"For an effervescent life, keep your thoughts fearless, your emotions constructive and your actions venturesome…"

Shaping Workplace Dynamics in a Masterful Way

Joyfully, the major component of my work is in the field of Emotional Intelligence. This leads me to engage with a variety of teams and team members. Some teams are newly forming, some are in crisis, some are adjusting to new managers, some are undergoing change.

I have worked with small and large organisations, those that are centrally located and those that are geographically dispersed, and those from the public, private and community sectors. From my observations, whether we are a manager or a leader (leaders have social capital and exist at all levels within an organisation), there are 3 essentials to being able to lead and shape workplace dynamics in a masterful way. These are:

- understanding what '*culture*' really is,
- being able to identify different *organisational mindsets,* and
- having the skills to use language *explicitly* to convey what we want.

1) Understanding what Workplace '*Culture*' Really is.

'Culture' is one of the words I find least useful in organisational nomenclature because it is incredibly vague and in most instances unhelpful in diagnosing what is going wrong or in programming how to get things going right.

'Culture' is not a thing. We cannot pick it up. In and of itself, it actually does not exist. 'Culture' is merely a term we use to describe a longer list of behavioural attributes that have become the 'accepted norm' in any team or organisation.

As a result, when people say 'the problem is our culture', or people purport to stop trying 'because of the culture,' this tells us nothing about what is actually wrong, and also indicates a state of disempowerment because the onus has been externalised to this thing that does not actually exist.

A workplace culture is a bit like the human body. The body is make up of many organs, bones and tissues. These have many functions and when something goes wrong, it has knock-on effects which show up in other organs, bones and tissues. In order to diagnose what needs to be

The 3 Essentials to Shaping Workplace Dynamics in a Masterful Way

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Identifying Different Organisational Mindsets

addressed, we need to know what organs, bones or tissues are actually sore and symptomatic. We need to be specific!

Like a body which is simply the sum total of its parts (although the body is actually a visible manifestation, unlike culture), a 'culture' exists because is it the sum total, or collective, of individual behaviours. Therefore, referring to 'the culture' as the problem, is not at all helpful because it is way too vague.

'Culture' includes the behaviour we exhibit regularly, the behaviour we walk past, the things we 'let slide', the behaviours we challenge and the behaviours we don't, common narratives and 'stories,' and the expectations that are implied. We can do nothing about the 'culture', but we can do something about the individual behaviours that make it up. Once we know what is happening at each of these behavioural levels, we can begin to shift behaviour, and as a result the 'culture' naturally shifts because the culture *is* the behaviour.

2) Identifying Different *Organisational Mindsets*

I observe a variety of mindsets in working with such a wide array of people who are at various stages of their lives and careers and working in very different workplaces. Some mindsets are empowering! Others, sadly, are not. The latter have detrimental impacts on the people who hold that mindset, as well as their colleagues and ultimately their organisation as a whole.

Ask most people what makes a great workplace team, and you'll get fairly similar responses.

"mindset" {noun}

a set of beliefs or a way of thinking that determines one's behavior, outlook and mental attitude.

Inherently, we all know what makes a great place to work. So why doesn't everyone just get in there and do those things?

I reflected on my observations of mindsets, categorising the differences, piecing together the similar attributes, analysing the different narratives and language that people chose to tell their story. Then I happened across the Integral Organisational Model (Ken Wilber). Wilber theorises that there are four perspectives that relate to any situation. If we can see and understand all perspectives, then we have an integral or very well-rounded understanding of it. If we do not, then we have missing pieces. This model (below) informed my reflections and I used it as a framework for my own model depicting individual mindsets and their effect on organisational culture.

To provide a crude overview of the Integral Organisational Model, the quadrants are:: 'I'- my **own** thinking and feeling; 'We'- how we relate, our **shared** values and feelings; 'It'- what something **actually is** from an outside, observable perspective, a thing; 'Its'-the broader **system perspective.**
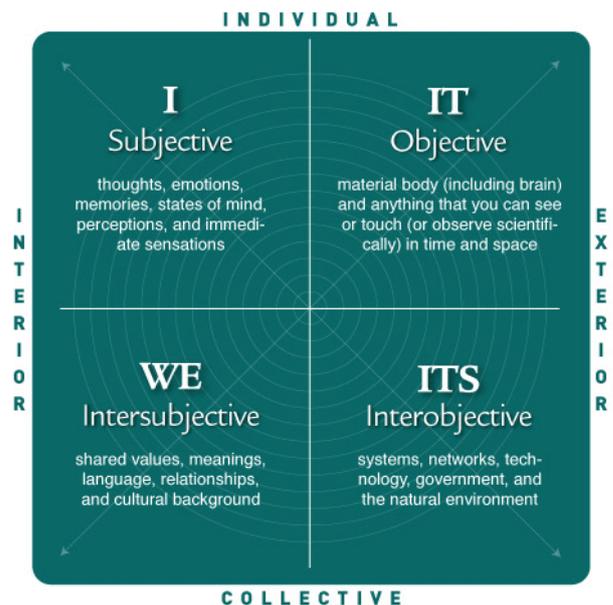

