Journal of
Professional Communication

jpc

Trust, conversation and creativity: Designing an intentional culture of success

Denise O'Connor★, Virginia Jones

Acuity Options, Ancaster (Canada)

ARTICLE INFO	**ABSTRACT**
	This editorial outlines a logic model for the design of an intentional culture of sustained success. Evidence points to the fundamental importance of trust as a necessary condition for effective and efficient relationships and the components of trust are well documented. It has also been established that creativity is a prerequisite for innovation that responds to change and emergent opportunities. The assertion presented here is that it is possible to be intentional in designing organizational cultures that embody these values and behaviours. The editorial introduces a project that will be unfolding over the next 12 months that will describe what this looks like through the experiences of organizational leaders.

In this era of accelerated time and rapid change, the need to monitor, adapt, recognize and respond to emerging opportunity or changing circumstance marks the difference between sustained success and the one hit wonder. While small, boutique, owner-driven enterprise may have the capacity for such agility and flexibility, what of the larger, hierarchical organization where information does not flow freely to a well-guarded C-Suite?

Recently, while attending a panel discussion on Social Innovation in Practice held at McMaster University's Innovation Park, we were struck when one of the panelists inserted a quotation attributed to business guru Peter Drucker that read, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." *How true*, we noted. Corporate culture – that seemingly nebulous source of petty politics and power plays that zaps everyone's goodwill and guarantees death to any new idea or plan at work.

We decided to undertake a project that examines organizational culture with the goal of identifying the factors that lead to a healthy, creative

★*Corresponding author (Denise O'Connor)*
Email: doconnor@acuityoptions.com, Tel: (1 905) 248-2049 Twitter: @Cr8tvOrg

organizational culture. Thus, the Creative Organization Project was born.

Toxic vs. healthy workplaces

We have all read about – or experienced – the havoc wreaked by the sociopaths who rise to the top of an organization, by the powerful entrepreneurial or inventor types so vested in their original idea or format, they miss the signals that the times and competition have changed (*RIM: Are you listening?*). Recently, Microsoft implemented a team performance management system called "stack racking" creating a dynamic of Social Darwinism that destroyed their capacity to innovate (Silberzahn, 2012). Stack racking involves ranking employees within a unit as top performers, good performers, average, and poor, thereby setting up a competitive environment within a "team". They are rewarded according to their ranking. We've seen charismatic leaders inspire, only to have the company fall flat when they move on or are revealed as having style but little substance. In each case, ego and self-interest trump, research and two-way communication[1] are shut down. True collaboration is discouraged and power plays out in unhealthy ways. Such behaviours are not serving society well – although clearly some profit from it.

Having seen this in action time and time again, we began to revisit what we know about organizational culture, asking: What are the characteristics of a healthy organizational culture? A resilient organization where creativity and innovation can thrive and the cultural norm is to be adaptive and implement the well-thought-out strategy?

Maintaining its cultural health would later require its own level of continuous commitment to those essential elements.

The intentional culture

At the heart of most business literature is the assumption that trust must exist and information must flow freely in multiple directions for solutions to work consistently. We would argue these are necessary conditions for organizational success and resilience no matter how good your talent is.

---

[1] Two-way communications exists when there is control mutuality e.g. both parties to the relationship have some level of control over decisions that affect them.

It's time to stop leaving such things to the forces of personality and chance.

We believe it is possible to design and shape organizational culture in a way means, with the right talent and strategies, an organization will be **creative, adaptable** and **resilient**. *Easy to do*? Hardly, since this approach requires attention and intention to accomplish and the commitment of anybody providing oversight. However, considering the alternative, it is well worth the effort.

Here is our logic model for success: Leaders must act in a trustworthy way so that the organization functions optimally; the social architecture must be created to enable two-way communication and organizational conversation and lastly, individual behaviour and organizational structures such as corporate policies and (customized) rewards must be aligned with those elements of a healthy culture.

> 3 Components of a Healthy Culture (creative, adaptive & resilient)
>
> 1. Trustworthy leaders (say = do)
> 2. Two-way communications & organizational conversations
> 3. Alignment of "healthy" values with individual behaviours and organizational structures

U.K.-based complexity and organizational change academic Ralph Stacey argues that organizations are the manifestation of all of us communicating together (Waltuck, 2012). Culture changes as an organization's members and context change. In this way, organizations are iterative, meaning the culture changes as the people, context and practices change. We have all experienced this.

Say + do = trust

Trust resides in the gap between what one says versus what one does. It emerges when people say what they'll do and then do what they said. However, what they *do* must be built on an ethical foundation where *fairness, respect* and *integrity* and emotional intelligence guide personal behaviour and business competency is present. Trust is relational and is literally an *experience of the other*. It can be lost or earned through repeated experiences.

