are, as well as the strategic challenges that may be getting in the way. But before exploring the reasons why coaching should be a core competence, it's important to clearly articulate what coaching is, and what it isn't.

Coaching is a way of being

Coaching is a powerful communication skill. When done well, it can be truly life changing. It's a process that can enable people to think deeply, self-reflect, change perspectives, and create new behaviours for the long term.

Fundamentally, it's a conversation that encourages deep thought. It helps to guide people to raise their self-awareness, set goals, overcome challenges, unlock their potential, and build high performance. The key is to ask powerful questions, and allow someone to think, so deep listening and silence play an invaluable part. It creates accountability in others to ensure positive progress is made. Done well, it helps to develop a growth mindset and one of continuous improvement. Ultimately, it empowers people to reach their full potential, both personally and professionally.

> *Not only is coaching a powerful communication skill, it's also a way of being. A mindset.*

This can tend to be a more challenging concept to grasp, and understandably so. We can readily observe skills, but we can't see someone's mindset. Fundamentally it means that when somebody starts to think like a coach, they can act like a coach. When coaching becomes second nature, and a way of being, it simply becomes *the* way to communicate. When organisations develop people to be more curious, to listen carefully and to build meaningful relationships and trust, they are building a culture that is set up for success. Arguably, it's the role of the People teams, business leaders and managers to unlock such potential and performance.

Coaching versus mentoring uncovered

One of the challenges with coaching, is that it's misunderstood. People can often be confused about what it is and what it isn't. So often when asked, people will proudly declare that they are confident at having a coaching conversation. What is meant by this, is that they are confident at asking questions, then when the silence becomes too uncomfortable to bear, or the other person has not quite found a solution, they happily dive into solution mode, and advise the best way forward, based on their experience. That's not coaching. That's advising or telling.

Another age-old challenge is that people can get confused between coaching and mentoring. While they share similar skills, such as building trust and rapport, questioning, and listening, they are also slightly different. When we think of a mentor, we think of someone who has 'been there, and bought the t-shirt'. Somebody who has experience in a certain subject matter that they are willing to share and guide others to learn from. Whereas coaching empowers people to come up with their own solutions, and the coach doesn't have to have any prior knowledge of the subject. It's a powerful form of reflection and self-discovery.

Coaching can unlock incredible results

Whenever people are asked what word comes to mind when they think of coaching, words such as 'development', 'potential', 'trust' and 'high performance' come up. The question tends to elicit words of growth and learning because coaching conversations can unlock incredible results, when done well and when the person being coached is open to learning and growing.

There's a breadth of research available these days about the many benefits of coaching conversations, and how organisations with a coaching culture outperform those that don't. There are just no downsides to building a culture where coaching conversations are expected and respected.

People and commercial metrics are known to improve, including employee engagement, wellbeing, development, inclusion, talent attraction and retention as well as the all-important commercial performance too. People also quote a greater sense of belonging, feeling listened to, valued, and understood.

Creating a culture of curiosity unlocks so much potential within individuals, teams, and an organisation. The benefits of ensuring that all People teams, leaders, and managers include coaching as a core competence are unquestionable.

People teams must coach to enable others

For those in People teams, coaching others in the organisation is an invaluable way to identify and deliver the organisational culture and business strategy. It's a fundamental skill to build relationships, uncover key opportunities and challenges and to truly partner with the various functions that they are there to serve. Often, it's the members of the People team who are expected to facilitate workshops, listening groups, and hold many confidential one-to-one conversations. Having coaching as a skill is fundamental to get the most out of all of these.

While this should be encouraged and celebrated, it mustn't be practiced to the detriment of leaders and managers doing their own role. In some organisations, members of the People team can fall into the trap of having the more challenging coaching conversations, rather than enabling leaders and managers. The phrase '...it's the role of the People team to coach my team' can still be a myth shared by some managers today. Thankfully, this practice is starting to change, as the role of the People team continues to evolve.

> "Having some level of capability in coaching is also important when identifying what the organisational coaching strategy is. This may include influencing stakeholders, identifying coaching needs, coaching capability gaps, identifying coaching solutions and evaluating the effectiveness of coaching interventions."

The magic happens when leaders and managers adopt a coach approach

While it's increasingly commonplace for an organisation to invest in the coaching capability of members of the People team, arguably the magic truly happens when the business leaders and managers also have the capability to have a coaching conversation. They are the ones having regular conversations with their teams after all.

This doesn't mean that they all must become professionally accredited coaches. Not at all. But to be able to adopt a 'coach approach' more of the time, so they can build and develop their skills over time should be seen as an essential rite of passage to be a leader or manager. To use an analogy, let's liken it to cooking. Everybody should be able to cook, but not everybody needs to be a professional chef. Cooking is a life skill. It is time to start viewing coaching conversations in much the same way.

Coaching is an essential people skill. Yet all too often, organisations hand teams over to technically gifted people by way of promotion, without giving them the basic skills to communicate. Not a recipe for success in anyone's book.

It's time to communicate human-to-human

Despite coaching being such a powerful communication skill, it's only now becoming more widely acknowledged that coaching needs to be a core competence of the People team. Even so, it's certainly not happening in every organisation. The CIPD People Profession Map of 2023 draws out the need for coaching around 'culture and behaviours' and 'learning and development'. Arguably, this should be the golden thread throughout all areas of the map, not just two. Undeniably, the People profession

has been through, and continues to go through incredibly challenging times. It's becoming increasingly apparent that the skills required are becoming more focused on the need to communicate effectively, human-to-human.

In fact, Sir Richard Branson quotes that:

"Great HR professionals possess the invaluable skill of balancing compassion and objectivity, enabling them to connect to employees on a human level while still upholding the best interest of the organisation."

Many supporters of coaching would agree that having an understanding and appreciation of coaching develops this skill in the most effective way.

Furthermore, it's also becoming more widely acknowledged that coaching is also an essential skill for leaders and managers. And while more and more organisations are waking up to this fact, it's arguably not happening quickly enough.

There's still a lot of work to be done...

While many organisations like the idea of building a coaching culture where it's a core competence for leaders and managers to demonstrate coaching capability, there's a general lack of understanding and mystery that can still shroud coaching, which means it's often not seen as a priority. Furthermore, as the recognition that coaching can benefit individuals, teams and organisations grows, so too does the need to bust the myths that continue to fester. It's these myths that often cause the strategic decision to deprioritise coaching.

Common myths include:
- There isn't an appetite to learn about coaching.
- People don't have time to have coaching conversations.
- Coaching is too fluffy.
- People don't want to be coached.
- Coaching is for poor performance only.

Common strategic challenges:

- Lack of senior level buy in.
- Determining the ROI of coaching.
- There's no time, budget, or resources to invest in coaching capability.

The root cause of these common challenges may be due to a general lack of understanding, a fear of the unknown and overall resistance to change. All these factors can hinder progress in any organisation. The opportunity here is to continue to strive to overcome them, to win hearts and minds and recognise the power of coaching.

Busting the coaching myths

There isn't an appetite to learn about coaching
People will be interested to learn about coaching once the benefits have been shared or they have experienced being coached themselves. This may be the time to source external coaches for the most senior leaders, build coaching capability with leaders and managers, and introduce affordable digital coaching solutions for everybody.

Dropping pebbles of success stories into the organisational pond, will ripple out further and further, ensuring others start to become interested in how they too can be a part of something so positive.

People don't have time to have coaching conversations
 While some coaching conversations are set aside specifically as a 'coaching session', it's important to encourage people to take a coaching approach more of the time to their everyday conversations. This isn't about adding to workload, this is about changing the way the existing conversations are happening. It becomes a much easier 'sell' when people realise this.

Coaching is too fluffy
This myth needs to be shaken off once and for all. Too many leaders misinterpret transformational rather than transactional conversations' as fluffy. Coaching can indeed unlock deeper conversations through the powerful questions asked. People will often share their thoughts and feelings more openly, and care and empathy will need to be shown. Trust will be built, and because of that, people may be more motivated and energised to be the best they can be. Coaching is proven time and time again to unlock potential and performance. All positive measures.

People don't want to be coached

This may be the case for some people, but it's highly unlikely to be the case for every single person. If coaching is part of the organisational vision and strategy, then 'going where the energy is' or 'the sunshine' is always a great place to start to introduce coaching. Those who may think that they don't want to be coached, may change their perspective when the results start to pour in.

Coaching is for poor performance only

Historically, this may have been the case. Not anymore. It's widely recognised that coaching can take people from good to great. The success of a coaching conversation largely depends on the mindset of the person who is being coached. The coaching conversations facilitate the process to raise awareness, change perspectives and behaviours for the long term. Coaching conversations are effective to help improve all performance.

Overcoming the most common challenges

Lack of senior level buy in

This is probably one of the most common challenges to ensure that coaching becomes core in any business. Again, this is likely to be due to a general lack of understanding, a fear of the unknown and overall resistance to change. A powerful way to overcome this challenge is to introduce coaching at the most senior level, it not only allows the senior leaders to experience coaching conversations first hand, but they too, can then learn how to role model coaching behaviours themselves.

Determining the ROI of coaching

Granted, it's not always easy to articulate the ROI, as both the tangible and intangible benefits of coaching need to be assessed against the investment. Quantitative and qualitative feedback surveys, focus groups, listening groups and one-to-ones are a good way to capture data to demonstrate change. Benefits may include such metrics as revenue growth, productivity, cost savings, improved employee experience, talent retention, and many more. However, the challenge has always been directly correlating a coaching culture, or the outcome of coaching conversations to these metrics.

Nonetheless, by attempting to quantify the ROI of any coaching initiatives, it becomes easier to demonstrate the value of coaching to key stakeholders and make informed decisions about resource allocation and future investments.

No time, budget, or resources to invest in coaching capability

This can often be a challenge when businesses are experiencing difficult times financially. The key is to keep demonstrating the effectiveness of coaching and the difference it can make. The way to do that is to keep gathering evidence and data, whether that is employee engagement scores, talent retention, performance metrics, internal promotions, wellbeing metrics, absence measures and overall business metrics. The question 'what is the risk of not doing this?' is a powerful one for sure.

How to integrate coaching as a core competence

To integrate coaching as a core competence for People teams, leaders, and managers, it's important to ensure that building a coaching culture is part of the overall business strategy and championed at the very top of the organisation. Coaching needs to be part of the fabric of the business, not as a supplementary nice-to-have. For this to happen, the senior leaders play a vital role in making this happen, role modelling the right behaviours and creating the environment for others to flourish.

Coaching is an essential communication skill and a way of being. Coaching conversations empower individuals to unlock their potential, creating a culture of continuous improvement and high performance. While it's often misunderstood, it offers so many benefits for individuals, teams, and the organisation.

In conclusion, organisational success, arguably, hinges on integrating coaching as a core competence, not only for those who are essential in influencing and shaping the overall strategy, but for those leaders and managers who are having conversations every day. Coaching allows people to develop their listening skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, and trust. All essential skills that are needed more than ever in the uncertain world that we live in. By busting myths, overcoming challenges, and championing coaching at all levels, organisations can harness the full potential of coaching to unlock potential and deliver results in the evolving world of work. It's time to recognise coaching as an essential people skill and prioritise its integration into the very fabric of the organisation.

DIVERSITY IN DESIGN: CREATING WORKPLACES FOR EVERY BODY AND BRAIN

BY JULIE TURNEY

Julie Turney is a heart centric people experience architect with over 16 years of experience in the HR profession. She is the brainchild of HR@Heart Consulting Inc., a coaching firm she describes as the "HR Safe Space." Julie created her firm as part of her healing process through her second bout of HR burnout. Today, Julie supports fellow HR professionals from around the globe who are struggling with burnout, compassion fatigue and frustration in their HR careers to get back on track and regain the lost joy in their HR careers. Julie is also a TEDx & Public Speaker, Author of the book "Confessions of an HR Pro: Stories of Defeat and Triumph", Host of the HR Sound Off Podcast Show, and Lead Organizer of Disrupt HR Caribbean for Barbados, Jamaica & Trinidad.

Keywords: *Neuro-diversity; Flexible Working; Mental Health; Training; Awareness and more..*

Introduction

Creating inclusive workplaces that accommodate everybody and brain type is not just about physical accessibility; it's also about acknowledging and accommodating diverse cognitive styles, sensory sensitivities, and mental health needs. In this article, we will explore how organizations can design and adapt their workplaces to be more inclusive and supportive of every individual, regardless of their physical or neurological differences.

Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in cognitive functioning present in human beings. It encompasses conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and more. Neuro-divergent individuals often have unique strengths and perspectives that can benefit the workplace when accommodated appropriately.

Physical Accommodations

Physical accommodations are crucial for ensuring that workplaces are accessible to every body type. This includes features such as adjustable desks and chairs, ramps, wider doorways, and accessible restroom facilities. These accommodations benefit not only individuals with physical disabilities but also those with chronic health conditions or temporary injuries.

Sensory Considerations

Sensory sensitivities are common among neuro-divergent individuals and can affect their comfort and productivity in the workplace. Employers can make simple adjustments such as providing noise-cancelling headphones, offering quiet spaces, and using soft lighting to create a sensory-friendly environment.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and flexible hours, can benefit employees with diverse needs. For example, individuals with ADHD may find it easier to focus in a quiet home environment, while those with chronic pain may benefit from being able to adjust their work hours to manage their symptoms.

Mental Health Support

Supporting mental health in the workplace is essential for accommodating every brain type. Employers can provide access to mental health resources, offer employee assistance programs (EAPs), and promote a culture of openness and acceptance around mental health issues.

Training and Awareness

Training employees on neurodiversity and disability awareness can help create a more inclusive workplace culture. This includes educating staff on the different ways people think and process information and how to interact respectfully with colleagues with diverse needs.

Conclusion

Creating workplaces that accommodate everybody and brain type requires a holistic approach that addresses physical, sensory, and mental health needs. Organizations can create environments where

every individual can thrive by implementing inclusive design practices, offering flexible work arrangements, and promoting awareness and acceptance.

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INCLUSION AS A CATALYST FOR INNOVATION

BY DR. LAURA MAY

Laura May, PhD, is former Executive Director of the International Mediation Institute, current European Director of People & Culture at Hill & Knowlton, and future and always people nerd. She's been inspired by fantastic feminists, magnificent mediators, and psychological scientists. Her PhD covered the ways in which blame makes villains, and she highly recommends the fascinating MicroMasters in Corporate Innovation offered on edX. Currently based in Spain, Laura also engages as a P&C consultant with The TCM Group.

Thinking of innovative organisations might give us images of gleaming buildings, cars in space, a proliferation of apps, or chaotic new technologies from our favourite tech giants. Perhaps it brings to mind slogans along the lines "move fast and break things", or "always be connecting dots". Some organisations appear innovative, bringing in funding and business accordingly, while others do not; but we don't always stop to ask ourselves *why*. Vitally, it isn't just a matter of brilliant leaders, but also a more holistic and fundamental innovation culture that invites and cherishes diverse perspectives.

An innovation culture is one that enables quick and successful adaption to change. It allows an organisation to gain and stay at the leading edge of technology and the market even during turbulent times as it encourages ideas to emerge, be tested, be brought to market, and then re-innovated as the world changes once more. Innovative organisations are at the cutting edge; not too attached to what they *have* done and *have* been, but always open to the new. And this tends to pay off (McGrath 2012). Innovative firms out-perform non-innovating firms in terms of both productivity and economic growth (Cainelli, Evangelista, and Savona 2004); and of course, some of the largest companies in the

world today, from Apple to Netflix, are known for their ability to innovate new technologies and virtually print money as a result.

We already know there are specific organisational choices we can make to help support a culture of innovation, and they tend to revolve around putting people first. Examples include having an *organistic* structure with flat hierarchy and matrixes rather than the mechanistic pyramid structures associated with conservative organisations; this allows ideas to be easily shared and grown. People should be selected for *benevolence* rather than solely ability, as a toxic character on a team is ultimately never worth the pain (Shazi, Gillespie, and Steen 2015). There are needs for continual learning and development to keep abreast of the latest techniques and opportunities; for people to the have time and space for deep thought; and for people to have the purpose, mastery, and autonomy—in short, are treated as responsible adults—that allows them to be motivated members of the workplace (Pink 2011). Agile innovation teams are likely to feature 'T-shaped' skills (Conley et al. 2017) with differing levels of expertise across a range of areas reflecting a wide range of life and learning experiences, rather than being siloed specialists—particularly important in times of uncertainty and technological change (Hamdi et al. 2016). Managing this new way of working in turn calls for leaders at all levels across the organisation to develop *vertically* as individuals—building skills such as emotional intelligence, authenticity, trust, and the ability to delegate—as well as horizontally in terms of learning new functional skills.

