

The Strategy of a Learning Culture

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Excellent companies have Financial Strategies, Operational Strategies, Marketing and Sales Strategies, and commensurate Resource Allocation Strategies (including People, Time, Money, Equipment/Assets, etc.) How many companies actually have a Cultural Strategy? Yet all companies have a culture, implicitly if not explicitly developed on a historical basis. A company culture can be defined as “a cognitive framework consisting of attitudes, values, behavioral norms, and expectations” (Greenberg and Baron, 1997), “the collective thoughts, habits, attitudes, feelings, and patterns of behavior” (Clemente and Greenspan, 1999), and “the pattern of arrangement, material or behavior which has been adopted by a society (corporation, group, or team) as the accepted way of solving problems” (Ahmed et al., 1999).¹

A company’s culture dramatically impacts the success or failure of all other strategies, and yet **little if any attention is consciously placed on the care and feeding of a productive, learning culture**. It is the invisible glue that binds together ever more diverse workforces including people from many cultures and generations. Because it is invisible, most executives are not conscious of culture or of the implications of their decisions on the development of or degradation of culture. Without a culture strategy, where are they aiming anyway?

All development and training is built on the platform of culture. It is the 'context' that determines whether the financial, operational or marketing strategies succeed or fail. A human resource focus on recruiting, retention and succession planning by definition focuses on the experience and skill building of individuals and often misses the broader perspective of the cultural influence and implications. Are fish aware of the water they swim in? Yet without it they will die almost immediately. The quality of the water determines the health of the fish in the tank. And whose job is it to develop a conscious strategy for culture? Human Resources? Whose job is it to continually feed and nurture a productive culture? We would say it lands squarely with Leadership!

If Leadership is not *consciously* strategizing, designing and developing culture, what is left to form it? Culture exists and is alive in the stories employees, (and vendors and customers), tell about what it is like to work there, how people get treated, how to get ahead, whom to hold your tongue around, whom to please, whether merit or seniority count to a greater extent, what happens if you are ill, what are the opportunities for development, promotion, raises, learning. What stories are your employees telling?

¹ From “Developing a Corporate Culture as a Competitive Advantage”; Golnaz Sadri and Brian Lees



(Customers? Vendors?) What stories would you like them to be telling? How does leadership impact those stories? What are the payoffs? These are the questions to ask to get conscious about impacting culture.

What is a Learning Culture and How Does it Get Developed?

A Learning Culture is one where the individuals and teams consciously invest in growing and developing themselves. In a Learning Culture executives are conscious and purposeful about the impact of decisions and strategies on the fabric of cultural development. There is a purposeful focus on reducing friction and waste in communications and developing productive working relationships. People know there is an expectation for growing and learning. Hiring decisions are made with an interest in an individual's ability to learn, adapt, grow and shift outdated mental models - as much as their past-based, functional experience. An atmosphere of curiosity, forward thinking and 'how can we learn from this' thinking permeates. It becomes the foundation or platform on which everything else is built.

What Are The Payoffs of a Learning Culture?

For an organization, this type of culture provides much more innovation, creativity, flexibility, agility, and expedited problem solving capabilities. It also impacts retention and even hiring decisions of individuals in the firm.

For individuals, it provides opportunities for learning and growth; enhancing marketability and value to this or other organizations. It also provides forums to be challenged, to add value, and to contribute at a high level.

Some CEOs have actually expressed concern that growing their people will make them more vulnerable to their best people leaving. However, if looked at from the individual's perspective, why would they leave unless and until they have fully used up the growth opportunities where they are right now? Why would someone leave a position where their value and contribution are recognized, supported and rewarded?

How Can We Develop a Learning Culture?

