Workplace Culture

A leader guide to setting expectations, requiring accountability and fostering trust

Table of Contents

Poor work culture impacts mental health, productivity and the bottom line. It's just not good for anyone! This guide offers tips and strategies to shift the team culture by setting expectations, holding people accountable and fostering trust over time. This work is not easy or quick, but over time the benefits will be obvious: higher morale, increased productivity and enhanced well-being for the entire team.

Focus on Values

To resolve long standing, chronic issues, leaders must focus on shifting the entire workplace culture to be more positive, productive, healthy and engaged. A great place to start is with the Mission and Values your organization already has in place, specifically, ones that speak to the problems your team is facing (for example, negativity might be addressed through the value of professionalism, respect or integrity).

Consider how these values will be introduced, discussed, rehearsed and held up as the standard for all interactions within the workplace. When violations occur, leaders should hold individuals accountable and teammates should be empowered to speak up and advocate for consistent practice of these values both individually and as a team.

1. *What organizational values will you focus on to guide culture change?*
2. *In what ways will you uphold, teach, and remind associates of these values?*

Decide that Interpersonal Conflicts will be Handled Interpersonally

Some associates may come to you with workplace issues and emphasize that they "don't want to get involved" or don't want their confidentiality compromised. Unfortunately, there can be no expectation of confidentiality when workplace issues are being addressed and resolved, it's just not practical or helpful! Be clear about this upfront. Let associates know that when a person is willing to bring issues forward, they also need to be willing to be part of the solution. Not only will this new policy set the stage for open, honest, solution-focused communication, it will also help extinguish overly negative, toxic venting and complaining if associates are now accountable to addressing and resolving the problems they bring forward.

With that said, leaders need to use discretion on issues that truly need to be held in confidence. For example, any type of corrective action, any disclosure of medical or health information or pending or ongoing investigations need to stay private. Outside of these types of exceptional circumstances, complaints and issues should not be allowed to stay secret.

1. *Have associates been allowed to bring interpersonal issues up anonymously? If so, reflect on whether this has contributed to problem resolution or hindered it.*

2. *How might you roll out the new expectation that there is no (i.e. very limited) expectation of confidentiality going forward, to better tackle and resolve issues? How do you think associates will respond?*
3. *If an associate comes to you with an interpersonal issue that they are "not comfortable" or unwilling to deal with directly (even when it is professionally appropriate to do so) how would you handle that?*

Create Leadership Alignment

In keeping with these values, leaders need to commit to supporting each other and the decisions each person makes regarding staff, holding people accountable, etc. They will seek to avoid "triangulation" (associates going around one leader to get a different answer from the other leader). Here are some strategies that can help:

- When associates bring issues to upper leadership, that leader will redirect them back to the direct supervisor (with the exception, of course, of issues concerning true harassment or bullying, or ethical or legal violations. Everything short of that should be redirected back to the direct leader).
- Here are three appropriate responses to redirect an associate. It is fine to offer all three, and let the associate choose their best option:
    o "You can address the problem directly with your leader/colleague and I can role play the conversation with you to help you feel more comfortable in doing so."
    o "We could invite your leader/colleague to a meeting where the three of us to discuss this together. I would be happy to facilitate a conversation between the two of you."
    o "You could choose to drop the issue and let it go. If you choose this option, the expectation is that you will not talk about it with other staff and you will not hold a grudge. Letting it go means it's completely over and done with."

In responding this way, it is likely that tensions and conflict will escalate dramatically at first. This is a normal part of the change process and does NOT mean the interventions are not working, quite the opposite. If leaders are consistent about using this process, over time associates will learn that there is no benefit to go around one leader to another, or to come to leadership with interpersonal issues that should be resolved directly, and the behavior will extinguish over time.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT SENIOR LEADERS SHOULD BE AWARE OF THE INTERVENTIONS BEING EXECUTED AND THE EXPECTED RESPONSE, as sometimes when complaints and negativity escalate up the chain, it is easy to assume that the leaders are causing the problem and need to change their tactic. However, it is CRUCIAL that senior leadership (and even HR) support their leaders in implementing these changes or the hard work of shifting the culture will be undone.

1. *How well do leaders at every level support each other? What could be improved?*
2. *Are there any trust issues among leadership? Why or why not? If so, what needs to happen so these can be resolved?*
3. *In your own words, how could you direct an associate to the appropriate leader/associate if they inappropriately come to you (using the examples above as a guide)?*

Determine the Need for Coaching vs. Corrective Action

It is often hard for leaders to know where to draw the line between behaviors that need to be corrected and coached vs. behaviors that warrant corrective action. Though this is very much a case-by-case basis, here are some guidelines to consider:

- Has the associate been given a clear explanation of the expectation?
- Does the associate have adequate knowledge, skills and training to meet the expectation?
- How many times has the associate willfully violated the expectation?
- What was the level of impact of the violation (inconvenience/irritation to patient safety issue)?
- Are there any legal or ethical issues to consider?

Sometimes issues of attitude are a little harder to put into corrective action plans, but these issues are just as crucial to a productive, professional work environment as any other work performance standard, maybe even more so! In instances like these, documentation is key. When a leader consistently documents behaviors with specific detail (who was there, what was done/said, what the impact was, reactions of others, etc.), it helps make a compelling case for corrective action if it is warranted and leaves very little "gray area" for interpretation (a corrective action document demonstrating eight specific examples of negative statements and impact on others is hard to deny vs. a general statement that someone has a negative attitude and needs to be more positive). It is recommended that leaders err on the side of over-documentation. It's better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it.