Image Credit: http://www.integralhealthresources.com

Identifying Different Organisational Mindsets

Broadly, the Integral Model applied to workplace Culture looks like this:

I Understanding of own experience in the workplace	**It** Understanding the structures, policies and frameworks in the workplace
We Understanding of shared values and feelings	**Its** The broader purpose of the workplace and the system within which the workplace functions

Using the quadrant categories described to the left, I have given examples of possible mindsets in the table below. Each of the mindsets from each quadrant can manifest in empowering and healthy ways, or disempowering and unhealthy ways. Usually, the more perspectives a person can see and understand, the more empowering and healthy their mindset. If they are missing perspectives, they lack understanding of the 'full picture' and their mindset can be disempowering or unhealthy as a result.

For example, looking at the quadrants below, a person who can see only the team perspective may not speak out or raise issues. Someone who can see only the 'I' perspective usually does not invest in what is good for the team. The more perspectives a person has, and the more they interpret them positively, the more likely they are to take personal responsibility for their own choices and behaviours.

'I'		'It'	
Empowering	**Disempowering**	**Empowering**	**Disempowering**
I contribute to the culture. My actions, choices and behaviours matter. (can see the 'we' and 'it' perspectives. Sometimes 'Its' as well)	I can't change anything. The issues lie with management and the culture (can't see 'we' or 'Its', leading to blame view)	There are structures and policies in place to help me and to help everyone understand what is expected. (can see the 'I', 'We' and sometimes 'Its' perspective)	There are structures in place. No one pays attentions to them. I just do my job. (can't see the 'we', leading to seeing policies as useless or just there for other people)
'We'		**'Its'**	
Empowering	**Disempowering**	**Empowering**	**Disempowering**
We are a team. We work together to get the job done. (Can see 'I' and 'It' perspectives. Sometimes 'Its' as well)	It is important to do what the team and cultural norms indicate (Can't see the 'I' and sometimes misses the 'It' as well, leading to unknown infractions and groupthink)	We have a purpose. We are a part of a broader system. We are influenced by our broader culture. (Can see 'I', 'We' and 'It)	The rules we have are arbitrary and nonsense. (Can't see 'We')

Develop the Skills to Use Language Explicitly

As you can see above, the systems perspective (it's) is not always necessary for a functional team culture, but very beneficial. This is the strategic perspective and those in leadership and management need to have a good understanding of this perspective.

To illustrate this model using another example, consider the choice whether to litter or not.

Iesha finishes a muesli bar. Iesha looks for a bin because she knows that littering is not good for the environment (It and Its) and that people in her town think littering is bad manners (We). She spots a bin in the distance and walks several metres out of her way to place her wrapper in it (Her understanding of 'We', 'It' and 'Its' leads her to take personal action 'I').

Sam finishes a muesli bar. Sam throws the wrapper on the ground (I). Sam knows about the environmental issues but decides her wrapper doesn't count and won't make a difference (no visibility of 'We' at all and without the 'we', Sam cannot connect the 'I' to the 'Its).

When someone is forming an opinion and choosing behaviour, but they are missing a perspective (quadrant), their behaviour will show this. If people don't see the 'I' in culture, they are likely to think that culture that exists outside of them and is something they have nothing to do with. This can often lead to blame. If someone sees the 'It' and 'Its' perspectives, they may be dismissing the powerful social and emotional elements that exist in a team or workplace and instigate or enforce change without taking this into account, resulting in damaged relationships and hurt feelings.