There are many books and articles about learning organizations including work by Senge² and Argyris³ that explain in depth about the what and how of learning organizations. Our 2130 methodology, (and terminology adaptation in some instances), ties to the 5 aspects of a learning organization that are generally accepted by leadership 'gurus' as follows:

² **Peter Michael Senge** is an American scientist and director of the Center for Organizational Learning at the MIT Sloan School of Management. He is known as author of the book *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* from 1990 (new edition 2006). (Courtesy wikipedia.com)

³ **Chris Argyris** is an American business theorist, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School, and a Thought Leader at Monitor Group.^[1] He is commonly known for seminal work in the area of "Learning Organizations". (Courtesy wikipedia.com)



- 1. Systems Thinking: Understanding how things influence each other as a whole.**
Our view is that executives and organizational leadership *are accountable to the entire organization* and all stakeholders for this larger view, including strategy development, planning, implementation, review and adjustment. This is a level above what most executives contribute on a day-to-day basis from their functional expertise (Finance, Operations, Sales, Marketing, HR, etc). In addition to a responsibility for systems thinking on an individual executive basis it is also critical that the entire executive team itself operate as a productive, learning system. Our work that supports this aspect of developing a learning culture includes working with top executives - the CEO, President or entrepreneur, in a trusted advisor or executive coaching assignment, and with the team of top executives supporting the development of and focus on all of the strategies required to be successful. With leadership, and later with the balance of the organization, our Operating Principles create a platform for a productive, learning culture. Most organizations develop a Vision statement, Mission and Values that constitute the overall framework, (we call it the 'Yonder Star'), and then on a regular basis develop strategies, initiative, goals and actions in the dimensions of finance, operations, marketing, sales, resource allocation and culture. Our methodology 'Vision-Focused Leadership' supports systems thinking.
- 2. Shared Vision/Values: "A vehicle for building shared meaning"** from Peter Senge's "Fifth Discipline." Unfortunately, this often looks more like the version from Dilbert "A long meaningless statement that proves management's inability to focus." Over the last 20+ years we have worked with organizations to develop Vision, Mission and Values in our methodology 'Vision-Focused Leadership'. Leadership gurus have been espousing for at least two decades the value of a shared vision to focus and align resources. Absent a shared vision, individual agendas rule the day and gaining personal power becomes a major executive focus. Shared Vision/Values encourage a learning culture by emphasizing the gaps *toward* our Shared Vision/Values, what is missing and what is next - versus what is wrong from the past.
- 3. Productive Mental Framework:** We talk about busting mental barriers, increasing mental agility and increasing capacities to deal with the unrelenting pace of change and increased complexity of issues facing leadership today. It requires skills at reframing for ourselves and others, and developing focus in chaos and high emotional states. Past-based arrogance and rigidity undermine productive cultures. It is critical to become aware of our blind spots (scotomas) and biases to be able to think clearly in the present to make the best decisions in a complex business environment. We use our Operating Principles and Essential Notions, developed and validated over the past 20 years to help build these *learning culture platform* capacities and equip leaders and managers with the mental and collaborative skills needed in today's world.
- 4. Personal Mastery: This is the commitment of every person in the organization to improve, develop and challenge themselves to be more than they are today,** and to proactively challenge themselves inside a framework of contribution and



collaboration. Individuals who insist on status quo and structural barriers to communication usually self-select out of a Learning Culture. In our book "*Accelerate: High Leverage Leadership for Today's World*" we say that when individuals develop themselves they have increased their collaborative capacities. We will get older automatically, however to grow as we age requires a conscious choice. In our work we describe conscious choice as the Leadership Choice Point. Every moment of every day presents an opportunity for choice. Will I relate to the world around me, the circumstances of my life as the defining parameters, or will I choose to use the circumstances as an opportunity to grow toward the Yonder Star?

- 5. Team Mastery:** In addition to individual learning and development, organizations must realize that groups of people, (of any size of 2 or more), creates yet another 'entity' with its own dynamics and productivity levels. Two or more people who may be very developed individually, when put together in a group or team may not be as productive together as the sum of their individual productivity. The question becomes - will we synergize our efforts where $1+1=3$ or more, or will we diminish productivity potential with friction and waste to make $1+1=1.5$ or less? There are numerous examples of sports teams that have all 'star' players, yet a team of 'average' players can beat them because of the way the 'average' players have developed their team effectiveness. The sum of what the players produce together is much greater than adding up individual skills - and so it is for organizational groups and teams. There are group skills and developmental opportunities that build on, yet are distinct from individual capacities. When groups develop these capacities we call that increasing their collaborative capital.

So What Will You Do Now?

Take stock of your culture. What are the stories being told about your organization by employees, clients and vendors? What stories would you like to be told? What attributes of this powerful, invisible platform are important to you? Where are the gaps? What will you commit to taking on, challenging the status quo, and BEING as an example of the cultural aspect you are committed to developing?

