How to come through loud and clear

RICK BRIMEYER

Brimeyer LLC

He is president of the Ames, Iowa, consulting firm

Former MIT Sloan School of Management professor Edgar Schein devoted much of his professional life to studying the nuances of organizational culture.

One of the more useful components of his work is the identification of various mechanisms that leaders use — both intentionally and unintentionally — to impact culture.

Schein identified six leadership occurrences, which he called Primary Embedding Mechanisms:

• What leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis.

• Observed criteria by which leaders allocate scarce resources.

• How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crisis.

• Deliberate role modeling, teaching and coaching.

• Observed criteria by which leaders allocate rewards and status.

• Observed criteria by which leaders recruit, promote and discipline.

According to Schein, these mechanisms always send strong, clear messages. When consistently delivered, the organization's culture will reflect the clear messages received.

For example, let's assume our leader is frequently asking questions regarding safety (what is measured and paid attention to). She starts her day by stretching with the team (role modeling). Capital is available when an unsafe condition is uncovered (scarce resources). Cutting corners isn't tolerated, even during the busiest days (crisis reaction). We can't help but conclude that our personal safety really is important here.

Now let's imagine a different scenario where we frequently see our leader without the appropriate personal safety gear. He walks past machines that are missing guards because they slow production. His first question at the end of each day, "How many units did you get today?" A high-producing co-worker, renowned for taking safety shortcuts, was recently promoted to supervisor. While none of these messages are intentional, they nonetheless shout that safety isn't a big deal.

Schein also identified six secondary embedding mechanisms:

• Organizational design and structure.

• Organizational systems and procedures.

• Formal statements of organizational philosophy and values.

• Design of physical space facades and buildings.

• Organizational rites and rituals.

• Stories about important people and events.

The thing about secondary embedding mechanisms is that they only help establish the desired culture when they are supported by aligned primary embedding mechanisms. If not consistent with primary embedding mechanisms, they only cause confusion and cynicism.

Let's return to the two examples. In the first case, hanging a framed poster listing safety as one of the core values reinforces the belief that safety is indeed important.

A new process introduced to report and address near misses will be well-used because people know issues reported will be taken seriously. The celebration for three years without a lost-time accident will be well attended and meaningful.

Those same three occurrences in the second scenario above won't help to establish a safety culture. Rather, because people observe their leader's behaviors being counter to the stated core values, they will only roll their eyes as the poster is hung, not believing the other values listed.

The near miss reporting program will be another failed flavor of the month. The celebration for three months without a lost-time accident (there's no way they'll make it to three years) will be just an opportunity for a free piece of cake.

Studying the list of primary embedding mechanisms reveals that they are all related to leadership behaviors. They are the "walk." In fact, they must be observed leadership behaviors. Poring over a spreadsheet on accident history in the privacy of one's office doesn't qualify as a primary embedder unless folks see their leader doing something with that data with their own eyes.

What's particularly ironic is that many might perceive the list of secondary embedding mechanisms as "management's work." They create organizational structures, develop systems and author core values. But real management work is portraying the desired culture consistently in every interaction with employees. That's tough.

Secondary embedding mechanisms aren't bad. When consistent with observed leader behaviors, they enable the organization to more effectively live out the desired culture. However, when the talk (secondary embedding mechanisms) isn't backed up by the walk (primary embedding mechanisms), cynicism reigns. Employees hear observed leader behaviors loud and clear.

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