1. *Are there ongoing issues on your work team that have not been adequately addressed? At this point, is informal coaching appropriate, or is it time to think about corrective action?*
2. *Are there recurring behavior issues that you have not documented? What has stopped you?*
3. *What's the likelihood that you would begin to document issues and concerns more thoroughly going forward? Why?*

Address Issues that Come Through the Grapevine

Sometimes leaders are unsure how to address issues that come through the grapevine. For example, if Johnny lets it slip that Sally told a customer to "Get a grip!" and then slammed the phone down, how should you handle it, seeing as this kind of thing NEVER happens in your presence?

First, coach Johnny on how to be an assertive bystander and empower him to speak up to Sally in the moment, should something like that ever happen again. Bystander intervention is a VERY effective way to shift culture and everyone should be coached and empowered to hold their teammates accountable, as well as be held accountable by teammates.

Second, meet with Sally privately. Let her know, calmly, about the rumor that's going around about her phone interaction. Do not accuse or blame; simply ask to hear her side of the story. You will probably get 1 of 3 versions:

- **Scenario 1:** A confession of guilt, in which case Sally is probably bothered by her own behavior, which will likely be consequence enough. Remind her of EAP or other resources to help her manage her reactions. Document the complaint, your conversation with Sally and the outcome.

- **Scenario 2:** A watered-down version of the story which minimizes her role in the interaction. There may be some deflection, finger pointing, excuses or other strategies to make herself out to appear better than she was. This is normal and in cases of "he said/she said", you may never get to the absolute truth about what happened. In this instance remind Sally about professional expectations and/or the organization's values. Even though you didn't get an outright confession, Sally was still held accountable and is less likely to do something like this again. Document the complaint, your conversation with Sally and the outcome.

  If it does happen again let Sally know you are concerned that you keep hearing the same issues/complaints repeatedly. Let her know about the resources available to help her improve her interactions with others (such as EAP). Ask her what she will do to remedy the issues (even if the issue is that her teammates have a negative perception of her; that is a correctable problem that Sally will hopefully take some responsibility for). Let her know that if she doesn't improve, unfortunately the next step may very well be corrective action, but of course you don't want to go that route! You have every confidence she can improve, and you will do what you can to help. Document the complaint, your conversation with Sally and the outcome.

- **Scenario 3:** Sally denies any culpability and gets upset that you would believe such a lie, and/or someone would degrade her character in such a fashion. In such instances you will have to use your discernment as to whether Sally has been set up and accused of something in which she is totally innocent (which is possible, as workplace bullying is a real thing), or if she, generally speaking, rarely, if ever takes responsibility for her actions; and this conversation is just more of the same dysfunctional, unhealthy behavior you've seen so many times before.

If that's the case, why are you keeping her on the team? At the very least, corrective action is warranted to give her a chance to remedy some of these unhealthy workplace behaviors and probably should have been done a long time ago. Document the complaint, your conversation with Sally and the outcome.

This is obviously a very generic scenario and in real life there are all kinds of complicated factors which can make knowing the exact right thing to say or do very difficult. If you find yourself struggling in situations like these, don't be afraid to utilize your resources! Call EAP for a free and confidential consultation.

Use Informal Interventions

Sometimes behaviors may be negative or inappropriate, but not necessarily rise to the level of needing a formal corrective action plan. Here are some suggestions:

- Work on establishing positive rapport and trust with associates. Compassionately listen to concerns and work with them to solve problems and find solutions.
- Be generous in your use of praise and encouragement. Make a point to notice positive behaviors and attitudes and point it out both privately and publicly if appropriate.
- Role model appropriate behavior. Be impeccable with your words and consistently kind in your interactions with others (even when you must be firm or point out inconvenient truths). Focus on solutions vs. shame and blame.
- If you see an associate behave or speak in a way contrary to your organization's values, point that out by saying something like, "I'm worried how that colleague may feel after hearing your interaction with her. That's not how we talk to people…" or "On a scale of 0-10, how would you rate your level of [compassion, respect, professionalism, etc.] in that interaction?"
    - o Speak with a low, somewhat quiet voice.
    - o Avoid over-talking. Calmly but firmly share your concern, then listen.
    - o Allow their own guilt to do the work. Don't rescue them from discomfort or assure them that "it's ok." It's not!
- Capitalize on an associate's intrinsic motivation. Ask them what drew them to this profession in the first place. Encourage them to live with that purpose and vision in mind every day.
    - o Point out inconsistencies with what they say their values/purpose are and how they behave or talk to others.
- When possible, move conversations to a solution-focus.
    - o Example: "Well, that interaction with your colleague didn't go very well. You said you didn't get much sleep last night and you are feeling more irritable than usual. What can you do to amend the situation with your colleague? What can you do to have a better interaction next time, even if you are feeling irritable?"
    - o If the associate is willing to voice a solution this in and of itself is a step toward a better culture.

- Encourage and empower your team to hold each other accountable. Research shows that bystander intervention has a significant impact on reducing negative behavior.
  - Teach staff how to be kind, take the high road, be assertive, hold each other accountable and use peer pressure in a positive way.
  - Utilize training sessions online or from your EAP to help teach skills such as conflict resolution, assertiveness, kindness, assuming positive intent, etc. and to practice new ways of interacting.

1. *How well have you practiced these informal interventions?*
2. *Which ones are easiest to do? Which ones are hardest?*
3. *Which ones will you focus on going forward?*

Conclusion

Most culture shifts take 3-5 years. That's a long time! Remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint. When you consistently demonstrate your commitment to a positive, engaged, accountable workforce, trust will build between you and your associates over time. Be patient, be consistent and don't give up!

1. *What are your leadership strengths?*
2. *Which areas of your leadership could use improvement?*
3. *What will you do to improve your leadership effectiveness?*
4. *Who can help you on your journey?*

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