> *Fundamental to innovation is a diversity of ideas and experiences, and that is where diversity and inclusion, and the psychological safety that supports both these and innovation more broadly, come in.*

These are most obvious at the stage of ideation, where we start to generate new ideas, but are similarly important when emerging problems that need solving, and afterwards as ideas are adapted, selected, tested, and implemented. We will take a look at some of the research discussing the link between diversity, inclusion, and innovation below, as well as the challenges and opportunities it provides; but firstly, where does innovation culture appear?

Innovation as an organisational culture

Organisational culture is where leadership, people and processes, and business strategy all meet. Leaders model and support a culture; people and processes carry on culture when leaders aren't in

the room (Frei and Morriss 2020); and business strategy including vision, mission, and values inform the need for innovation and may be innovated in turn as new horizons appear. Without *all* of these components working together, innovation will be difficult: including 'innovation' as a value without also implementing the processes or selecting the people and leadership to support a culture of innovation is doomed to fail. Consider a large-scale cake-making business. Perhaps a leader sees that frozen cake pops are all over TikTok this summer, and decides to see whether they can innovate their existing products or produce a new product that is just as 'TikTokkable'. If they don't have a stage-gated innovation process in place to come up with, test, and implement ideas, or perhaps the requisite culinary or media expertise in-house, they're significantly less likely to be successful. After all, soggy, partly-defrosted cake doesn't like quite so good on the 'gram, even if it *does* sparkle.

Upsetting. Generated using DALLE-3.

Another challenge is that organisations with an internal culture of innovation will not just innovate *externally* in terms of products delivered to clients or the market; they will also be subject to *internal* innovation. This may come with a bit of a sense of threat, particularly to those in leadership who are

used to a particular way of doing things. This can be a real challenge to organisations that want to achieve innovative outcomes, because as noted above, conservative, directive, hierarchical organisations that damage rather than foster trust and autonomy are simply not built to innovate.

How is diversity important to innovation?

There are many ways of talking about diversity, but here we'll talk about *demographic* diversity (things like gender, age, race, religion), *functional* diversity (people from different functional areas in an organisation, e.g. people and culture or operations), and *cognitive* diversity (where people think differently and have unique perspectives). Cognitive diversity can arise out of demographic and functional diversity: perhaps your IT project team is used to approaching projects using Agile 'test it fast' principles, while your operations team is used to waterfall 'deliver a finished project' principles. Likewise, the different experiences we have because of who we are, how we look, and the experiences we've had can lead to divergent perspectives.

Rarely, when pulling together a team to work on innovation, demographic diversity might not be important. For example, if you are designing a facial razor specifically for use by men, then including pre-pubescent people, women, or those who are religiously opposed to shaving and thus do not have the experience of *using* a facial razor in a project group might not help generate innovative design ideas (see Pearsall, Ellis, and Evans 2008). However, this is an outlier case. Elsewhere, gender diversity on R&D teams is related to radical innovation (Díaz-García, González-Moreno, and Jose Sáez-Martínez 2013).

In heterogeneous (i.e. diverse) teams, perception that your tasks are interdependent with those of others is strongly related to innovative behaviours, while lacking goal interdependence or having homogenous teams is not. That is, diverse teams that work together across projects, task, and workplace boundaries are more innovative (Van der Vegt and Janssen 2003). More generally, enhancing diversity is associated with innovation. Functional diversity improves quality of team performance across measures of decision-making, creativity/innovation, and problem-solving (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007). There is a clear call for interdisciplinary teams, and perhaps those people who can bring different skill sets to a project.

Interestingly, Brixy et al find that ethnic 'unusualness' is much more likely to lead to innovation in start-ups—so it is not simply desirable to ensure teams reflect the multiculturality of their society, but

also to seek further afield for people whose cognitive approaches and knowledge are significantly different (Brixy, Brunow, and D'Ambrosio 2020). This calls for an inclusive approach to hiring, bringing in minority and unrepresented communities from near and far, and enhancing mobility programs.

Lastly, employees of firms with leadership diversity along both demographic and experiential lines are "45% likelier to report a growth in market over the previous year and 70% likelier to report that the firm captured a new market." (Hewlett, Marshall, and Sherbin 2013). Board diversity, along both cognitive and demographic lines, leads to heightened innovation (Makkonen 2022). It's not just a matter of having diverse innovation or project teams, but ensuring that continues the whole way through to leadership (cf. Hunt DBE et al. 2023).

From diversity to inclusion

It appears that teams encompassing a range of diverse perspectives can help drive and implement innovation, but this comes with its own challenges (Winkler and Bouncken 2011). Namely, people who *think* very differently are going to find it much trickier to get along at first. Horwitz has found a negative relationship between team diversity and social integration (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007). Indeed, diversity can be a source of "misunderstanding, suspicion, and conflict in the workplace" (Bassett-Jones 2005) that in turn results in poor outcomes such as lessened morale, increased turnover, and potentially *lower* quality work. How to manage this?

To answer this, we need to consider:

The difference between diversity and inclusion: diversity is a description,
and inclusion is a process.

Being inclusive means not just selecting the right, heterogeneous group of people; it means setting them up with the conditions for success (Taylor 2024). Here that means taking a people-centred approach that meets people where they are, asking what *they* need to be successful (Khan et al. 2021), perhaps using props such as 'Manuals of Me' that give personnel the opportunity to reflect on who they are and their own direction. This should be complemented by L&D that aids vertical development: new lenses for seeing the world, and for understanding and planning one's place within it. There should be elements of coaching and even moments of inner confrontation where people feel safe to explore *what* they think, and why they think it. It also means a management style that is focused on empowering personnel—servant leadership, where managers give people what they need

to succeed and then get out of their way (Iqbal, Latif, and Ahmad 2020). Without these as basic steps towards inclusion, any team diversity is likely to be tokenistic and unsuccessful in gaining the desired innovative outcomes.

"A servant leader supporting their staff". Generated using DALLE-3.

One of the most important strategies for practicing inclusion is developing a notion of *constructive conflict*, where conflict is a source of ideas and growth, rather than *destructive conflict* that destroys trust and relationships (it's no coincidence that Hill et al. 2014 identified 'creative abrasion' as one of three key organisational capacities required for innovation.).

This calls for a resolution framework rather than punitive grievance, harassment, and bullying policies (Liddle 2017), which must be accompanied by the key workplace skills of mediation and integrative negotiation. These together support the transformation of conflict from a source of competition into a location for collaboration. This helps create the psychological safety that is so important to innovation (Edmondson and Mogelof 2005), and to creating a more inclusive workplace more broadly. Curiosity and emotional intelligence must be prized, as producing both the big questions that need answering and the ability to navigate through tricky diplomatic situations and complicated feelings that can arise when things are always changing.

A further difficulty when putting together diverse teams can be that some people feel less able to speak up and have their ideas taken seriously than do others. Part of addressing this is sensitive and empathetic servant leadership; but another part is embracing failure. While it may seem

counterintuitive to want people to fail, embracing failure and the ability to fail fast encourages risk-taking and trying new things, while minimising the time spent on innovations that won't work out (see Cannon and Edmondson 2005). Having events such as 'failure Fridays' where members of the leadership team share a time they have failed, and what they learnt from it, could model and render safe the desired behaviour—while also illustrating the authenticity key to modern leadership and the dedication to ongoing personnel development that are so important in the innovation sphere.

Conclusion

In a rapidly evolving business landscape, characterised by new technologies and ways of work, fostering a culture of innovation is not just a choice but a necessity. By prioritising diversity and inclusion, organisations can gain access to new perspectives and ideas that help to encourage and drive innovation. However, this is not without its challenges, and not without its scary parts. We are in an age of extreme and increasing disruption thanks to technological leaps and nascent AI, and this could already be dislocating for managers and personnel alike. Innovating to come out ahead means innovating internally as well, both in the sense of 'going within' and doing internal work as leaders, but also in terms of letting go of old organisational practices and making best use of the people you have to build something new, together. It is perhaps ironic that in an age of AI, it is by being our most human that we can come out ahead.

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FROM STRESS TO SUCCESS: HOW CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE CAN TRANSFORM YOUR ORGANISATION

BY MARIE COOMBES

Marie Coombes, CEO of We Restore Calm, specialises in mediation, training and mental well-being, with over 300 resolved workplace conflicts. Her award-winning approach blends deep mediation skills with trauma-informed practises and mental health expertise, fostering workplace transformation and positive change through expert coaching and conflict resolution

In today's fast-paced and demanding work environments, the spectre of stress looms large, often casting a long shadow over employee well-being and organisational success. According to the CIPD, 2023 marked the highest sick absence rate in a decade, with employees averaging just short of 8 days off; stress remained one of the main causes at a staggering 76%. Unchecked, this stress morphs into a chronic and often toxic force, eroding individual health and productivity. Worse yet, it seeps into the very fabric of workplace culture, planting seeds of discontent, disengagement, and dysfunction throughout the organisation. In this article, we delve into the root causes behind such soaring levels of stress, as well as its creators, placing a spotlight the role effective implementation of psychological safety has on creating an environment where employees can flourish.

What is Stress?

Stress, at its core, is the body's instinctual response to feeling threatened or pressured. When faced with a stressful situation, whether real or perceived, our autonomic nervous system kicks into gear, triggering the "fight or flight" response—a primal survival mechanism inherited from our ancestors. This response served us well in the days of cavemen, helping us navigate immediate dangers like

oncoming predators. Similarly, it can provide a helpful boost of adrenaline when tackling impending deadlines. In the short term, some stress is healthy and beneficial, keeping us alert and motivated. Indeed, it's crucial to recognise that the absence of stress can be just as harmful as an overwhelming amount of it.

The real issue arises when stress becomes a persistent part of our daily lives, leaving little room for relaxation and recovery. This prolonged state of stress, known as chronic stress, wreaks havoc on our bodies and minds as it leaves us with constant exposure to high levels of adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormones). Some tell-tale signs of chronic stress include:

- Immune system suppression, leading to increased susceptibility to short-term and chronic illnesses.
- Musculoskeletal issues such as muscle tightness and tension, resulting in headaches, migraines, and back or neck pain.
- Cardiovascular problems like elevated blood pressure and a heightened risk of stroke and heart disease.
- Cognitive impairment, manifesting as poor memory and concentration.
- Sleep disturbances, perpetuating a vicious cycle of stress and pressure, potentially culminating in mental health conditions like anxiety or depression.

This last point is an important one to emphasise; while stress itself is not a psychiatric disorder, allowing it to spiral out of control can pave the way for more severe mental health issues.

The Creators of Chronic Stress at Work

In the workplace, chronic stress can be created in various ways; here are just a few examples:

High levels of pressure and demand
 Excessive workloads, tight deadlines, and unrealistic expectations leave employees in a constant state of fight or flight as the brain tries to protect both body and mind. As a result, employees feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, with the results ranging from short term absence and presentism to 'leave-ism' and burnout.

Lack of support and resources

When employees don't feel supported by their managers or colleagues, or when they lack the resources necessary to perform their job effectively, it can contribute to feelings of anger and frustration (fight) or apathy and disengagement (flight or freeze). This lack of support can be particularly problematic during times of change or uncertainty which in themselves are stress creators.

Poor work-life balance: Often a result of the previous two catalysts, this is where a workplace culture either encourages, or doesn't discourage, employees to switch off outside of work, often leading to 'leaveism', with employees feeling the pressure to work during allocated time off just to stay on top of things and meet expectations. When left feeling like they have to choose between their job and their personal life, it can lead to feelings of guilt, resentment, and exhaustion.

Unclear expectations and role ambiguity

When employees are unsure about what is expected of them or how their role contributes to the overall goals of the organisation, they are left in a state of uncertainty and confusion, as well as a lack of purpose and direction

Lack of autonomy and control

When employees feel micromanaged or like they have little control over their work or career, it can create at best a lack of trust between employer and employee and create strong feelings of apathy and helplessness.

Conflict and hostility

Stress & mental illness enjoy a cause-and-effect relationship with conflict; individuals prone to stress or those diagnosed with mental illness may find that destructive conflict intensifies their symptoms, leading to a worsening cycle of distress. Similarly, engagement in destructive conflict, even for a brief period, can significantly harm an employee's well-being, regardless of any pre-existing mental health diagnosis. Combine this with the understanding conflict rarely involves just two people and left unchecked can affect and infect an entire organisation very quickly.

This is by no means an exhaustive list; your industry may face unique stressors not mentioned in this overview. Notably, statistics from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) for the period from March 2022 to March 2023 highlight that the sector with the most reported stress-related illnesses is Human Health & Social Work, with an incidence rate of 3,530 per 100,000 workers. Following closely are the Public Defence and Education sectors, ranking second and third, respectively. It's critical to understand that the presence and impact of stress in the workplace should never be underestimated or overlooked, regardless of its origin.

Counteracting the Catalysts

The key to counteracting these creators on paper is simple; create an environment where psychological safety flows through everything you do. What isn't so simple is what that looks like for your organisation and employees in practice. The key to implementing lasting psychological safety is remembering one key element – the individual.
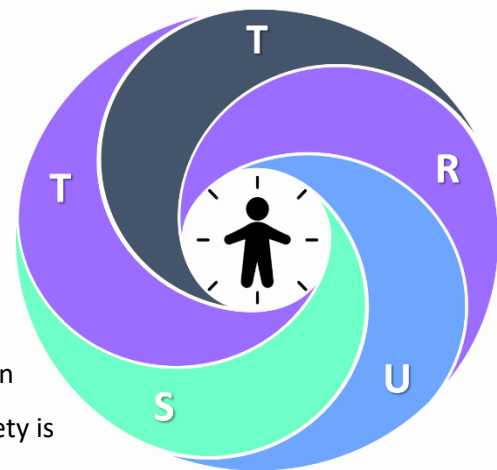

Fig 1: The T.R.U.S.T© Model of Psychological Safety
Coombes, M (2023)

The T.R.U.S.T$^{©}$ Model of Psychological Safety (Fig 1) has the individual at its heart; the key to understanding the individual is to understand the Frame of Reference concept by Jacqui and Aaron Schiff, used heavily both in the mediation world as well as in mental health first aid. It revolves around the idea that each individual perceives and interacts with the world through a unique filter composed of their personal experiences, education, and beliefs. This concept is particularly important in the context of non-judgmental listening, which emphasises the need to listen to others without letting our own preconceived notions or biases interfere. The Schiff's Frame of Reference, some aspects of which are shown in fig 2, is essentially the mental and emotional lens through which we view the world, shaping our reactions and judgments.
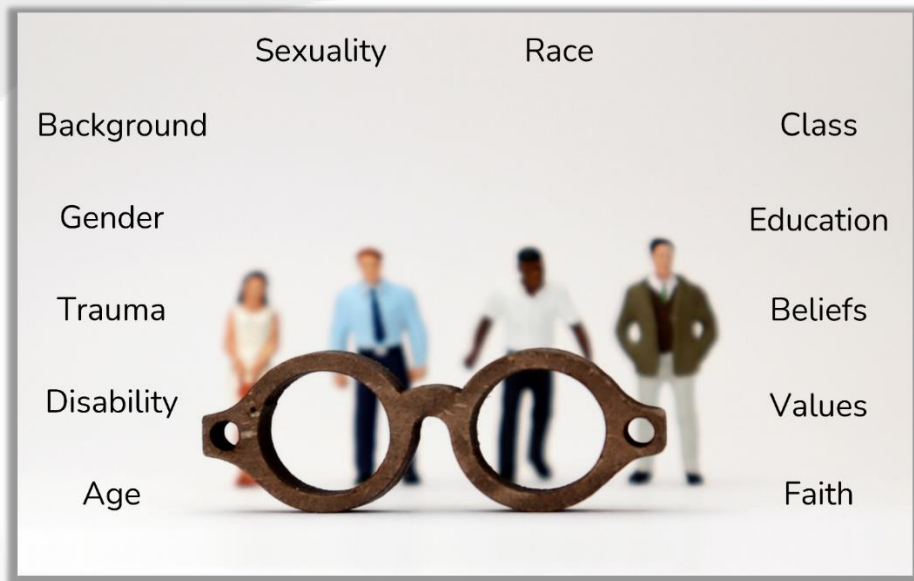
Fig 2: Frame of Reference – Jacqui & Aaron Schiff (1975)

Why is this relevant to psychological safety? The reason is two-fold. Firstly, our Frame of Reference significantly influences our concept of what psychological safety is because it shapes our perceptions, beliefs, and interpretations of our environment. For example, one individual's Frame of Reference includes a traumatic experience which has created a state of hypervigilance where their brain is fine-tuned to look for threats. Consequently, situations perceived as threatening, such as receiving an email from a challenging colleague requesting a one-on-one meeting, may trigger irrational responses; someone who's Frame of Reference doesn't include such an experience may not react at all.