3) Develop the Skills to Use Language E*xplicitly*

As I highlighted above when discussing 'culture', the language that we use is often very vague and global. Consider words like respect, teamwork, collaboration, love. These words describe a series of feelings and behavioural criteria. Again, can you pick up respect? No. It's not a thing. 'Respect' brings up different connotations for different people. Some people consider things like good manners (also a nonsense term because manners are not a thing). Some people might draw a blank and say they don't know how to describe it but they 'know it when they see it'. There is danger in both of these types of responses because they are not explicit.
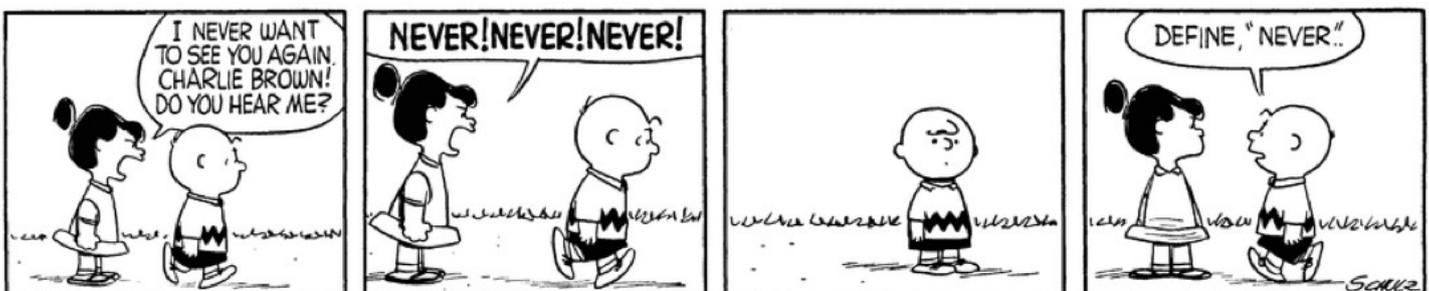

Image credit: http://www.philipchircop.com/post/110267915436/never-we-use-the-word-never-often-for-various

If a manager stands up and shares that respect is a value she holds dear and she expects everyone to behave in a respectful way to each other, is that really a useful statement? *Really?* People will nod their heads and have a generalised or global understanding of what she means, but they will each walk out of the meeting room with a slightly different understanding. This is because the manager has not been explicit.

In Conclusion...

To use language expertly, break down those conceptual (or nonsense) words into behavioural criteria. Or better yet, do it as a team so you can create a co-authored understanding! Discuss as a team what respect actually looks like. How does it show up? If you saw a colleague 'being respectful' what would he or she actually be doing? Your team may share suggestions like:

- saying hello and goodbye
- sharing information
- not interrupting me when I have my headphones on because it means I am trying to focus.

Breaking respect down into this level makes it so easy to live up to. Everyone is clear on the intent of the word. Everyone knows what is expected from each other. There are no misconceptions and no misunderstandings. If it is not broken down and people are left to 'display respect', everyone has to mind-read what that looks like for different people and challenges arise.

Engaging in these type of discussions regularly will help you be explicit, clear and set expectations that people can actually live up to.

Will work as food

Due to his grammar mistake, Wilbur found a position. It just wasn't the one he wanted

Image Credit: http://www.faceitsocialmedia.com/

In Conclusion

To shape workplace dynamics in a masterful way, we need to ensure that we are being explicit in our expectations, taking time to understand people's differing mindsets and recognising the behavioural elements that collectively form a 'workplace culture'. When we are mindful and active in our understanding of these crucial aspects, we can see the perspectives individuals have, diagnose the elements that require shifting within a culture, and use language explicitly to achieve a deep and shared understanding of what the way forward looks like.

Abby Elizabeth Rees is PunkPDs director, a self-confessed 'education junkie', University Lecturer, Education and Empowerment Writer, Behaviour and Change Specialist, Executive Meta-Coach and artistic thinker.

Energy, Excellence and Tenacity capture Abby's drive and personality.

Thriving on new challenges to design for education and change, Abby leads with a level of energy that earned her the nickname '240' (240 Volt) from her former colleagues. With the tenacity of a Rottweiler, Abby lives and breathes her design projects, providing her clients with a commitment to excellence that is unparalleled. Abby has a lively personal presence, strong interpersonal skills and uses a wide range of innovative and inventive techniques. With rich experience in facilitating diverse groups, Abby has delivered a range of corporate training and developed education, change and communication tools to meet individual needs.

In addition to being recognised with numerous National and International awards for her work, Abby embodies the cliché of 'life-long-learning' and has achieved:

Masters of Educational Leadership

Sustainable Leadership Fellowship Scholarship

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Bachelor of Education: Inclusive Education

Graduate Certificate in Public Relations

Executive Meta-Coach Accreditation (ACMC-P)

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