

Fixing Dysfunctional Culture

With Patsy Feeman, Leb Tannenbaum and Patrick Lyons

Episode 16

As a leader, talk is cheap. Action is what counts and practice makes a difference. Below are practical steps to improve performance.

- **Invest in your people.** Today's employees demand personal and professional growth, and like it or not, you'll lose your people if you don't provide them with the opportunities. Those opportunities often take the form of investments into job training and skill development, but they must also include career growth opportunities for employees to avoid feeling stagnant. If they do feel that way, they'll leave you for career growth elsewhere.

And make it a point to dedicate ample time for employees to participate in the opportunities you provide for them. If they constantly feel like they can't participate in growth opportunities because they're overloaded in their jobs, they'll grow frustrated and leave.

- **Take a critical look at the teams within your company. Are they true teams or do they function more like workgroups instead?** True teams share a common goal and a unified commitment to achieve it beyond individual accolades and accomplishments. They function well together, support each other, communicate transparently and freely share information so their common interests can be achieved. Naturally, teams are guided by the virtue of teamwork and buy into the "All for one and one for all" mentality.

Workgroups can be thought of as a collection of employees who may share a leader, workspace, tools and other important aspects of their jobs but operate more like siloed individuals with their own interests and objectives. They often have little concern for - or thought about - how each individual's actions affect the others. Members of a workgroup often prioritize their own goals and objectives above others unless someone else's success is necessary for their own success.

- **Empowering your employees is fairly simple. Here's how you do it:**
 - First and foremost, clarify roles and responsibilities for everyone in the company. Confusion abounds when employees are unclear about what each person is supposed to be doing and who is responsible for what.
 - Next, clarify the authority attached to each role and/or employee. Time and energy are often wasted trying to discover whose approval is needed for this or for that, and things can fall through the cracks waiting for that person to be identified.

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- Finally, ask everyone with authority what information they need and when they need it to make the decisions within their authority. It's incredibly frustrating to have authority to make a decision but be unable to get the information needed to make it. This causes delayed decision-making and/or mistakes caused by decisions made without all the information. On that note...
 - **Information flow is incredibly important, and leaders have more influence on it that they realize.** Mistakes are often made because we lacked the data to avoid them. How often do you find out after the fact that someone had the information all the time but it didn't flow to those who most needed it? Fix this by bringing the right people together, examining the flow of information in your business, determining the black holes and bottle-necks, then fixing them. You'll diffuse frustration across the organization.
 - **Be curious, empathetic and listen with an open heart.** Every time you're convinced you know the answer, you've closed yourself off to additional data that might be relevant and change your mind. Additionally, you create a culture with stunted communication skills that jumps to conclusions and disregards one another. That sure sounds like a great place to work!

Instead, check your assumptions at the door, ask open-ended questions, and learn to listen to understand, not to respond.

- **Culture is a living, breathing organism!** It's ever-changing, evolving and growing, so you must be intentional to feed it and grow it into something you want it to be. And never forget that you, the senior leader, are the single-biggest influence on your organization's culture, so start in the mirror when asking what needs to be done to create a high-performance culture.
- **Do the hard work to identify and understand the beliefs in your organization.** We often warn senior leaders that this is some of the hardest work there is to do. Why? Because employees (even those on your leadership team) often don't voice every belief they have about working for you. Sometimes, they themselves don't even fully understand the beliefs they have that drive their behavior and feelings about the company.

Getting to those beliefs requires first understanding key and critical characteristics of your organization, then having deeper conversations about why those characteristics exist.

For example, a characteristic of your organization may be that it's slow to respond to changing customer requirements. Why is that? Could it be that a belief employees have is

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that customers shouldn't be allowed to change their requirements? Could it be they believe the requirements will change again, so why bother? Perhaps they believe your requirements gathering process is woefully antiquated or mismanaged. Maybe it's something else entirely that needs to be explored. Whatever their beliefs, once you know them you can begin the work to address and change them for the betterment of your culture.

- **Now more than ever, leaders must evolve and grow.** Look, personal and professional growth should always be your focus to keep yourself sharp and current, but the leadership landscape has dramatically changed since the start of the pandemic. Employees are less willing to stay where they're stagnant or unhappy. Communication, engaging employees, sharing information, and practically every other aspect of your business is more complex today. You simply cannot expect to lead the way you did when everyone was together under one roof. You may even find that some successful leaders of the past are unable to transition to this new leadership landscape, forcing you to make the tough decisions that are yours - and yours alone - to make.
- **Slow down and ensure you're sharing the learnings of your mistakes.** Making mistakes is part of business and can often be a sign you're working hard and trying new things. Making *the same* mistakes over and over, however, is an indication you're just not learning from them. That's both frustrating and expensive. While it's tempting to try to do everything at light-speed in a fast-paced business world, when it comes to sharing what you've learned from the mistakes you've made, slow and steady wins the race (and prevents repeats!).

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