Secondly, our Frame of Reference drives how we offer psychological safety to others, particularly through communication. In the mediation room we create psychological safety by listening non-judgmentally and impartially. To do this effectively, we must strive to overcome our Frame of Reference; creating an environment where the speaker feels safe to express themselves openly, involving acceptance, empathy, and genuineness towards the speaker's experiences and views, which may significantly differ from one's own. These core conditions facilitate a safe space for the speaker, encouraging open and honest dialogue.

This isn't to imply that an organisation must tailor a unique concept of psychological safety for each employee. However, it does underscore the necessity of acknowledging and incorporating individual needs when addressing stress creators. Achieving this involves leveraging the various elements of the rest of the T.R.U.S.T$^©$ model, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and meeting these individual needs within the collective pursuit of a psychologically safe workplace.

Transparency

Here open communication is key; sharing information openly, accurately, and timely with the relevant stakeholders. By ensuring that the right information reaches the right people at the right time, organisations can enhance trust and reduce ambiguity, mitigating the potential for misunderstandings or mistrust.

> *Transparency includes providing clarity on the rationale behind decisions, changes, policies, and processes.*

Employees crave understanding of the "why" behind organisational initiatives, and transparent communication helps bridge this gap. When leaders are forthcoming about the reasons driving their actions, it cultivates a sense of predictability and trust, enabling employees to navigate change more effectively.

In a psychologically safe environment, transparency extends beyond sharing successes to acknowledging and learning from failures. Embracing a culture where feedback is encouraged, valued, and acted upon fosters continuous improvement and innovation. Employees feel empowered to voice their opinions, knowing that their input is taken seriously and contributes to positive change within the organisation.

Achieving transparency requires vulnerability and honesty from all members of the organisation. Leaders must lead by example, demonstrating integrity and authenticity in their communication. By practicing transparency consistently, organisations can quickly build trust among employees, paving the way for collaboration, innovation, and success.

Respect

The principle of respect plays a pivotal role in fostering an environment where individuals feel valued, empowered, and free to express themselves authentically. Central to this notion of respect is the consideration of ideas, alternatives, and challenges, creating a culture where diversity of thought is not only welcomed but actively encouraged. It's essential to emphasize that respect doesn't equal agreeing to everything; it entails genuine consideration and engagement with differing perspectives, even when they challenge the status quo.

> *Respect entails the acknowledgment of worth, value, and contribution, irrespective of perceived or actual hierarchies within the organisation.*

Recognising and valuing the unique perspectives, viewpoints, and frames of reference that each individual brings to the table fosters a culture of inclusivity and collaboration, where everyone's input is valued and respected.

Feedback delivery is another critical aspect of fostering respect within the workplace. By ensuring fairness and equality in how feedback is given and received, organisations create an environment where individuals feel heard, understood, and valued. This involves providing constructive feedback that is clearly actionable, in a respectful and empathetic manner, focusing on behaviour rather than personal attributes, and offering support and guidance for improvement.

Furthermore, respect also encompasses empowering individuals with the autonomy to express themselves in ways that are genuine and aligned with their personal values and beliefs. This empowerment includes honouring and supporting their work-life boundaries, ensuring that employees can maintain a healthy balance that respects both their professional commitments and personal well-being.

Understanding

The willingness to take time to be curious and engage in active listening is where the Frame of Reference really comes to the fore and where individuals can be allowed to express their individualised notion of psychological safety. By demonstrating genuine curiosity about others' perspectives and experiences, individuals can foster a deeper understanding of their colleagues' thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

> *This proactive approach not only prevents misunderstandings but also helps to nip potential conflicts in the bud before they escalate.*

Instead of shying away from disagreements, organisations should embrace them as opportunities for growth and learning. By reframing mistakes as opportunities for improvement and approaching

conflicts with emotional intelligence and empathy, individuals can navigate challenging situations more effectively, leading to mutually beneficial resolutions.

Understanding is exemplified through shared understanding role-modelled by all members of the organisation. From mission and vision to goals, values, behaviours, and roles and responsibilities, everyone plays a role in upholding and reinforcing a shared understanding of the organisation's purpose and objectives. By aligning individual actions with organisational goals and values, individuals can contribute to a cohesive and harmonious workplace culture where trust and psychological safety thrive.

Support

This should transcend traditional hierarchical boundaries, manifesting in peer-to-peer, top-down, and bottom-up forms. This multifaceted approach ensures that support permeates every facet of the organisational structure, fostering a culture where individuals feel valued, empowered, and equipped to navigate challenges effectively.

Support is not merely a reactive response to crises but a proactive commitment to personal development and well-being. It entails providing resources, guidance, and encouragement for individuals to realise their full potential and thrive both personally and professionally.

By investing in employees' emotional and mental well-being, organisations not only enhance individual resilience but also cultivate a culture of compassion and empathy.

In challenging times, the importance of support becomes even more pronounced. Whether grappling with organisational changes, uncertainties, or personal hardships, individuals rely on a robust support network to navigate adversity with resilience and grace. Leaders play a critical role in modelling supportive behaviour, demonstrating empathy, and providing reassurance during turbulent times.

Tolerance

The linchpin for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, tolerance extends beyond mere acceptance; it encompasses a genuine embrace of diversity in thought, perspectives, and experiences. Key to this is the recognition and appreciation of mistakes as valuable learning opportunities rather

than failures. By cultivating an environment where mistakes are met with understanding and support, individuals feel empowered to take risks, innovate, and grow without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Tolerance extends to embracing diversity of thought and perspectives. Organisations thrive when individuals bring varied viewpoints to the table, challenging assumptions and driving innovation.

By fostering an environment where individuals feel safe expressing dissenting opinions and engaging in constructive dialogue, organisations can harness the collective intelligence of their teams and foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Respecting, acknowledging and valuing differing Frames of Reference can foster a culture of empathy and understanding, where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued for who they are.

However, tolerance does not equate to a lack of accountability. While organisations should strive to create an environment where individuals feel supported and respected, accountability remains essential for maintaining trust and integrity within the workplace. Without accountability, tolerance can devolve into complacency, undermining the very foundation of psychological safety.

As we navigate through the complexities of workplace stress and its creators, it's clear that a proactive and compassionate approach to psychological safety isn't just beneficial; it's imperative for the health and prosperity of both individuals and organisations alike. The strategies outlined, from fostering transparency and respect to ensuring support and embracing tolerance, provide a roadmap towards a more resilient and supportive workplace culture. But understanding and implementing these principles require more than just reading about them; it calls for action. The journey towards a psychologically safe workplace is a collective effort, and it starts with each one of us taking a step forward. Let's commit to making our workplaces not just spaces where we work, but environments where we all can genuinely thrive.

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T.R.U.S.T© Model comes from "From Turmoil to Trust: A Leader's Guide to Psychological Safety in the Workplace" (Coombes, Marie Oct 2023), due for release early 2025.

SHARED TRUTHS AND COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS IN THE WORKPLACE

BY MARIA ARPA MBE

Maria founded the Centre for Peaceful Solutions and developed a model of conflict resolution for violent crime using her brainchild, the Dialogue Road Map (DRM). It is used for resolving conflict, repairing harm, decision making and healing at an individual and group level. Using the DRM for collaborative decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution transforms communities into a peer led system of organization which shares power in order to reduce pressure on leaders, and increase responsibility taking at all levels. Maria has authored two books, The Heart of Mindful Relationships and Mindfulness at Work and, in 2020 she received an MBE for Services to Mediation.

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A typical workplace conflict…

Last month, I was giving a talk about conflict in workplaces and an audience member presented me with a scenario she faced as a manager in a College. It was very typical of the kinds of conflicts that happen in workplaces. Sadly, the conflict was never fully resolved and one of the colleagues left the job. The manager felt responsible and wanted to understand what she could have done differently.

The conflict was centred on a Lecturer who was organising an event to promote inclusion and equality. It was a very noble initiative and there was much enthusiasm. Execution of the event required cooperation from another staff member. This other member of staff was a highly respected and experienced colleague who refused to cooperate because the planning was too 'last minute' and disruptive to the smooth running of the department.

The event did not go ahead. Both colleagues felt frustration and they entered into an unpleasant email exchange that lasted for several weeks, copying in other colleagues who had their own opinions but did not know what to do so they took sides and fuelled the conflict without realising that what they were doing wasn't at all helpful.

The manager felt responsible for resolving the conflict and expended a lot of energy speaking to each of them separately and, in her words, "trying to reason with them". It was to no avail. The less experienced member of staff resigned and, after they left, the matter was never spoken of again.

This scenario is typical of the kinds of conflicts that arise in workplaces, and also typical of the lack of training and skills needed to attend to such conflicts early enough on for constructive dialogue to take place. And, I go a step further. It's also typical of how workplaces create the conditions in which two members of a team could even believe there was a conflict or anything to argue over.

Yes, read that again. Team members believe there is a conflict and something to argue over because they believe conflict is bad and something to be avoided or stamped out. And I say… it's a workplace full of people doing their best, sometimes badly, to meet the terms of their employment, some better than others, with, maybe, differences of opinion on what or how things could be done. And, in the mix are power imbalances, budgets, deadlines, due diligence, rules, health and safety, and scrutiny. It's messy. People are messy. How an organisation governs its resources creates a culture. That culture determines how people work together.

Of course, the college could have brought in an external mediator which would have most likely resolved the issue enough for the two staff members to continue working together, yet, for me, even that means allowing an incident or set of circumstances to escalate to a point of damage affecting not only the two staff members, but the team, the manager, the college and possibly the students.

Let's reimagine how conflict in the workplace could be processed

To do this we need to first accept that when we put tens, hundreds or even thousands of people in a community called a workplace, in a setting where they don't necessarily get to choose their colleagues, within a diverse society, it's not only likely but pretty much definite that some people will not get along, some people will disagree, some people will do life better than others, Furthermore,

some people will make better quality decisions and some people will just not care about others very much.

To get compliance and consistency we can use all sorts of tools like laws, employment contracts, policies, punitive threats and even rewards to evoke behaviour that is conducive to a healthy and functional environment and often, it works enough to get results. Sometimes, though, it doesn't work and no amount of rules or coercion will get compliance.

Expecting people to work in quiet compliance is a short term game. If they are actually unhappy and have nowhere safe to express it, they will act it out as non-cooperation in ways that remain within the employment contract but are difficult to name. This may even be unconscious. For example, gossiping and rumour mongering, working more slowly than they actually can or giving no more than is the minimum requirement to make performance acceptable.

> "The fruits of resentment are toxic and hard to spot. Resentment can be invisibly leaked into the culture and spread contagiously."

The reason for this is resentment. Resentment results from a sense of unfairness. If a person believes they are being treated unfairly, whether this is true or not, they will feel indignation. Left unattended indignation will manifest as resentment. Having no safe place to express unhappiness will lead to resentment because we all have a deep need to be heard and to matter. So any community where people are not heard will be perceived as unfair. Sometimes a conflict or dispute may show itself as a symptom of a wider underlying issue. This is why I often advocate against parachuting a mediator into a business to do a one off piece of work in a workplace where the culture is counter to the values of conflict resolution, such as openness, participation, transparency and empowerment.

For someone to be heard is not just a matter of letting them express themselves and offering up platitudes, it is a place of dialogue. It's a place where we honour what is alive in people and support them to make a contribution from a place of goodwill. So, in reimagining a workplace, we go beyond the expectation of compliance and foster an environment of goodwill. A workplace built on compliance may get things done. A workplace built on goodwill will flourish.

What does it take to build goodwill?

Goodwill is a human state that forms when we bond with each other. It is based on trust and integrity. To build goodwill in a workplace, every person is recognised for their value and what it means to their team, their department and the organisation. From this place a person will understand the worth of their contribution and feel satisfaction in the giving.

In this way we form a bond of giving and receiving. Of course, salary, bonuses and other perks are important but basing employment solely on money in exchange for labour misses the possibility of the whole human experience. It misses the possibility to make something greater than the sum of the parts.

Of course the money in exchange for labour must be a fair and reasonable contract and my proposition is based on this as the starting point. Once this has been established, a whole human experience is based on giving and receiving. The employer provides a place of meaning and purpose where contribution is valued and wellbeing is a consideration, and the employee makes a contribution with care for the outcome because they get satisfaction and trust that they are cared for.

Caring for the workplace and everyone in it is the key. Demonstrating that care is paramount. It requires everyone to adopt a position of curiosity in which we actually are interested in the motivations and inspiration for the actions people take. For example, instead of blaming someone for a mistake or failure, trying to understand what they were telling themselves allows much more room for a conversation about learning, development and correction than inducing humiliation and shame in someone that they then have to recover from.

When it becomes apparent that everyone cares, the seeds of goodwill are watered and nourished. This will show itself as happier and more productive community.

The main problem with ignoring goodwill as a basis for a community is that in a hierarchical system, on the day that the person holding the power screws up and desperately needs the support of the people they manage to put something right, if it requires those people to 'go the extra mile' they are less likely to do it with any grace, if at all.

Pie in the sky?

In the UK, employment law is requiring employers to take more and more responsibility for their employee's wellbeing. Never before have employers been required to consider mental health, misuse

of power, human rights and working environment to such a level of legal obligation. And employees, rightly so, rely on these laws when an employer does not do its due diligence.

When employers find this tough, experience has shown me that it is because they haven't reimagined the culture of their workplace. No amount of extra benefits or quick fixes are going to change the culture. Giving people sweets to buy compliance will not remedy the root causes of conflict that breeds unhappiness, demotivation and dissatisfaction.

And, when employees do not believe that anyone cares, they will use any levers available to draw attention to their issues. This means grievances, complaints, time off with stress and contaminating the community with negative narratives. The resources expended to address these issues may put out the fire but do they deal with the root causes or cultivate a healthier culture? Therefore, it is more intelligent to put resources into building goodwill, taking care of our humanity by attending to what is authentic, than using resource heavy punitive measures to remedy harm that could have been designed out.

Do you think I have strayed from the original conflict outlined in the introduction?

Maybe you would have preferred that I tell you how I would have mediated that dispute if I had been commissioned at the time? And how I would have salvaged that working relationship with my mastery and how the manager would have been satisfied with the outcome. Without knowing more about how things work in that department and in the college as a whole, and what level of goodwill resides in the workplace, and what other unseen tensions could be fuelling the argument, and how many arguments, grievances, allegations and other disruptors go on, I may have been just sticking a plaster on the wound. Helping two people find resolution without understanding the whole context and community within which it resides could actually create harm. Employers that are not interested in the bigger picture and who 'buy' mediation as a one off tool, may pay the price for the lack of care in ways that often go unseen.

I want a relationship with the people in a business not a purchaser provider transaction

In today's workplaces, it's essential to nurture a relationship with an independent consultant who is seasoned and experienced in working with conflict, tension, disputes and trauma, who can deliver

Facilitative Leadership by modelling the nature of goodwill, intervening in disputes using a mediation approach, training people with line management responsibilities, and building connection so as to positively influence the people and culture. The outcome is to reduce reliance on the consultant and cultivate the skills and qualities that foster shared truths, common understandings and connected communication.

In this way I get to know the people, how the workplace ticks, what the power dynamics look like and what the common and recurring situations are that cause tension. With this understanding and by remaining multi-partial, I provide a path towards a bigger picture of culture change through training and consultancy whilst facilitating and mediating the current conflicts that resist and obstruct change.

Results

Consider the prison where I have trained a group of prisoners to be Dialogue Road Map Facilitators. It is their full time prison wages job to support prisoners who are struggling with facilitated healing sessions and mediation. We have a small department in the prison with rooms to carry out the work. It is a workplace. In this workplace we have fostered a culture of goodwill. Imagine a group of men in prison for varying crimes with absolutely nothing in common from different walks of life, each managing their own sense of shame, being asked to work together, and stick at it after the initial investment of training, at a level of intimacy and authenticity they never knew existed.

In this setting we have created a culture of goodwill with each other. To the extent that the Facilitators have made an agreement not to bring the prison into their workspace. This means they treat each other with compassion, kindness and respect, provide a safe landing for each other when they fall over and hold each other accountable for their values and practice using empathy and support to give each other feedback. Or the restaurant chain where a General Manager said, 'it's wonderful when other members of the team have done the training so we have this considerate and gentle language we can all use to get things done when the pressure is on'.

