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Creating and developing positive organisational cultures for learning and inclusion

Meaningful culture change means little if organisations have no sense of what they are striving for. We must understand what a positive culture actually looks like to most effectively enable positive change.

I was recently fortunate to have the opportunity to attend the CIPD's Organisation Development (OD) conference. During this event there was much discussion of organisational culture, particularly from OD consultant and expert Helen Cooke, who argued that culture change shouldn't be seen as separate from how a business operates – it's not an end in itself. She also noted that it's not possible to simply 'drag and drop' a successful workplace culture, as what works in one environment might not be relevant in another.

Helen highlighted several key indicators of a problematic culture: employee attrition, negative Glassdoor comments, employee absence, poor individual/team performance, low customer satisfaction and negative publicity. Naturally, it's easy to think that a positive organisational culture looks completely different from this: low turnover, high-performing teams and high customer satisfaction, for example. However, it's important to look more deeply into what good workforce culture actually means, and in particular, what are its key elements. To do this I'll consider recent research my colleagues and I have conducted, focusing specifically on inclusion and learning and development (L&D) and assessing the role these play in facilitating a positive organisational culture. I'll then establish the aspects of culture that need to be strengthened and maintained, and which need to be weakened, even eradicated, to ensure an organisation's culture is one that allows its employees to thrive. Finally, I'll look at the most and least effective ways of undertaking

culture change.

In our [inclusion research](#), [1] we found that while policies that promote belonging and inclusive behaviours are, of course, important, an organisation is unlikely to move effectively towards this without an inclusive culture. We know that organisational culture is informally defined as ‘the way we do things round here’ or, to put it more formally, the shared beliefs and values that guide behaviour in an organisation. But what does a positive inclusion culture look like? Our research found three key aspects: recognition (whether it’s emotional, legal or political) of difference and solidarity, allowing everyone to be their true self; reciprocal understanding of the different obstacles and enablers of people’s development; and trust between and within groups, which helps facilitate closeness and collaboration. [2] So, key here is the need to be aware of difference and the difficulties it can present, while ensuring openness so that everyone in the organisation feels comfortable being themselves.

Organisation culture is also referred to in a lot of the L&D literature I’ve been exploring recently. Of note is the idea of organisational learning culture. While this is tough to define, in the evidence it is generally perceived as assumptions, values and norms that support systematic approaches to achieving higher-level learning within an organisation. So, very similar to what we’ve seen above, it focuses on the functioning of an organisation but puts emphasis and value on elements of the learning process, such as information acquisition and interpretation, and behavioural and cognitive changes. [3] An organisational learning culture is one which encourages different forms of learning, according to Watkins and Marsick: at the individual level, through continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry; at the team or group level, through collaboration; and at the organisational level, through systems, empowerment and leadership. [4]

In the above examples of inclusive culture and learning culture, there are several crossovers and key things that need to be built on and maintained if a positive organisational culture is to develop. The first is a genuine acknowledgement and appreciation of difference. This isn’t just applicable to diversity, where organisations and those within them need to support a diverse workforce sincerely in order to foster a culture of inclusion. It’s just as important for learning, where innovative thoughts, new ideas and failure are embraced as necessary to facilitate change and move a company forward, rather than creating a risk-averse environment where people are afraid to voice their opinions for fear of backlash. Another aspect that clearly needs to be developed is, of course, the role of leaders, who must champion these causes with sincerity, signalling their commitment through not just their words but their actions, too. Demonstrating open and accepting behaviour, using their resources and empowering managers to enact change are a few key ways in which leaders can achieve this.

How can organisations hope to adapt their culture to support some of these sentiments? Culture change in general is not an easy thing to encourage, nor to commit to and execute successfully. Organisations that wish to strengthen their culture and align it with some of the ideas discussed above will likely run into difficulties along the way. One is attempting to change culture through buzzwords – high-performing, transparent, results-oriented, for example – that do little more than describe the culture an organisation aspires to. Instead, this aspiration can be illustrated by acknowledging an important tension, for example highlighting the need to achieve results while also demonstrating a commitment to the learning and development of staff. Another issue is the abstract, intangible nature of culture, which leads to companies often struggling to quantify how people feel about it and tending to use employee surveys to do so. Using data such as employee engagement and turnover rates doesn't provide enough nuance into the complexity of culture. To get a full picture of culture perceptions, open-ended questions should be present in surveys, allowing employees to speak truth to power.

There are several steps organisations can take when attempting to create a culture that specifically facilitates learning. One article in [Harvard Business Review](#) recommends rewarding continuous learning and balancing this with high performance and efficiency. Too often, employees in high-performing businesses are asked to maximise results at the expense of enhanced learning. Bringing the two together is key, not just through promoting those who display an eagerness to learn, but by creating an environment in which challenging authority is encouraged. The authors also argue that leaders often skirt around providing (constructive) negative feedback and focus too strongly on positives (yes, you can be too positive). They encourage leaders to give meaningful and constructive feedback, allowing employees to grasp the knowledge they lack and increasing their motivation and curiosity to learn. Moreover, leaders are encouraged to practice what they preach, exploring the depths of their own learning to inspire others to do the same. This requires leaders to display nonconformity, too – expecting others to question the status quo is difficult if a leader is a sucker for the rules.

In the above paragraphs, I have outlined several key aspects of a positive culture for learning and inclusion and identified key behaviours that help move towards this type of culture and the perennial problems and unproductive behaviours that block this progress. What's clearly important is a sincere commitment to change from leaders – those who have the power to both influence decisions and inspire positive change from others. While this may be difficult to achieve, it represents removing a great barrier to open-minded and innovative thinking and behaviour. Once we have achieved this, great strides can be made towards positive organisational culture change.

References

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