And public service with service users that used to be violent and aggressive, where the team reimagined their environment and built a culture of empathy and goodwill so that when resources are thin on the ground they still find ways to support each other and hold consistent boundaries that service users came to respect and learn from. It's all possible, and it means that on the day a staff member has an idea that requires the consent of another team member, the culture of cooperation

and goodwill means that they would have both been in the conversation collaborating and using language in a way that doesn't lead to a power struggle which, of course, was the real problem underlying the conflict outlined in the introduction.

GOSSIP: WORKPLACE CULTURE DESTROYER

BY MERRY BROWN

Merry Brown is a writer, speaker, mediator, podcast host, and philosopher dedicated to guiding individuals and organizations through difficult conversations and conflicts. As the founder of Third Party Workplace Conflict Restoration Services LLC (3P), Merry is on a mission to train and empower employees and businesses to deal with conflict swiftly and justly, with a win/win restorative mindset that is committed to treating all people with dignity and respect. Her latest book, "How to Be Unprofessional at Work: Tips to Ensure Failure," offers a guide of what to avoid in the workplace, sparking insightful discussions on constructive alternatives. Tune in to the 3P 'Conflict Managed' podcast for conversations about toxic work environments and how to fix them.

The quality of our lives is directly proportional to the quality of our relationships. If we want to have a resilient, engaged, high performing work environment, we must attend to the health of our relationships. What constitutes a healthy relationship?

Being for others. Wanting the best for them. Noticing and celebrating victories, accomplishments, and contributions. Seeing and being seen. Listening and being listened to. A robust sense of reciprocal altruism. Since we know about the benefits that flow from strong collegial and team relationships, we ought to watch for signs of breakdowns.

A sure sign that something is amiss in a team or organization is gossip.

Gossip involves critically or invasively speaking about others when they aren't present. The definition of gossip from the Oxford Languages begins with, "Gossip is casual and unconstrained conversation…." *Casual and unconstrained* denotes that we aren't careful with our speech. We aren't seeking to protect and uphold the absent parties' right to privacy or their reputation. Let's explore why gossip is destructive, its causes, and how to combat it.

What Is So Toxic About Gossip?

One key to the long-term success of any group is the feeling of belonging. Gossip reduces confidence in the leadership's ability to communicate and bring out the best in their team while also sending red flags that this is not a safe work environment to be fully invested in, cared for, or listened to.

Here are five reasons gossip is toxic:

1. Gossip stamps out curiosity

When we gossip, we make a public declaration that "we know" about the other person, persons, or situation. If we already know "the truth" about others or circumstances, there is no need to seek out new information. If I already know, why would I investigate further?

Gossiping, however, signals that we don't have all the facts. Gossiping involves accusations and assumptions about another person's intent and action, focusing on the past and doesn't look for constructive solutions. Thus, gossiping tricks us into thinking we know more than we actually do, reducing the practice of self-reflection. Curiosity is a key ingredient in developing a creative, resilient, and self-reflective mindset. Therefore, since gossiping reduces curiosity, making us more rigid and less resilient, there is no legitimate place for gossiping at work.

2. Gossip damages relationships

When someone finds out they've been talked about, their perception of the gossipers changes from neutral or positive to negative. The people participating in this behaviour may now be viewed as unsafe, unwelcoming, disingenuous, and/or suspect. Gossiping not only damages the colleague gossiped about, but the gossipers suffer too. When you treat someone uncharitably or maliciously with others, you form a bond based on ill-intent that may morph into a bad habit. And yet, when we bond with others while engaging in destructive behaviour, we are weakening those relationships too. As they say, there is no honour among thieves.

3. Gossip kills psychological safety

Psychological safety at work is the belief based on the feeling that I can speak up without fear of retribution. In order to form this belief, one must trust the group they are in. Trust is built and demonstrated through everyday interactions over time. While trust takes time to build, it can be destroyed in a moment. We are very sensitive to our environments, always assessing and testing to

see what's really going on, judging the climate to see where we are in the order of things and how safe the environment really is.

> *Gossiping is an indication that you are in an unsafe, even vindictive, environment. It damages and destroys trust and a sense of belonging*

The person subject to the gossip feels uncared for, offended, and/or disrespected and the gossiper and complicit group lose credibility as trusted colleagues. Gossiping is a lose/lose proposition.

4. Gossip stunts personal growth

When we gossip or listen to gossip, we participate in an activity that we curiously tell ourselves is a victimless crime. The person being talked about isn't present, so who cares? Let's suppose the subject of the gossip never finds out. You're in the clear, right? Wrong. Someone is always listening. That someone is you.

Every action we do is forming our character and professional reputation. I am who I am today because of the choices I made yesterday, ad infinitum. If I allow myself to trash talk a colleague, that behaviours colours my world and what I find to be acceptable behaviour and practice, persuading my behaviours into the future. We tend to justify our misbehaviour, glossing over the unsavoury bits because we are good people. You can be a great person and still make poor choices. There happens to be a compounding effect with choices. The more you do something, the more likely you are to do it again.

Gossiping is easy and lazy, requiring no self-control, and involves malicious intent. When you allow yourself to fall prey to your baser desires to treat someone with disdain, you are forming yourself. You are always forming yourself. All of us are on a journey of moral and emotional growth. With intentional, sustained effort, we can be better tomorrow than we are today.

5. Gossip creates work factions

If you want a strong team, you need to form a sense of belonging, the feeling that we are all in this together, working toward a common mission. Gossip is the opposite of belonging. Gossip removes constructive team dynamics. Where there is the habit of gossiping, in place of a team you have factions. There is "us vs. you" or "us vs. them." Full stop.

Why Do People Gossip?

Gossip sets fire to the concept of team. It destroys the possibility of a healthy and flourishing work environment. Since we know this, why do people gossip and why is this behaviour found and tolerated in almost every workplace?

1. Basic human need to know

By nature, humans are social creatures, always looking to make sense of their environment. We are constantly taking the temperature around us, making calibrations, and acting based on available information. If we miss or misread what's going on around us at work, we may waste time and resources pursuing the wrong ends, damage our relationships, and harm our professional reputation. We might be demoted, lose a promotion, lose credibility, or even be fired. Human persons seek information about how we are being perceived as well as the general health and well-being of others and our environment. Our desire to know about the places and people we find ourselves interacting with is normal and helpful to establish, cultivate, and maintain flourishing environments collectively and personally.

2. A vacuum of communication

When there is a lack of information, we seek it out. We fill in the blanks, Gestalt style. We need information about the hard facts of an organization as well as the soft facts about how we stand in relations with one another. When we can't easily, consistently, and reasonably access the information we need to be successful, we will search for it, even if that means using less than savoury means.

3. Feelings that the workplace is unfair

Expect people to talk about unfair treatment. This, too, is normal. People usually get the sense that they are not being treated well when they see policies and procedures that are arbitrary and punitive, and even worse, being capriciously applied. Perceived favouritism quickly fuels the gossip machine.

4. Desire to connect with others

Having strong working relationships is valuable. We strengthen those bonds when we give something of value to another. Information is valuable. So, when I tell Sally my inside information about Jim's

trouble with the boss, I offer her something of value. Some people gossip because they want to connect with a colleague and don't know what else to say. Spreading gossip is not the goal, but rather connecting with another person is the end. As Marshall Rosenberg observed in his great work *Nonviolent Communication*, "Every message, regardless of form or content, is an expression of a need."

5. Some people like to watch the world burn?

There is a notion that people gossip because they want to cause strife and seed discord wherever they are. I feel uncomfortable with this assessment of another's intention. Barring any psychological disorder, and I am not a psychologist, the likely culprits here are bad habits. Once we decide it's acceptable to gossip about others, and practice this kind of behaviour, it becomes a normal (to us) way of being in the office. It doesn't even feel like a choice anymore because it's normalized. This is the development of a bad habit, or what Aristotle calls a vice. Acting from a vice becomes second nature. If gossiping instantiates itself in the gossiper to the level of vice, watch out.

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*If this person feels threatened at work, they can turn their gossiping vice
into a truly astonishing destructive force.*

Alternatives to Gossiping

While it's natural to gather information about the world around us, gossiping is an immature and unprofessional way to go about it. What are we to do instead?

1. Telling

    Gossip fills in the blanks when communication is absent. Therefore, communicate. The rule of thumb with office communication is to share information unless you have a very clear and legitimate reason not to. Sharing appropriate information at the right time and in the right way builds trust, reduces the feelings of unfair practices, and thus decreases the practice of gossiping.

2. Asking

    You don't know why Mary is out of the office? Wondering why the change in vacation policy? It's unclear why some people must be in the office while others get to work from home? Develop the

habit of asking. When you are curious about what's going on in your workplace, ask the relevant person about it.

3. Venting

Someone rolled their eyes at you in a meeting. Someone took your idea and claimed it was theirs. What's going on? It is absolutely normal and reasonable to want to talk with someone about what just happened. Since we know gossiping is off the table as a live professional possibility, try venting. Venting, here, is defined as a way to gather perspective about an event without malicious intent and with a forward looking and self-reflective gaze.

Finding a trusted colleague to bounce ideas off and gain perspective is important. But be careful: if you are talking with a colleague at work about another colleague, watch that your language doesn't become slanderous. When emotions run high, it is easy to slip into degrading language about someone who harmed you or acted in an unprofessional manner.

4. Embracing uncertainty

Deciding not to participate in gossip is a decision to live with a certain amount of uncertainty. You will not always have access to the information you need to do your job excellently. It may feel uncomfortable to not know what's going on, and it may even affect your ability to do your work. Therefore, rejecting gossiping as a means of gathering information may leave you, at times, in the dark.

5. Self-reflection

Even though we have a basic desire to know about the office politics and events at work, it is up to everyone to be self-aware and reflective to ask the questions:

- Do I need to know this piece of information in order to do my job?

- Would it be nice to know this piece of information about my work environment, leading me towards a more drama-free and efficient work environment?

- Do I simply want to know this information, even though it has no bearing on my work performance?

6. Speaking up

When you see something that you understand to be unfair or a violation of company policy, say something to the proper authority. Speaking up when you see something wrong takes courage. Courageous acts come about through doing courageous deeds. It's called a virtuous cycle. You become what you do. Developing the virtue of courage is not easy, and it usually doesn't take the fear out of acting, but that's what fortitude is. Acting rightly even in the presence of fear.

Addressing Gossip at Work

Gossip proof yourself

Once you notice the quantity and reasons why you gossip, you can take steps to change your own behaviour, away from reacting to situations that are not in step with your values, toward responding in a positive way.

In order to gossip proof yourself, you need to start with an accurate assessment of where you are currently in relation to gossip. How much do you do it? When do you do it? Why do you do it?

When you feel the urge to spread a rumour or are approached with one, what are you going to do? You could walk away, change the direction of the conversation, go to the person being talked about and ask for clarification, work on communication systems within the office and organization. You could ask the person about their hobbies or what project they're working on. You could work on developing conflict resolution and de-escalation skills, meditate, or work on getting specific about what you believe you need to know and why and then develop a plan to get it.

Once you begin to think about what to do instead of gossiping, many options avail themselves, thus showing gossip to be what it is – lazy and cowardly communication.

Gossip proof your team and organization

1. Set expectations

Make clear the destructive force of gossip. Make clear how gossip is a distraction from fulfilling the company's mission and how it damages colleagues' sense of belonging. Make it clear that gossip has no place in your organization and the expectation is that, in a professional setting, people ought to

deal with their frustration or uncertainty in a positive instead of malicious manner. Make it clear that gossiping is a violation of civility at work.

2. Communicate regularly

Embrace sunshine! Share information. Share often. Don't gatekeep. If you can't share a piece of information, have a clear understanding as to why it's private. Articulate why some things cannot be shared. Have avenues for people to ask questions without fear of retribution or being labeled.

Gossip fills in the holes of information, like weeds, seeking to choke out a flourishing environment. Don't give gossip a foothold.

3. Develop trust

You don't get trust because you ask for it. Trust is developed in the everyday, mundane interactions. When you treat people well, thoughtfully, and respectfully, in every interaction, trust is built. When you see a problem and address it, trust is built. When you see a success and celebrate it, trust is built. Gossip is less likely to be an issue in teams and organizations with a high level of trust.

4. Address conflicts

Addressing conflicts early, often, swiftly, and justly is an excellent and necessary practice to eradicate gossip. There are and will be conflicts in every organization. This is a certainty. It is also certain that when conflicts go unaddressed and unmanaged, sickness creeps into teams and organizations, spreading like poison.

Conflict management and restoration need to be a strategic priority in all organizations to train, empower, and expect all members of an organization to address conflicts. When conflict is managed, companies reap the benefits. However, when conflicts are left unaddressed, gossiping and "quiet quitting" are likely consequences.

Conclusion:

We know from positive psychology that the best way to move forward is to capitalize on our strengths. The desire to communicate, understand our surroundings, and build reliable relationships is part and parcel of the human condition.

Therefore, let's share information freely. Let's hold listening sessions. Let's make avenue after avenue available for colleagues to get their questions answered. Let's instantiate training and ongoing assistance for colleagues who find themselves facing what they perceive to be unfair practices and conflicts.

People are going to talk. Let's give them something inspiring and humanizing to talk about.

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ALIGNING BEHAVIOURS, PERFORMANCES & VALUES IN A MULTI-CULTURAL ORGANISATION

BY NAVNEET HRISHIKESAN

Navneet Hrishikesan became a lawyer by happenstance and is a Sr Director at Cisco Systems. He currently serves as Cisco's Head of Legal for the Asia Pacific & Japan (Service Provider) region and also as its General Counsel for India/ South Asia. Prior to Cisco, Navneet worked at Wipro Limited and the London City law firm Simmons & Simmons. All opinions expressed in this article are made in his personal capacity.

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"*Ok, I will wait for an update from you.*"

This response to a work request I had allocated to one of my team members had me flummoxed. I was early in my career as a people leader and was left confused and anxious; was I facing a mutiny, an insurgency, an act of defiance, an employee testing my limits or was it a challenge to my technical competence?

As I deliberated on how to respond while ignoring the twitching in my amygdala, I re-read the email trail again. Then I found it.

While discussing how to get the task done earlier, I had written: "*I would do it this way…*".

My colleague was from one of the more hierarchy conscious Asian countries and appeared to have read my clumsy attempt to provide guidance as an announcement that I would be doing it. While English isn't my mother tongue either, my Indian upbringing and work stints in the UK and the US

probably meant I was more comfortable in English but I also seemed to have picked up some confusingly indirect modes of communication, I suspect from England.

I responded politely, correcting the confusion and giving clear instructions on how the work should be done (by them). The work got done promptly by the employee.

My experience above provides a small flavour of the difficulties that arise when a leader presumes that everyone speaks a language (allegedly English in this case) the same way. While communication is no doubt the biggest cause of confusion and a lack of cohesion, it is not the only one.

> "Individuals tend to have very different life experiences and socio-cultural orientations. So even if everyone on your team is a lawyer or an engineer, it is probable that they have very different frames of reference, which makes building a common purpose and culture challenging."

Superficially the world may seem to be becoming more homogenous, after all you can find a KFC or a Starbucks in most cities around the world, but that is not the complete picture. KFC for example is planning a vegetarian outlet in India. While this may sound amusing given the history (and name) of the brand, it just goes to show that the world is not as uniform as we may believe it to be. Even more confusingly, cultural norms tend to be very fragmented even within the same country. A joke which may be enjoyed in England may not resonate (or may even be found insulting) in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

One shouldn't also forget oneself in the middle of all this, remember you are also a member of the team and you will also have to work to understand your own biases, particularly those based on ethnocentricity i.e., the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture. Dr Wittwer's blog says it well: "*The point is, awareness of your own ethnocentricity – and that of the culture in which you're doing business – can often help you work, communicate, and promote effectively across cultures.*"

All this therefore seems to vindicate what people generally say: managing a team where people belong to diverse backgrounds and cultures is hard.

So, how does one go about building a common set of values and behaviours when you have a team which is made up of a diverse set of individuals with the problems that this causes?

Here are some suggestions:

1. **Start Low**

   As Pulitzer winning author Prof McPherson explains while discussing his book "For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War", whatever be the reason people may have first signed up, "Fighting to save a few close friends can prove a more immediate and powerful motivator than such abstract ideals as flag and country."

   This is a truth that is known to anyone connected with the military. Ultimately, it's your bond with your closest colleagues or unit, also called 'primary group cohesion' that makes a team (or an army) cohesive and committed. As the article I have cited states: "*While opinions vary widely across the corpus of literature on the subject, the most common and widely accepted components of the cement [of cohesion] are generally considered to be social attraction, group prestige, and task commitment.*"

   People have more allegiance and will do more for the person next to them in the cubicle (or trench) than they will for an abstract concept like a corporate vision (or even King and Country).

   Put another way, if you want your multi-cultural team to work well together, you need to build an identity and common set of values and behaviours, an *esprit de corps* if you will, at the first line manager/ team level.

2. **Start simple**

   Get to know your team members. This is an essential step in building trust. Make the time and effort to understand their personalities. Adopt active listening so you can understand what is actually being said and why. Some cultures tend to be more direct in their communication, many others are not and you may need to listen closely and may even need a local coach who can help you interpret some of your conversations.

   This helps build a personal bond with the team members and helps them feel acknowledged and valued. After all, nobody likes to feel unnoticed or that their contributions are insignificant. As Claire Hastwell suggests, make sure you recognize them as individuals who

are appreciated for the important work they do. As one of my personal heroes, Maya Angelou reminds us: *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

As a side (perhaps more hard-headed) benefit, I have found that this level of interaction also helps you identify skills in your team that may not have been known earlier. It can be a great way to find the skills that you need.

3. **Do some reading**

   There are several books and articles on managing cultural differences in a team environment, perhaps pick one up that aligns with the composition of your team.

   One book that I found interesting was Erin Meyer's, The Culture Map. In her book Ms Meyer makes the case for a broader view. Focusing only on the individual is not enough according to her, one also needs to understand the culture within which the individual operates.

   What I liked was that she didn't make it a binary equation. She suggests that cultural influences operate in a spectrum or range: *"The culture sets a range, and within that range each individual makes a choice. It is not a question of culture or personality, but of culture and personality."*

   In other words, it is not just the individual or the culture from which they come that solely decides their performance and interactions, it is a combination of both.

   While the anecdotal manner in which the book is written resonated with me, please do remember to take all writings on the topic (including this one) with a pinch of salt, as I mention next, we are dealing with individuals and humans tend to be very difficult to classify into neat categories. It is very easy to fall into the trap of cultural prejudices and biases if one is not careful.

4. **Be Flexible**

   Don't go purely by what others write on this topic. Human beings can be frustratingly distinct.

Form your own approach based on your interactions with your team members. As an example, people from otherwise hierarchical societies may be attracted to a multi-national corporation because they are drawn to the possibility of interacting on a more egalitarian basis. This would make your interactions with them very different to what is the considered to be the social norm in that country.

> *I have found that dealing with people from different socio-cultural backgrounds is a great way to break my own ethnocentric personal biases, as Victor Potrel writes, as long as one is open to learning.*

5. **Build an engagement model**

Once you have a feel for the people in your team, it is important to have a vision and set of engagement norms for your organization. Spend time discussing it with the team and set a timeline within which you would like to finalise them. Try and incorporate all the feedback you receive and if you can't incorporate them, explain why that was the case.

These norms could include roles and responsibilities, manner of interaction (e.g. when is it fine to call someone on their cell phone, weekend work expectations, office timings etc), how feedback should be given, what are your expectations of them, how you should interact with each other, how decisions are to be made and anything else you feel is relevant. Be open to adding more as the team ethic develops.

Once the norms are agreed, let your team know that you would like everyone to follow them. Build a team identity and team spirit using these norms and don't forget to keep updating them from time to time. While some of these suggestions may appear to be corporate 'fluff', I have often found that the process where you discuss what your values and principles should be and the intent behind them is often more valuable than the actual document that you end up with.

6. **Be the rhino**

In the movie The Gods Must be Crazy (a childhood favourite of mine), an African rhino comes running out of the bush and stamps out a camp fire. While this may well be based on a myth, be ready to be the rhino the moment you sense a conflict building within the team.

A multi-cultural team has a wider 'attack surface', if I can use a cyber security term here, for misunderstandings and interpersonal conflict.

As a leader you have been to more sensitive to its possibility. This can come in different ways, in some of the more conservative societies, conflict is never openly displayed and this can make it challenging to read the signs of trouble brewing.

Irrespective of the rhino allegory, be gentle while managing conflicts, especially if the conflict is arising due to cultural norms. Taking inspiration from what Brett, Behfar and Kern advise in their article in the Harvard Business Review, I suggest trying to bridge the differences in a more subtle manner than what you may be used to, particularly, if some of the cultural norms are not to your personal taste or liking.

7. **Communication**

We end where we began, with communication.

Be open, transparent and clear in your communications with the team. Remember, the team learns more from your behaviour than what you say. Be sensitive to cultural differences while communicating, for example, if you have team members from a cultural setting which is uncomfortable giving direct feedback in a public setting, consider setting up a drop box/ email address for people to send anonymous feedback. Keep several channels open for discussion especially in the new-ish world of remote working.

Consider if cultural sensitivity training or language training would be helpful for your team members or yourself. If you feel that people are finding it difficult to understand or follow what is being said, consider visual aids or follow up with written notes and minutes at the end of the meetings.

Consider finding a local coach or mentor who may be able to translate some of what is going on around your team. I remember the time from an earlier workplace when I met two senior leaders from one country for a project I was driving. The meeting went very well I thought, we

agreed to collaborate together and all of us seemed to be getting along very well. It is only later that one of my local colleagues asked me how I felt it went. Hearing my glowing report, he asked me if I knew that the two leaders I had met couldn't actually stand each other. They had put on a show of fellowship before the outsider from HQ but the chances were very high that they would not be willing to do any work together. I would have never realised this without my local 'translator'. I took steps basis this intelligence to ensure that the project was a success, but if I had left it only at the bonhomie and not had the insights of my local guide, it could very well have ended badly.

Always remember that while dealing with your team, the aim is to encourage sensitive, open dialogue and you will have to set the bar high by showing vulnerability and openness to learning. This may take time, so be patient.

While doing all this, avoid, and I can't stress this enough, avoid humour or slang, they don't often translate well and also remember that some phrases may have a historical or culture reference which may be considered insulting in some places.

Conclusion

Finally, like most important things in life, parenting for example, remember there is no user manual for managing a multi-cultural team. You will have to learn it as you go.

Give yourself the freedom to make mistakes and learn to not be too hard on yourself. In my experience, irrespective of background or culture, people tend to respond to authenticity and are always welcoming once they realise that someone is trying to do the right thing.

So, speak to people, listen to feedback, learn, and perhaps most importantly, don't take yourself too seriously, for as GK Chesterton informs us, "*Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly*".

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THINKING ABOUT OUR FUTURE WORKPLACE FOR OUR FUTURE TALENT

BY NICOLE GODETZ

Nicole brings a breadth of experience as a Coaching Expert with proven expertise in training, facilitation and change management. She is highly recognised as an open, warm and honest communicator, using intuitive listening skills and acute emotional intelligence. Nicole has over 30 years of experience working with young people, in education, the youth sector and the workplace. Nicole specialises in driving a strong, collaborative mentality to bring teams together and encourage reflective thinking, through her consultancy, Noo Thinking

Noo Thinking is passionate about supporting positive relationships and cultures in the workplace. For decade, its founder and CEO (the author) was a teacher and headteacher in London. In that time of teaching and leading she learned the real importance of listening and hearing what was being said, and how this can take bravery and courage as you don't always know what you will hear and how this will make you feel!

The skill of active listening is crucial to creating positive working environments and helping individual employees to play a constructive role in creating, embedding and sustaining this. We need to show that we are active in our listening by our non-verbal, verbal and action responses. So, good eye contact (but not scarily so!), body language (open, affirming, relaxed) and acting upon what was discussed and agreed (showing that there was a point of sharing, and if actions cannot be followed exactly, then offering objective explanations of why they cannot).

For young people, this would entail giving them time to explain, share and express their thinking, then checking that you have understood correctly by repeating back to them your understanding (using as many of their own words as possible) and if this was sharing of a complaint, trying to help them consider the impacts of their choices on themselves and others around them. If this was a dispute

between young people, asking them to share with each other how they felt as a result of the incident; developing their emotional literacy.

For adults, this would entail giving them time to explain, share and express their thinking, then checking that you have understood correctly by repeating back to them your understanding (using as many of their own words as possible) and if this was sharing of a complaint, trying to help them consider the impacts of their choices on themselves and other around them. If this was a dispute between them and others, asking them to share with each other how they felt as a result of the incident, looking for common ground and resolution and always relating back to agreed workplace practices, if in place and if regularly used!

> "Good practice for employees in the workplace would be, ensuring that there is a behaviour code that is understood and is referred to and can be used as a mantra. This code should drive behaviours of all employees and leaders that institution."

Recognise the huge similarities?
Good practice for young people would be, ensuring that there is a behaviour code that is understood, referred to and can be used as a mantra. This code should drive behaviours of all young people and adults in that institution. Young people should see this modelled by the adults around in their own behaviours and their expectations of others. There is also a general acceptance that our young people are developing their EQ and 'instances' and interactions are opportunities for learning. For schools, youth organisations and colleges, there is also usually a well understood system of who to go to if there is a problem and who will help you.

Employees should see this modelled by the leaders around in their own behaviours and their expectations of others. It is helpful to have a culture of acceptance that people continue developing their EQ throughout life, and 'instances' and interactions should be used as opportunities for learning and embedding the organisation's culture and expectations. Having a clear structure of line management and support of who to go to if there is a problem and who will help you can help to deal with difficulties at an early stage, will minimise escalation and support a consistent workplace culture.

Again, recognise the similarities?

So, there we have it, how to deal with problems and how to prevent them with our young talent and our more established employees.

Problems appear at scale when practices such as those outlined above are not in place, or they are, but there has been no or little investment in leadership training. In the introduction of ACAS' "Estimating the costs of workplace conflict", Professor Saundry makes the argument that *... "organisations have tended to place too much emphasis on developing leaders concerned with strategy, while overlooking the importance of encouraging excellence in core management practices such as the management of poor performance, which are incorrectly seen as 'basic' and 'easy to replicate"*.

Acas research has also found that mismanagement of performance can often escalate into accusations of bullying. More generally, the potential for conflict in relation to the conduct and capability of employees, means that conflict between managers and employees is central to management of the employment relationship.

More and more we are hearing in mainline press about workplace cultures that are not positive: Scottish Police, Welsh Fire Service, Metropolitan Police, McDonald's, Amazon, Pinterest, Goggle, Disney, Victoria's Secrets, Welsh Rugby Union, Yorkshire Cricket, to name but a few. Yet most of these organisations are big on positive culture policy.

For example, in their Vision and Values, McDonald's say:

"McDonald's has a zero-tolerance policy on workplace harassment.
Training has been rolled out across our estate, from shift leaders in our
restaurant and upwards. Our Executive has already undertaken training,
and by the end of 2019, every franchisee in our business will understand
how to help prevent harassment occurring and respond properly if it does".

One of Google's Commitments is Including all voices, and they say:

"Building a world where progress, equitable outcomes, diversity, and
inclusion can be realities both inside and outside our workplace."

The Scottish Police's values are: *"Integrity, fairness and respect."*

Disney say this of their Culture: *"Across Disney, we cultivate, value, and encourage curiosity, collaboration, and creativity from everyone and we strive to build supportive environments that inspire optimism and drive innovation. We work to create a culture that is welcoming to all, celebrates our unique perspectives, and promotes respect for one another, regardless of identity or background."*

Positive learning and workplace cultures can be achieved and sustained, but they only **start** with vision and policy. Being clear about what your organisation stands for and expects is important, but embedding and sustaining these principles in practice takes real commitment, and not just once, but over and over.

There is a wealth of research about the importance of employee engagement and how effective, positive focus on this can yield significant improvements in staff retention and performance and reductions in absenteeism and sickness leave. Figures on people leaving jobs still show that 4 out of 5 people leave a job for some interpersonal reason: co-worker, boss, HR procedure, for example.

With the realities of the negative impact of poor workplace cultures and behaviours and the onset of AI, being the best humans that we can be is crucial.

There is no best place to start, many people in positions of leadership, know that they need to act, but are waiting for the right time. The time is now!

Adults with much experience of the workplace and good levels of resilience are struggling at work. One of the impacts of the Covid-driven work from home shift, was that many over 50s choose not to return to their jobs. They decided that quality of life was more important than salary and voted to find a lesser paid, part time job closer to home and to cut their cloth according to their means! This has left a massive skills and experience gap in the workplace.

So, how are our young talent coping at work? How are our workplace cultures adapting to attract, retain and develop out young talent?

There is a big mismatch with the top skills employers are looking for and what is focussed on at school. The World Economic Forum reported in February 2024 that the top 5 most useful skills for the future were:
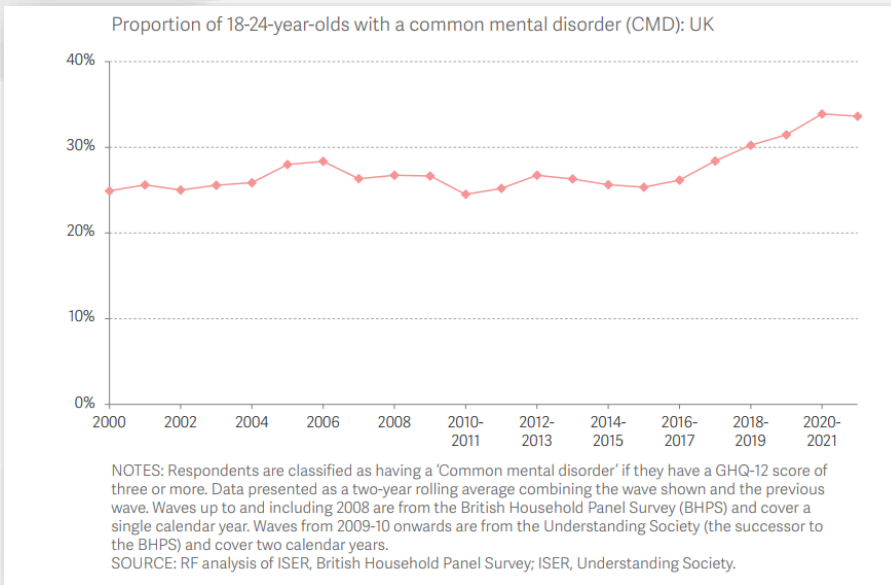
- Analytical Thinking

- Creative Thinking

- AI and Big Data

- Leadership

- Lifelong Learning

Yet many curricular in many countries are still focussed on content regurgitation that can be exam assessed and reported in order to judge and compare the education success of institutions, regions and countries.

Evidence also shows that, sadly, mental wellness of our young talent is sharply declining.

- On 7th February 2024, The Guardian newspaper shared that NHS data showed that Children's emergency mental health referrals in England had soared by 53%.

- The Resolution Foundation's "We've only just began" research reports that numbers of 18–24-year-olds who they were experiencing a 'common mental disorder' (CMD) such as depression, anxiety or bipolar has gone from 1 in 4 in 2000, to more than 1 in 3 in 2002. They say that "Young people today have the undesirable attribute of having the poorest mental health of any age group; two decades ago, young people had the lowest incidence of CMDs across the age spectrum."

The Resolution Foundations' analysis of the British House Panel Survey showed that One-third of 18–24-year-olds cross the threshold at which they are considered to have a common mental disorder (CMD)

Proportion of 18-24-year-olds with a common mental disorder (CMD): UK

NOTES: Respondents are classified as having a 'Common mental disorder' if they have a GHQ-12 score of three or more. Data presented as a two-year rolling average combining the wave shown and the previous wave. Waves up to and including 2008 are from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and cover a single calendar year. Waves from 2009-10 onwards are from the Understanding Society (the successor to the BHPS) and cover two calendar years.
SOURCE: RF analysis of ISER, British Household Panel Survey; ISER, Understanding Society.

And the Resolution Foundation's analysis of NHS medicines used in mental health revealed that the number of young people prescribed anti-depressant drugs has increased by almost a third since 2015-16.

Number (left axis) and proportion (right axis) of 18-24-year-olds who are prescribed anti-depressant drugs: England

Number of young people prescribed anti-depressant drugs

Proportion of young people prescribed anti-depressant drugs

SOURCE: RF analysis of NHS, Medicines Used in Mental Health; ONS, mid-year population estimates.
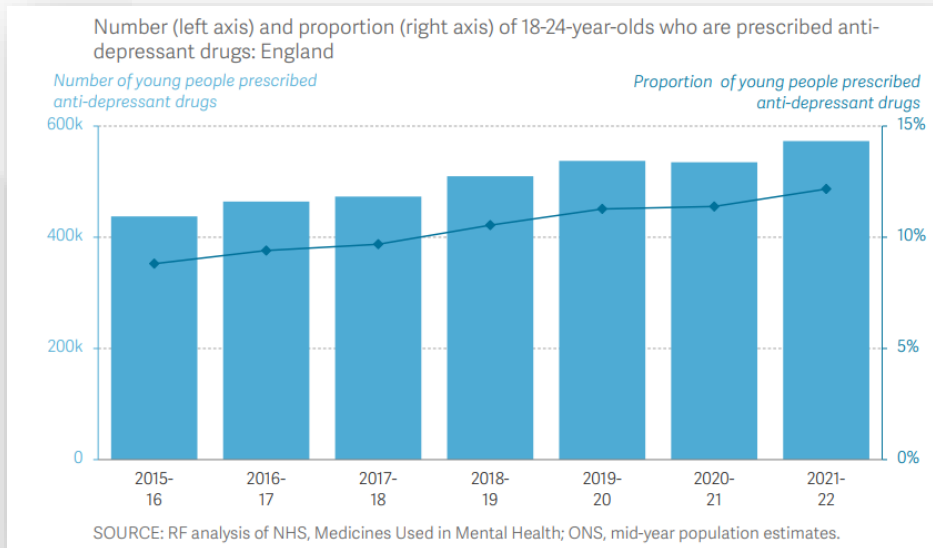
So, we are expecting into our workplaces young talent who are likely to have been processed through curricular that are not agile enough to keep pace with what is being heralded as the 4th industrial

revolution (rise of data and connectivity, AI, analytics, human-machine interaction, and improvements in robotics). These young people may also be affected by poor mental wellness themselves, but most certainly would have been affected by poor mental wellness round them. There are other characteristics that we know about the up-and-coming young talent, but simply focussing on these would mean that that the most successful workplaces will be those who actively plan to support their young talent.

Policy change relating to mental health in schools and colleges *have* evolved over the last decade. Below is a summary of recent announcements relating to mental health in schools and colleges, by year, in England:

Teaching about mental health	Referring to NHS mental health support	Providing mental health support within schools and colleges
2017: The Transforming children and young people's mental health provision green paper included: - Providing mental health awareness training to staff, - Consulting on mental well-being within PSHE.	**2014**: Introduction of the new Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice, with a focus on referrals from schools and colleges to CAMHS. **2015**: A pilot was introduced to link schools with single points of contact in CAMHS.	**2017**: Mental health first aid training offered to every secondary school. **2017**: The Transforming children and young people's mental health provision green paper was launched. Proposals included: - Incentivising schools and colleges to identify and train Designated Senior Leads for Mental Health, - Funding new Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs).
2018: Introduction of statutory health education. The guidance came into force in 2020, with school pupils expected to learn about mental health and well-being.	**2018**: The Government committed to rolling out this Link Programme. The programme concluded in 2022, and over 3,000 schools and colleges had been involved.	**2022**: Additional funding was announced for schools and colleges to train a Senior Mental Health Lead. **2023**: MHSTs to be expanded to cover at least half of pupils in England by 2025.

SOURCE: RF analysis of GOV.UK; K Garratt, E Kirk-Wade & R Long, Children and young people's mental health: policy and services (England), House of Commons Library, January 2024.

Conclusion

So, what are some heads up for us in the workplace to effectively support our young talent to be the best versions of themselves that they want to be at work?

Noo Thinking has a mantra that goes, 'Change is normal and learning is constant'. If we can embed this into our culture, then welcoming new staff, helping them onboard and expecting things to change as our workforce evolves, will make our workplace experience feel more open, authentic and safe. In addition, when our young talent come into an organisation where learning is constant, then their training and learning will just feel a part of the usual routine.

A focus on transformative practices rather than transaction ones, of learning and development and understanding coworking effective behaviours rather than, as *Noo Thinking* refers to them, the unholy trinity of grievance, disciplinary and capability is also a top focus. In 'Estimating the costs of workplace conflict'. The Implications for policy and organisational practice included:

- Investment in effective and early resolution designed to build positive employment relationships.
- Organisations placing much greater emphasis on repairing employment relationships in the event of conflict and acting at early points to address issues of capability and poor performance.
- Approaches to disciplinary issues that focus on learning and avoid blame.
- Managers being provided with the core people skills to have quality interactions with their staff.
- Rebalancing of policy – decreasing the emphasis on legal compliance and effectiveness of the tribunal system, towards the resolution of conflict within organisations.

Even more than this, The Resolution Foundation suggests "that mental health-aware' managers are a must", especially in sectors like retail and hospitality that employ large numbers of young people.

To support all of our workforce, but especially our young talent, we need to focus on our human skills. Is your organisation actively listening?

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A GUIDE TO REAL INCLUSION IN OUR HYBRID WORLD OF WORK: MUSINGS ABOUT MANDATES

BY DR PENNY PULLAN WITH INSIGHTS FROM NANCY SETTLE–MURPHY

Dr Penny Pullan, an expert in leading in today's hybrid world, is the director of Making Projects Work Ltd. Penny is the author of CEO Today 'Top 5' book and bestseller: 'Virtual Leadership: Practical strategies for success with remote or hybrid work and teams', now in second edition (Kogan Page, 2022). Penny works with leaders and teams to enhance collaboration and effectiveness across hybrid teams.

Keywords: *Hybrid Working; Inclusion; Hierarchy; Career Starters; Chronic Illness; Disabilities; Personality; Mental Health; Promotions; Micro-aggression and more…*

With the rise of the virtual working during COVID lockdowns and hybrid workplaces in recent years, new opportunities for inclusion have emerged. In this article, we explore these opportunities across a range of groups, and set out ideas for organisations to consider. We'll look from the perspectives of those who are likely to feel excluded as more and more organisations encourage staff to return to the office, sometimes with five-days a week in the office mandates.

First of all, let's explore what inclusion means and the related idea of belonging. As per the Cambridge English Dictionary, 'Inclusion' is defined as 'the act of allowing many different types of people to do something and treating them fairly and equally' and this is used as the basis of our definition of inclusion in this article. We focus on allowing many different types of people to participate in the workforce, and treating them fairly and with equity. Note that inclusion here focuses on the action of the organisation.

It's really important when considering inclusion to not just focus on this action, what an organisation *does*, but instead to consider the effect and impact of this inclusive action on each individual. Successful inclusion will lead to a sense of belonging in individuals. Belonging is defined by Cambridge

as 'a feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group and having a good relationship with the other members of the group because they welcome you and accept you'. Belonging comes from each individual feeling valued, accepted and respected as part of an organisation. To gain a handle on the state of inclusion in your organisation, it is necessary to listen to the perspectives of individuals and whether they feel they belong.

Hierarchy matters

Let's start at the top of the hierarchy. What might their perspectives be? Leaders often prefer being able to see team members at work. Leaders spent many years before COVID lockdowns living with the simple, cultural expectation that work happens at the office. This was true for almost everyone, apart from a few official 'tele-workers'. Many leaders are older and have lived through decades of command-and-control work cultures, when their own bosses preferred to be able to see what people were doing, which in turn made it easier to control what was happening in their teams. It's what they are used to. Might this be the reason why so many felt that it is so important to bring people back to the office, despite reports of enhanced productivity when people are able to choose where to work? While some feel that collaboration, communication and meetings are better in person, this doesn't mean that it makes sense to force all work to be done in the office.

> "The Boots CEO, Sebastian James, suggested in March 2024 that 'the ability to meet in person has been far more effective' and that the office was 'a much more fun and inspiring place'. As a result, he has decided that a 'five days in the office' mandate will begin in September 2024."

The Guardian reports other companies suggest linking pay and promotions to time in the office. But will these changes really make a difference, or are leaders generalising based on their own perspectives, rather than considering what would make others in their companies as effective as possible? Maybe a culture of presenteeism and the tendency of leaders to micromanage isn't going to help employees do their best work or feel included. It seems unlikely to spread happiness or help with retention: an informal LinkedIn poll by People Management in March 2024 showed that 69% of respondents would seek a new job if their organisation asked them to increase the number of days spent in the office.

Career starters matter

There are many other groups to consider when it comes to inclusion in our hybrid world of work, several of which are easily forgotten. We start at the other end of the hierarchy from leaders: those early in their careers. They might prefer to work in an office, rather than in cramped living quarters. They might appreciate being in close contact with colleagues as they learn how to operate in a business context and develop an understanding of the culture of their organisation. At the same time, such employees might also find the costs of commuting particularly challenging, so you can't make assumptions about any one individual's situation. Once again, feeling included and belonging is something that each individual will rate for themselves.

Life stage matters

Moving on a few years from those at the start of their careers, at this stage people may take on caring roles. These include parents of young children, and those looking after elderly parents or other family members who require extra help. Many such caregivers have often found that the chance to work from home has given them much more freedom to be involved in caring, alongside working effectively for their employers. Mandating a full return to the office means no longer being able to drop children at school, spending far less time with loved ones due to commuting, and losing other options that remote working brings. Once again, each individual's perspective and experience will be different and this will contribute to their feelings of inclusion and belonging or, more likely, otherwise.

Personality matters

Any organisation will have a range of people with different personalities. While extroverts might really struggle to spent time working on their own away from the office, introverts might find home to be a very productive setting and find being called back bizarre when they can work so well remotely. Once again, it depends on each individual's preferences.

Physical disabilities matter

There are groups for whom a physical commute into their office is particularly challenging, those with mobility issues, or those who use wheelchairs. I remember meeting Claire during the first pandemic lockdown. Claire is a project manager and was revelling on being able to work on her own terms. She even attended conferences all over the world from her own desk. For once, no-one could see the wheelchair and so treated her just like any other project manager. She described what a revelation

this had been for her. She's worked very effectively from her home base for years now. Why would anyone want to impose a challenging and potentially painful journey on Claire each day? Once again, when you examine this from Claire's individual perspective, it shows a very different answer from the assumptions made by leaders calling for mandates.

People with limited eyesight are another group who may find it easier to skip the commute and attend meetings remotely, where they can always be assured of a 'front row seat' able to see presentations clearly on their screens, able to use visual aids to help. These are just two examples of physical disabilities making a difference. Remember to hear each individual's preferences and see things from their perspective.

Those living with invisible illnesses or chronic conditions matter

People may look absolutely fine, so bosses might not be aware. Immune-compromised people are particularly susceptible to infection, so they need to avoid picking up bugs from others. This makes

> "Not all disabilities are visible. There are large numbers of people living with conditions that affect their daily lives considerably but which are not instantly apparent."

commuting on busy trains or buses, along with being close to others with respiratory infections in offices, unhelpful. Regardless of the commute, people can feel very tired, meaning that the possibility of working in a remote way, based from home, has made their working life so much more manageable. If people are happy and healthy working from home, why would you put them at risk of harm by calling them back in? Once again, feeling included and belonging is judged by the individual.

Those living with mental health challenges matter

Some people dealing with mental health challenges crave the office, keen to have other people around them to interact with in person. Many, though, do not. For many, the safe environment of their own home surrounded by familiar things can be much more productive. Remember that one in four people will experience at least one mental health problem in one year (NHS) so there are likely to be many people with mental health challenges in every organisation. How can you harness them so they feel included and like they belong?

Those facing micro-aggressions matter

The importance of individual perspectives continues with racism. We live in a world where this is embedded within many of our organisations, despite best intentions. Many people find remote working at least some of the time frees them from having to cope with constant, often unintended, micro-aggressions, that sap time and energy. It also frees them from the need to code-switch to fit in with others preferred ways of working.

Those facing other challenges matter too

Freedom from masking to fit in applies also in the case of neurodiversity. Of course, this varies from individual to individual. If you've met one autistic person, for example, you've met one autistic person, so ask people what they need individually to be productive at work. Home working may well be part of the answer.

Another area that's had more focus recently is menopause. Those suffering from adverse symptoms may well find it helpful to be able to work from home on occasion, especially after disturbed nights. There are many other marginalised groups that we haven't mentioned so far, but remember, whoever we're talking about, it's the individual who defines whether they feel they belong and have been included, and their perspectives matter.

It's not just the marginalised to matter

Some people prefer being able to work from home, at least some of the time, because their jobs require intense focus, free from distraction. Concentration, reading and technical tasks typically show up as working better remotely (Forbes, 2023). Do you want to force these people to be less productive by bringing them into an environment of constant interruptions? And finally, what about those who find it intensely irritating to travel all the way into the office only to sit on Teams all day?

Conclusion: What can you do to promote inclusion?

Be wary of blanket statements. Mandating that everyone should be in the office five days a week will not necessarily mean more fun and more effective working. You might find that people let you know how they feel by quietly moving to other places that consider their individual needs and listen to them, to ensure they are included and belong. Too many organisations unintentionally exclude people. Instead, consider the individual perspectives of employees, remembering that only they can let you know if they truly feel they belong. Take steps to empower people, include them in decision making,

hear their stories and listen to their needs. Give your managers the flexibility to do the right thing for their individual team members, and give them training and support to so. You might even train people to be effective collaborators and communicators in the hybrid world we find ourselves in, and let teams work out how together they can be the most productive and effective they can. Lead by example. Build all of this on the foundation of trust, showing you trust your employees to deliver their best wherever they work, and they will respond. Over to you!

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PEOPLE AND CULTURE: ENERGY AND SYSTEMS

BY PERRY TIMMS

Perry is the Founder & Chief Energy Officer of PTHR. In 2022 he was ranked Number 1 Most Influential HR Thinker by HR Magazine. In 2023 he was inducted into the HR Most Influential Hall of Fame. In 2024, Perry was given the Lifetime Achievement Award from WorldBlu for service to self-managed and democratic, freedom-centred work. In October 2017, his first book, Transformational HR, was published by Kogan Page and The Energized Workplace was published in August 2020. The 2nd Edition of Transformational HR was published in July 2021. Perry is a 5x nominated HR Most Influential Thinker 2017-2022 (4x Top 10). He was also named the most influential HR and Transformation Professional by Corporate Vision Magazine.

In my 30+ years in the world of work, I've seen an evolution in the concept of what makes an organisation tick. I've seen the advent of digitisation, continuous improvement, globalisation, and, most importantly, differentiation.

We've seen customer experience, brand presence, innovation, scale, and even behavioural science set out what differentiates one enterprise from another. In the commercial world, market share, market creation, technology invention, and profitability are linked. In the non-profit world, purpose-led service provision and sustainably frugal operations are key.

Both are driven by capital of some sort or other.

Another form of capital—and this is not disrespecting people in using this term—is human capital. And this is where differentiation now lies. We can all leverage tech, supply chains, and disruptive and exponential business models—all of which have been codified and are readily available for replication and utilisation.

But people - and by this, we mean attracting the most creative and committed talent, retaining them, fully and fairly utilising that talent, developing people beyond their known limitations of that talent, combining that talent for sustainable high-performance now and in the future, and then crucially, linking that talent to things bigger than simply stacking up profit - an alluring purpose, mission and values-based approaches to how it feels to work in an organisation.

Yes: People Experience has emerged and is the key differentiator. People Experience (PX) is a much nobler term than Employee Experience, which still feels like the absolute ownership of people's hearts and minds. PX mixes traditional elements like terms and conditions, employment law, and the value proposition that an organisation offers its people with fulfilment, flexibility, choice, development for the future, and an inclusive present.

What we now know as organizational culture influences all of that. Many people say this term represents "the way things are done around here."

But to me, culture is this: How does my presence in and participation in this organisation make me feel?

Culture is feelings. If the organisation had a soul, it's that. How we behave, the rules we are bound by, the intellect we deploy and acquire, the comradeship, the inclusion and support, the care, the diligence, and the integrity of what is promised in the work we do all impact our feelings.

So, if human capital is the differentiator that truly sets apart the most admired, balanced, and successful enterprises on the planet, is culture the determinant of whether that human capital is invested, spent, and used well?

It so is.

Great benefits, a super brand, and outstanding profits all look like success criteria, and they certainly help showcase brilliance in some crucial forms. Can you succeed without a great culture? Yes, sadly, in many recognisable ways.

But without a strong, stabilising and inspiring culture, there's a price to pay for that success. One that isn't always "bankable" and some companies may have huge cash balances in the black, but if culture is in the red, beware.

Do you, therefore, 'over-index' culture over everything? No. But 'under-indexing' culture is a drain you may not notice and could catch you out when you least need it. I often say that when your processes, technology, and even leadership fail, your culture will see you through.

The question really is, how do you pay more attention to culture whilst maintaining all the other levers of success?

- Firstly, culture is not programmable. There's no such thing as not having a culture; you've always had one. If it's not what represents the soul of the enterprise, then something needs to happen—which is why programmable thinking might come in. A programme of culture change might be your desire, and a declaration to focus on culture will need to be made, but creating programmable actions is superficial and unlikely to create the lasting shift needed.

- Secondly, culture is always moving and thereby, it can be researched and defined today and shift tomorrow due to a big decision, a market-wide shock, or a leader's ill-discipline coming to light. As it's constantly changing, so should our attention and corrective actions be constant.

- Thirdly, it's a hugely personal perspective. But a collective one always forms. So, what we think culture is, it is. But to someone else - even a close colleague - it will be different. Our individual experiences of culture mean that it's likely to a normalised variable.

- Lastly, it's like concentric circles in a pool with an epicenter of cultural principles, That are different as they ripple through professional functions, business disciplines, teams, roles, and situations. At a time of change, the culture will be one of experimentation, adaptation, communication and collaboration. Where it's about an agenda around a specific product or service, it'll be about consistency, consolidation, coalescence and convergence.

How do we change it then? For the better.

Focus on two key things in the title of this piece:

Systems and Energy

Back to my definition: How does my presence in, and being a part of, this organisation make me feel?

The system we're in will create the conditions for certain energies to come to the fore. The energies we use, show, and experience will shape and determine how the system acts.

So, it is that simple to me. 2 crucial components that are not talked about enough.

Yes, talk about behaviours, attitudes and approaches. Talk about language, styles and deeds.

But these will form into systems and will have an impact on our energies.

To take it down a level, our systems and energies manifest in our principles (values, codes and conduct) and in our design.

Example: We believe a culture of innovation will help us succeed in competitive and challenging environments. Yet our design is one of hierarchical power and bureaucracy. No matter how we want a culture of innovation to prevail, the system's design works against this and creates energy disparity, like opposite magnetics. Repellence will be the outcome, not revelations.

Once we've interrogated our principles and design, we might see the need to change our systems to impact on our energies, and we should then look at three core elements that make up our principles and our design:

- Accountability
- Clarity
- Togetherness

How do we set accountability and show it? How is it defined and utilised? Both to people and from people? To each other, the organisation, our customers, stakeholders, and partners? How clear are we regarding expectations, balance, equity, and fairness? It's beyond communication, but that's a

crucial part of creating clarity. When people know, they are more likely to make good decisions, participate well with each other and use company resources more effectively.

And togetherness. How well are we "as one" with decisions? Priorities? Adjustments? Do we look out for each other, the company, and our mission?

Of course, below these are "artefacts" that will also impact culture, such as development, recognition, influence, and inclusion. More likely to be seen in HR and Talent programmes, policies and products.

This leads to more fulfilment, care, and well-being and ultimately helps create a more flourishing state for people and the organisation.

Now, that's what a good culture should ultimately deliver - a regularised state of flourishing.

Or, as Greek Philosopher Aristotle called it, Eudaimonia. It is the highest form of human good and a pervasive sense of joy. It is not hedonistic or fleeting happiness. It is a sustainable sense of being with something that delivers a constant range of positives and flourishing sensations.

As I said, I believe culture is this: How does my presence in and participation in this organisation make me feel?

And there's no higher form of that than flourishing.

INTEGRATING GENERATIVE AI: WHY GETTING THE HUMAN DYNAMICS RIGHT IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS

BY UMA GUNASILAN

Professor Uma Gunasilan is the Associate Dean of Research and the Chair of AI with Hult International Business School. With 25 years of academia and 10 years of IT consulting experience, her interests are in the advancement and effective deployment of AI, deriving and disseminating business intelligence, growing sustainable scholarly ecosystems within academic spheres and progressive academic management models.

Keywords: *Human Dynamics; Generative AI; Digital Transformation; AI Integration; HR; Technology; Leadership; Transparent Communication; Education; Development and more…*

As we navigate through the era of rapid digital transformation, the allure of Generative AI as a tool to automate complex tasks, foster creativity, and enhance decision-making is undeniable. This technology has the potential to be a multifaceted tool in the digital age, poised to revolutionize industries. The technological leap promises to revolutionize industries by automating complex tasks, generating creative solutions and enhancing decision making processes. In a nutshell, this new tech promises to be the Swiss Army knife of the digital age - except it's trying to paint, calculate, and maybe make coffee at the same time.

However, considering the crucial role of human dynamics is essential for any organization looking to successfully integrate Generative AI into its operations. Overlooking these can impede progress and affect the health of an organization. Embedding AI into the fabric of business operations requires not just technological adjustments but a cultural shift towards fostering trust and inclusivity. Acknowledging and actively engaging with these human elements can smooth the path to a harmonious integration, ensuring AI serves to enhance, rather than disrupt, the organizational ecosystem.

The Emotional Rollercoaster of AI Integration

Introducing Generative AI into the workplace has proven to be an emotional rollercoaster, featuring a mix of excitement, scepticism, and fear among employees. This complexity is highlighted in a study by Leadership IQ, which reveals a broad spectrum of employee reactions: a small fraction wholeheartedly embraces AI, while a vast majority fluctuate between cautious optimism and serious apprehension, concerns shared by leadership as well. The root of this unease often lies in misconceptions about AI's capabilities and its implications for job security, further compounded by a significant portion of leadership teams lacking confidence in and experience with AI tools. This situation underscores the challenge of nurturing a culture that fully embraces technological advancements.

Acknowledging this emotional landscape, the question arises: How can organizations effectively address these challenges and emotions to smooth the transition towards AI integration? The answer lies in proactive strategies that emphasize clear communication, education, and inclusivity. Organizations must demystify AI, clarifying its role and potential to enhance rather than replace human work. By fostering a culture that values transparent communication, continuous learning, and active participation in AI initiatives, companies can alleviate fears and build a supportive environment. Encouraging a dialogue about AI's benefits and involving employees in the development and implementation process are critical steps towards harmonizing AI with human dynamics in the workplace. This approach not only soothes the emotional rollercoaster but also paves the way for a future where AI and human creativity coalesce to drive innovation and efficiency.

The Art of Transparent Communication: Decoding AI for the Masses

The cornerstone of turning AI sceptics into believers is as simple as it sounds: just talk about it - but with clarity and transparency.

Central to overcoming resistance and fostering an AI-ready culture is the establishment of open and transparent communication channels. Organizations must prioritize demystifying AI for their employees, distinguishing between myth and reality. This involves clear, consistent messaging about the purpose of AI integrations and how they're expected to enhance operational efficiency. Most importantly, it's about separating AI fact from AI fiction, ensuring everyone understands that AI is less about orchestrating a workplace coup and more about taking the drudgery out of their daily tasks and

elevating their roles rather than replacing them. It's about addressing fears head-on, acknowledging them, and providing reassurance through information and engagement, all of which can help to transform scepticism into acceptance.

Adopting A Human-centric Approach to AI

When integrating AI, remembering that people are the protagonists of this story is crucial. Keeping people at the core of AI initiatives is pivotal for ensuring that technology adoption does not alienate the workforce but instead enhances people's capabilities and job satisfaction. This narrative involves designing AI not as the hero who saves the day, but as the trusty sidekick that knows its place. This human-centric approach means designing AI systems and processes that complement human skills, fostering a symbiotic relationship between employees and AI tools. By involving employees in the development and implementation phases, organizations can ensure that AI solutions are tailored to enhance, rather than replace, human input. This collaboration not only improves the effectiveness of AI solutions, but also empowers employees, giving them a sense of ownership and control over the changes affecting their work environment.

HR's Role

Human Resources departments play a pivotal role in navigating the transition towards AI-enhanced operations. In this unfolding saga, HR departments have the pivotal role of casting director, ensuring that every voice is heard in the great AI debate. HR can lead the charge in creating an inclusive culture where feedback on AI initiatives is not only welcomed but actively sought. This involves implementing regular feedback loops, town hall meetings, and focus groups dedicated to discussing AI projects and their impact on the workforce. By valuing and acting upon employee feedback, organizations can mitigate fears, clarify expectations, and adjust their AI strategies to better meet the needs of their workforce. It's about fostering a culture where feedback on AI doesn't disappear into a black hole but is welcomed with the enthusiasm.

Leadership's Example: Pioneers in the AI Frontier

Leadership attitudes towards AI have a profound impact on the organizational culture. Leaders who exhibit open-mindedness, adaptability, and a willingness to experiment set a positive example for their teams. Leaders in the AI era need to channel their inner explorers, navigating uncharted technological territories with a blend of curiosity and courage. They should champion the benefits of

AI, share learning resources, and encourage a culture of innovation where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth. This leadership style is instrumental in building a resilient organization that views AI as a tool for empowerment and innovation, rather than a threat. They must be the ones who, faced with the AI wilderness, don't just survive but thrive, setting an example of innovation and resilience that inspires everyone to boldly go where no employee has gone before.

Investing in AI Education and Development: Not Just Another Training Module

Preparing the workforce for the AI revolution is less about adding another forgettable training module and more about sparking genuine excitement and curiosity. The successful integration of AI into organizational processes necessitates a well-informed and skilled workforce. Investment in education and development programs is essential for equipping employees with the knowledge and skills needed to leverage AI tools effectively. It's about transforming AI from a mysterious box that might steal your job into a fascinating tool that could make work more engaging, creative, and fun. Tailored training sessions, workshops, and continuous learning opportunities can help demystify AI technologies, showcasing practical applications and benefits. By fostering an environment that values learning and growth, organizations can accelerate the acceptance and adoption of AI, ensuring that employees feel confident and competent in using new technologies. This is where educational initiatives come into play, offering a mix of AI enlightenment and entertainment that could rival the best Netflix documentaries.

Navigating the path forward on AI Integration

The goal is to unlock the full potential of both AI and human capabilities, paving the way for a future where technological advancements and human ingenuity drive collective success. The journey towards a harmonious alignment of AI and human potential involves:

a. *Building a Foundation of Trust Through Transparency and Communication*
   The bedrock of successful AI integration lies in cultivating an environment where trust prevails. Trust, however, is not a commodity that can be instantly acquired but is earned through consistent, open communication and transparency. The challenge here is manifold: organizations must navigate the fine line between hyping AI capabilities and underplaying its potential impacts on job security and workplace dynamics. This balance requires a nuanced approach to communication, where information about AI's role, objectives, and expected outcomes is shared openly, yet sensitively. Critically, this means not just announcing changes

but engaging in two-way conversations where employee concerns and questions can be addressed. Such an environment fosters a sense of security and belonging, crucial for the acceptance and successful adoption of AI technologies.

b. *Prioritizing Human-centric Design in AI Initiatives*

A human-centric approach to AI design emphasizes creating systems that augment human skills and creativity rather than supplanting them. The critical perspective here scrutinizes whether AI initiatives truly serve to enhance job satisfaction and productivity or inadvertently contribute to a sense of redundancy among the workforce. To genuinely prioritize human-centric design, organizations must involve employees in the AI development process, gathering their insights and preferences to ensure the technology complements human efforts. This process should be iterative, allowing for adjustments based on real-world feedback and experiences. It challenges the organization to measure success not just by efficiency gains or cost savings, but by improvements in employee well-being & engagement.

c. *Leveraging HR to Cultivate an Inclusive Culture*

HR departments are pivotal in ensuring that the integration of AI into the workplace respects and reflects the diverse voices within an organization. The critical challenge here is to move beyond token gestures of inclusivity to genuinely empowering employees to shape AI policies and practices. This involves creating structured forums for dialogue, feedback mechanisms, and perhaps most importantly, ensuring that this input meaningfully influences decision-making. Cultivating an inclusive culture around AI also means addressing disparities in digital literacy and access to ensure all employees can participate fully in the AI-augmented workplace. The role of HR is thus not just administrative but profoundly strategic, acting as the architects of a workplace where technology serves to unite rather than divide.

d. *Encouraging Leadership to Model Adaptability, Innovation, and a Commitment to Continuous Learning*

Leadership in the age of AI requires a paradigm shift from traditional command-and-control models to one characterized by adaptability, innovation, and an ethos of lifelong learning. Critically, this means leaders themselves must be willing to engage with AI technologies, understand their implications, and exhibit the very qualities they wish to see in their teams. The challenge is significant: it requires leaders to publicly navigate the uncertainties and

learning curves associated with AI, sometimes failing in full view of their teams. Yet, it is precisely this vulnerability and willingness to learn that can inspire a culture where experimentation and innovation are valued over perfection. Leaders must thus become the embodiment of the change they seek, a process that demands both humility and courage.

e. *Investing in Comprehensive Education Programs to Prepare the Workforce for the Future of Work*

The future of work, increasingly shaped by AI and other digital technologies, demands a workforce skilled not just in technical competencies but also in critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence. The challenge in investing in comprehensive education programs lies in anticipating the skills that will be most valuable in this future landscape and creating learning opportunities that are accessible and relevant to all employees. This requires a commitment to continuous education that goes beyond one-off training sessions to create a culture of ongoing development and curiosity. Critically, such programs must be designed to be inclusive, recognizing and addressing the varied learning styles, needs, and starting points of a diverse workforce. The ultimate goal is to empower employees not just to navigate the future of work but to shape it actively.

Hand-in-hand

In wrapping up this foray into the world of AI and human dynamics, it's clear that the path to a harmonious AI-human workplace is paved with good intentions and clear communications. As organizations implement Generative AI, keeping the focus on human aspects is key to smoothly managing AI's complexities and making the process beneficial for everyone involved. After all, the future of work with AI doesn't have to be a dystopian novel; it can be a collaborative adventure story where humans and AI are partners, solving the mysteries of efficiency and innovation. In the end, the quest for AI integration is not just about programming and data. It's about creating a workplace narrative where technology plays a supporting role in the human story, enhancing our capabilities and perhaps, making the office a bit more interesting. Here's to the future, where AI and humans work together, not just as colleagues but as comrades-in-arms.

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THE SUCCESS FRAMEWORK: A JOURNEY TO PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

BY DR VICTORIA STAKELUM

Dr Victoria Stakelum is a multi-award-winning Success Psychologist and Mindset Coach. She is the Chief Mindset Coach at The Success Smith and Founder of Elevate – The leadership academy for women. In over two decades of professional experience, Victoria have gained deep expertise in Leadership, Personal Effectiveness, Influence, Energy Dynamics, Executive Presence and Career Strategy. This is underpinned by her expertise and Master-level qualifications in psychology, coaching, NLP and integrated therapy and energy work.

Keywords: *Outward Insight; Self-Awareness; Outward Influence; Self-Control; Organisational Change; Value Systems; Self-Growth; Mindfulness; Listening; Communication and more…*

Your ability to create success – personally and professionally - boils down to a handful of key skills. In this article, I provide a framework for these skills that you can consider and evaluate yourself and others against. I will then provide development suggestions for each part of the framework so that you have something to go on if you identify gaps or opportunities in your own development plan or that of someone around you. Whether your interest is in growing your business, having more credibility and clout with your boss, influencing a senior stakeholder or driving an organisational change, read on to discover more about this success framework (p 149)

We often think that success is the result of what we are doing. But what I have learned during several decades of corporate leadership and coaching others to success, is that *how we do the things we are doing* is a far more significant factor in success - our 'way of being', in relation to ourselves, and then to those around us is the real game changer.
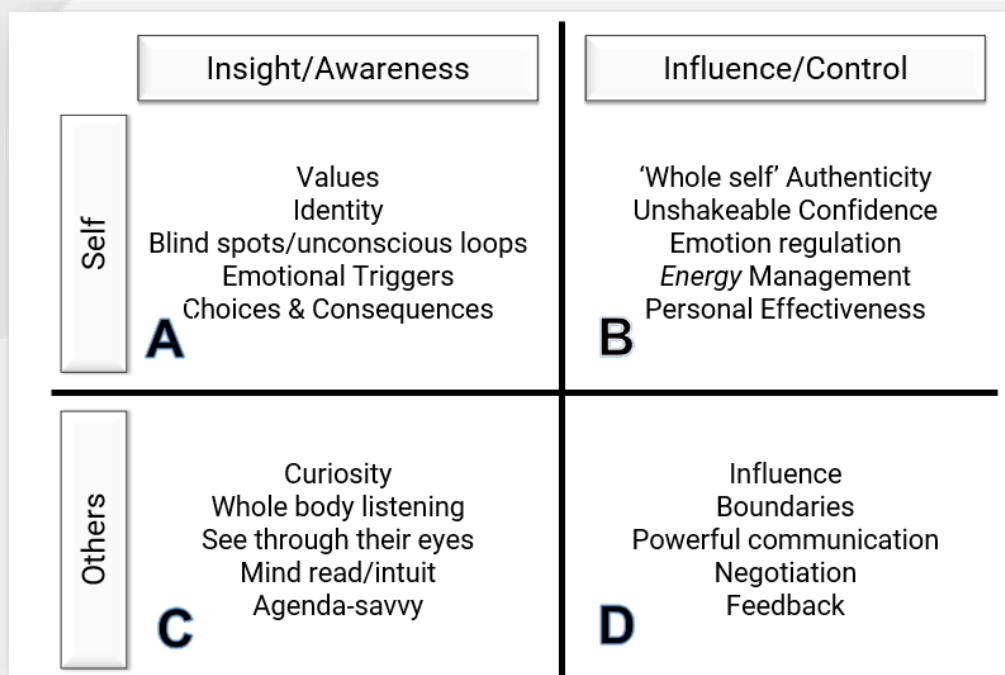
The Success Framework: Overview

Figure 1: The Success Framework ©2023 The Success Smith

How we show up, starts with our level of insight and awareness. This is about how deeply we understand ourselves – our strengths, weaknesses, emotional triggers, habits and behaviours – and the impact of these on those around us. In relation to others, it is about our ability to read, understand and interpret the needs, desires, behaviours and attitudes of those people we come into contact with.

If you think about it, much of the inner and outer conflict, confusion and miscommunication that takes place in life and business comes down to someone lacking awareness of their own needs, behaviours or impact, or failing to completely understand those of another.

Beyond our awareness and insight, our levels of self-control and influence with others complete the framework. Individually, this is about how well you are able to regulate yourself when it comes to your impulses, fears, emotional responses, and behaviours. For example, knowing that you become snappier when under pressure, or that your anxiety becomes debilitating when you have to give a presentation, is one thing. Being able to control these effects so that you can maintain your

composure and performance is an advanced skill when it comes to personal performance and effective leadership.

Our ability to control ourselves then extends to our influence with others. How effectively are we at managing our impulses, reactions and behaviours so that we can be at our most effective when engaging, influencing, consulting or negotiating with others? Are we adept at speaking the language of and understanding the agendas of those people we would love to better influence? Are our relationships impactful, mutually respectful and healthily picketed? Or do we find ourselves agreeing, tolerating and saying yes when we don't really mean to?

It is only by developing our ability to set boundaries and energetically connect to and influence our peers, leaders and teams that we become highly effective at driving personal, team and organisational performance, outcomes and success.

As you reflect on the framework now, how would you rate yourself in each quadrant? Give yourself a score out of 5 for each quadrant where 5 is 'Bulletproof' and 0 is 'Not a hint of it'.
What pattern do you notice in your responses?

Some common themes I have observed through my work with executive coaching clients are as follows:

It is also common for us to assume we have a greater level of awareness of others than we actually have. We so often make assumptions or interpretations that are based in our own perceptions, beliefs and experiential filters. Until we have become aware of our own stories, narratives and filters, it is very difficult to get a 'clean read' on what someone else is thinking or feeling, or what is motivating their behaviour.

The fourth quadrant, influence with others, tends to flow natural once we have an advanced level in the other three. When we have developed self-awareness, can regulate how we show up and when we have really honed our ability to understand others, the ability to influence them tends to flow naturally. It is in this space of ease, energetic power and self-mastery that I believe the most influential and high integrity leadership emerges.

So how you can build your capability in each area?

Quadrant A: Self Awareness

Developing deep self-awareness involves:

Having an understanding and acceptance of 'who I am' – a self-identity that is clear and secure.

Often, we realise during adulthood that we aren't quite sure of who we are anymore. The ease and confidence that flowed in earlier years (if we ever had it!) can feel a bit less secure as we take on financial responsibilities, become parents or carers, get passed over for promotions or feel the stress of more senior roles. In trying to meet with the expectations of society, our families, our peers and our colleagues, we can sometimes lose our connection to the person we once were. This can create a vulnerability that can show up as second guessing ourselves, feeling imposter syndrome or hiding parts of ourselves from our colleagues (which can create even greater feelings of imposter syndrome as we fear the exposure of being 'found out' for those traits, or for the vulnerability we are feeling).

Knowledge of my strengths, weaknesses, emotional triggers, beliefs and habit patterns

Whilst we cannot be at our best 100% of the time, learning about those situations and events that act as energy gains and energy drains helps us be at our most productive and high-performing more often. Developing an awareness of those external triggers and internal thoughts that bring up reactive or unhelpful behaviours allows us to make a decision to manage those moments more effectively. Learning to identify those beliefs and behaviours that limit us or keep us stuck allows us to begin shifting them and rewriting our narrative to something more supportive. Crucially, with this awareness comes a kind of quiet confidence. *Your* feedback or behaviours cannot throw *me* into reactivity or vulnerability if I have considered these aspects of myself and reflected on them honestly and chosen to take responsibility for them.

A deep understanding of my values

We often know the values that we cherish, but there can be a deeper set of values that lie beneath the surface of conscious awareness. If you aren't sure what these might be, take a look at how you experience day to day life. If it is broadly in line with those things that are important to you, your known values are probably in line with your subconscious values. But if you find yourself feeling stuck, dissatisfied or out of alignment in day to day life, your subconscious values may be driving you in a different direction without you realising it. On of the greatest benefits of becoming clear of our deepest values is that we can make a choice to get into alignment – within ourselves, and within the culture of the organisation we are working in – which allows us to be at our best much more of the time.

Key Actions for Developing Self-Awareness

- Consider taking a personality psychometric like DISC or Metaprogrammes in order to build your understanding of your traits and preferences under different circumstances.
- Undertake a 360°feedback exercise to build your awareness of how others perceive you (I recommend doing this through a coach or expert to ensure your feedback is rich, free of political bias and carefully handled and delivered).

- Think about how you show up when you are at your best, versus when you are 'just surviving' and the impact you have on others in these different energy states.

- Spend time in self-reflection – whether that be sitting in quiet contemplation, journaling on key questions or taking time each week to review wins and learnings.

- Bring all this information together in a personal SWOT exercises, reviewing your Strengths, Weaknesses, Options and Triggers to gain a clearer perspective on the full picture of yourself and how you show up.

Quadrant B: Self Control

So now that we have spent time developing a deep level of self-awareness, what do we do with this information? For many of us, this point of the journey can be the toughest. We have all of this awareness of our unhelpful reactions, emotional triggers and limiting beliefs, but we have not yet developed strategies to regulate them. This can lead to feeling low in confidence as we become aware

of our shortcomings but feel powerless to change or have limited in coping strategies. The secret here is to realise that even as you develop greater levels of self-mastery, it is never something you have, it is something you commit to. It is a practise rather than a trait.

So rather than feeling bad each time you become aware of something but haven't yet managed to change it, see it as a gift from which you can learn – a stepping stone to success, because success actually lives inside the land of failure – it is never a single destination, but rather an ongoing journey.

Developing self-awareness then, becomes a beautiful opportunity to practise a) self-acceptance – because perfection doesn't exist and b) choice – because now that you have this awareness, you get to decide what you wish to do. For example, some of your weaknesses you may choose to accept and forgive yourself for. Others, you may take active steps to develop out of.

This could take so many shapes – it will be completely unique to you. But some examples might be:
- I want to show up with more confidence in meetings and presentations
- I want to have healthier boundaries and find appropriate ways to say no
- I want to negotiate a salary increase/role progression
- I want to be more honest with my boss about my ambitions in my role
- I want to be more influential with the board
- I want to lead a cultural change project but am scared of failing.
- I want to procrastinate less and achieve more

Whatever you have identified as opportunities for greater self-control, a brilliant place to start is by learning to manage your personal energy. There are two specific aspects to this, the physical and the emotional.

Physical energy is supported by having good foundations in place for being in your best energy. This includes getting enough sleep, eating well, limiting alcohol, sugar and caffeine and having plenty of movement in your routine. These might sound more like they belong on a fitness programme than in an article about leadership skills, but there is a hardwired connection between our physical energy and our emotional energy – our hormones rule us! If we want to show up with composure, be able to regulate our emotions and have high energy, it starts with our lifestyle habits. These habits also provide great opportunities to practise self-control.

Emotional energy is about remaining grounded and composed regardless of what events and triggers you are faced with. This A-B-C process is a useful start point when it comes to showing up with composure and regulation:

A. Awareness – learn to recognise your triggers – those thoughts or events that have you reacting in ways that limit your choices, showing up in ways you are not proud of or impacting others adversely. We covered some of this in quadrant A above. But here, it is about bringing awareness *in the moment* that you feel the emotion or reaction taking place, so that you can catch it.

B. Breathe – slow, deep breathing through your nose is the most rapid and effective way to downregulate your nervous system, which reduces stress, allows you to think clearly and slows things down. Therefore, when you feel yourself in the grip of an impulse, whether that's frustration, anxiety, embarrassment, upset. procrastination or imposter syndrome, take a moment to breathe three to five deep slow breaths through your nose and notice the calming effect this has.

C. Choose – having grounded yourself and caught the immediate feelings before they spill out into behaviours, ask yourself "What action or response can I take now, to create the best possible outcome?"

Don't be disheartened if the first few times you try this, you have already reacted in the old ways before you catch yourself. As you continue to practise, it will get easier. You can improve faster by using mental rehearsal (playing the event in your mind, but giving it a happy ending!) when you know trigger events are coming up (like a big presentation or difficult conversation) or after a situation in which you didn't quite show up as you would have liked. Your subconscious mind can't tell the difference between reality and visualisation, so mental rehearsal builds the same neural pathways as really making the change.

You can also catalyse your progress by practising mindfulness daily. My research showed that people that have a regular mindfulness practise have a greater ability to regulate adverse emotions using short 'in the moment' mindfulness and breathwork exercises than those that don't.

Quadrant C: Outward Insight

Having developed a degree of self-awareness and control, you are ready to begin building your capacity to 'mindread' others. The reason we need to do the work on ourselves first, is that until we become aware of our own thought filters, triggers and reactions, we tend to make assumptions of others based on our own insecurities, narratives and beliefs. How often do you send an email and then worry when you don't get a response and make up all sorts of stories in your mind about why the person didn't come straight back to you? This is a good example of how our assumptions and stories will cloud our perception. Once we have the self-awareness to bring 'clean insight' to our interactions with others, we are better placed to really understand them.

This is a whole field of study that can't easily be covered within the space of this article. However, some good techniques to begin practising include:

- Active listening – this is listening to hear, rather than listening to respond. Use open questions to avoid imposing your own expectations on an interaction and to generate deeper and less superficial responses. Try and notice your own thoughts trying to intervene on what the other person is saying. It is easy to analyse or interpret the meaning of something someone said, but to avoid making incorrect assumptions, it is important to acknowledge and enquire, rather than assume, what a person may be conveying. To develop your active listening and questioning capabilities, exploring coaching as a skillset could be valuable.

- Bringing curiosity rather than judgement to every situation you find yourself in. This is difficult! Human beings are wired for judgement, but curiosity is the antidote and acts as a shield and a superpower when it comes to navigating the complexities of modern life. So, try to suspend judgement and become deeply curious about people's needs, unspoken messages and agenda.

- Learning to connect to the energy of an interaction. This might sound a little bit abstract, but people carry an energetic field and if you can learn to feel and connect to it, you can fast track your rapport, engagement and connection with that person. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears and try to connect to the energy of the person you are in dialogue with. So often people tell us more than their words are conveying - with their facial expressions, tone and body language.

- If you can become really adept at knowing your own filters and putting them to one side, you may be able to start 'mind reading' a little bit – really seeing the world through another person's eyes and understanding their perspective. The skillset that comes with Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) can be a particularly helpful one if you are trying to develop this capability.

Quadrant D: Outward Influence

There is inherent benefit and reward in everything discussed above. However, our final quadrant is where we realise the full benefit and power of all the work we have done so far! This is where we can use our self-mastery and understanding of others to influence the world around us. This is about creating outcomes that are beautifully designed around win-win scenarios because we have been able to position them around both our needs and the needs of those people we are negotiating with because we have taken the time to understand them. We have been able to control our impulsive reactions to people and instead respond in ways that build our credibility and effectiveness so that we are respected and acknowledged as someone worth engaging with.

We are able to ask for what we need and create firm, healthy boundaries because we have taken on our fears and learned to communicate in ways that land positively with our stakeholders and colleagues. We are able to negotiate effectively because we know our own mind and have understood the agenda of the person across the table so that we can find a mutually acceptable agreement. We are able to give and receive feedback effectively and with composure because we know ourselves and can deliver our message to others with care and empathy.

Reflect on what your career would be like if you focused your development across these quadrants. Can you imagine ever feeling out of control, or stuck or stressed if you developed your skills across all four quadrants?

This Success Framework isn't a static blueprint but a dynamic journey. I would encourage you to pick an area to work on, starting with quadrant A and taking a long-term approach to working your way around the whole framework. Celebrate your victories, learn from challenges, and commit to perpetual growth on the road to success. If you commit to this framework, your leadership journey will be marked by authenticity, resilience, and the impactful influence that stems from embracing this transformative process.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

BY JONATHAN RODRIGUES

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The Future is People & Culture!

This is a phrase that we use every day at the PCA, and it was echoed by almost every speaker during the International People and Culture Week, **'IPCW'**, held between May 1-7, earlier this year. The feeling is in the air and we at **'PCA'** (People and Culture Association) are only interested in letting it grow. Following the success of a week-long series of conversations and celebrations at the IPCW24, it was only appropriate that we followed it up with another global project to showcase the trending themes in People & Culture.

The inaugural volume of The International People & Culture Review will feature some a list of accomplished practitioners, policy influencers and academics who are transforming the old-school office atmosphere to an inclusive, transparent and productive co-working environment, where individuals can personally thrive, while striving to achieve organisational goals. The culture backgrounds of the authors also provides the reader an overview of the global context to P&C – confirming to us what we already know, that the principles and values remain universal for most global organisations, but the frameworks and guidance for implementation require to be contextualised to the collective culture of the people that work within each organisation.

And, who provides that transparent ring fence around leadership? People and Culture.

The People and Culture function is now very visible and active within an organisation. Leadership is beginning to embrace and respect the employee advocate and employee experience role played by the P&C professional. Culture highlights the undercurrents of how things function at any workplace

and therefore, it is no longer a discussion that can be sidelined in the modern workplace. Creating a blueprint for Culture at an organisation requires the endorsement from every single stakeholder – and with so many authors (writing for IPCR 2024) focussing on inclusion is a testimony to this truth.

I, personally, didn't mind the term 'Human Resources' and it didn't bother me much – as I had spent most of my work life as an entrepreneur running my show. However, as I began engaging in multiple global projects, I began to be referred quite often to Human Resources to get things done. This is when the reality became apparent – 'I am not a resource, but a person'. I wasn't a tool to be sourced and outsourced at someone's whimsical theatrics – luckily, P&C happened. If not for David Liddle and The TCM Group, I am not sure if I would ever be exposed to the world of People and Culture.

Listen, it would be nonsensical to argue that "HR" is irrelevant or outdated – of course, we could change the 'R' to 'Relations' instead of 'Resources'. Beyond that, most of us know the tough tasks associated with policies, protocols, permissions, paperwork, payrolls – and this requires the best in the field for efficient execution. The truth is, there is room for two here – So, what is the role of People and Culture all about?

Some may argue that the development of the People and Culture function is a novel, while others argue that it has been around for ages – just not defined as it is today. Then again, it is really clearly defined and laid out in the modern times? Considering the types of diverse work backgrounds the people who are tasked to do P&C work represent, we at PCA set out to comprehend the definitions and understandings that individuals have of People and Culture. It has been a fantastic learning experience and we are energised by the feedback and insights we have received on the P&C Questionnaire – which is still Live – do reach out to us if you would like to participate.

Our learnings so far have been that People & Culture functions have grown increasingly important within private and public organisations since 2020, partly due to the awareness that was generated during the pandemic work-from-home period. This has led many researchers, scholars and practitioners to suggest that effective P&C teams are having positive impact on employee well-being, thereby affecting overall productivity levels within an organization.

People & Culture managers and leaders are currently working closely with Human Resource Management teams to draft policies and analyse protocols that address diversity in the office, identify professional development and learning requirements in teams, co-create purposeful job opportunities

for employees, and support talent retention efforts through reward structure or engagement and belongingness programs.

In addition to assisting the leadership in achieving organizational goals, P&C teams are also tasked with the responsibility of setting the expectations for behavioural standards as part of office culture. People & Culture teams are embracing mediation, facilitation and coaching to de-escalate tensions between team members and rebuild cordial working relations. These teams are also required to work in tandem with the management and employees to curate and organise trainings, coaching and counselling wherever necessary. A good temperament, excellent communication, inter-personal and problem-solving skills are the basics necessities for a P&C professional.

At the PCA, we are excited to be highlighting some of the bright spots who are putting in place the building blocks for the people and culture function, internationally. Thank you for joining us on this journey of *#puttingpeoplefirst*

Let's co-create better working!

The International People and Culture Review – Vol 1

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