Add to this the principles and practices of two-way communication and

organizational conversation and you are moving towards a winning formula, creating opportunities to harness the great human creative potential that lies underutilized in too many organizations.

This isn't easy to do and we are not naively arguing that you can eliminate idiosyncratic and ego-driven human behaviour or the expression of self-interest. Yet, it is possible to move people beyond reactively dealing with what they must do to get through the day and instead to tap into their potential to create something better for themselves while in pursuit of the goals they share collectively. It requires an intentional approach embedded in an understanding of organizational culture and evidence of how trust and creativity are built. Values that lead to trust and creativity must be more than simply motherhood statements; they must be enacted. The energetic matrix of an organization must embody this approach.

We think of the term "organization" as describing a collective endeavor. An organization, at whatever scale, from a team to an inter-organizational collaborative, is comprised of a mix of people who come with their baggage, their agendas, their personal hopes and fears. Managers are tasked with ensuring employees do their jobs. Yet the group is interdependent; everybody is connected and through interdependence and playing off context and the "rules", they co-create a culture that will manifest whatever it is that they show up with on any given day and play out through their interactions with each other and their environment. If the corporate culture is one that values creativity, innovation and integrity, it becomes easier to reward "good" behaviour that ultimately serves the corporate goals and identify the "bad" behaviours that undermine it.

In research on start-ups, Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind find,

> By talking with employees, rather than simply issuing orders, leaders can retain or recapture some of the qualities—operational flexibility, high levels of employee engagement, tight strategic alignment—that enable start-ups to outperform better-established rivals. (Groysberg & Slind, 2012)

They identify four elements of an organizational conversation: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. Building this into management practice allows for course corrections as new information surfaces and leverages new opportunities in more timely and efficient ways.

The result? Employee engagement and a more agile and responsive, corporate culture where feedback and contribution are clearly valued. We assert that this approach is a foundation for human communication and, as such, is

generalizable. This is about good human relationships.

As public relations practitioners, the desired outcome of our work is improved relations. It is easily argued that communicators have an important role to play in helping our organizations to take an intentional approach to its culture so we can unlock the creative potential that interdependent work allows us. By operating within the context of a healthy and safe environment or culture, employees, project teams and stakeholders can focus their energies on not only finding more mutually satisfying outcomes but more excitingly, can find 'the sweet spot' for creativity and innovation that we charge is inherent in relationships. To succeed this requires the wholehearted support of organization's leaders.

The creative organization project

We are undertaking a project whereby we will be interviewing leaders from private and public sectors whose organizations possess the elements of a creative, adaptive and resilient culture in an effort to better understand the challenges and opportunities that an intentional approach to culture management provides. We are offering our guests' insights and our discoveries through podcasts and articles that you can find on our website (http://www.creativeorganizationproject.com) and eventually, by pulling it all together into a book.

Here is what we will be demonstrating: It is our contention that implementing a practice of two-way communication and organizational conversation means creating a *social architecture* that facilitates the expression of collective knowledge and activates employees' "discretionary energy" to produce and contribute. Social architecture is the conscious design of an environment that encourages certain social behaviors (i.e. two-way communications) designed to accomplish a goal or set of goals (e.g. more horizontal and vertical collaboration and creativity). Designing social architecture with the intention of creating safe spaces for imagination, brainstorming or learning allows people to express themselves, while contributing to a shared vision of success. Everyone applies their energies in an environment that encourages active participation, together, in service to the organizational goals. A feedback loop that is intentional in creating opportunities dispersed through an organization to initiate dialogue makes these practices a part of the formal organizational structure, thus empowering employees. The caveat, of course, is that it will only work if the environment is safe due to the existence of organizational integrity and

trust and a commitment from the organization's leaders.

To help connect the dots between values, behaviours and outcomes take a look at the slide deck, found on our website (O'Connor & Jones, 2013).

Unfortunately, this contrasts with the more common practice of leaving the onus for trustworthy behaviours and communication flow to chance or the personal commitment of leaders and other managers.

We welcome your thoughts on our model.

References

Groysberg, B. & Slind, M. (2012, June) Leadership is a conversation. *Harvard Business Review: The Magazine.* Retrieved from http://hbr.org/2012/06/leadership-is-a-conversation/ar/1

O'Connor, D. & Jones, V. (2013). Creating and intentional culture of success. Retrieved from: http://www.creativeorganizationproject.com/what-is-a-creative-organization/slide-deck-depicting-the-model/

Silberzahn, P. (2012, July 12). The terrible management technique that cost Microsoft its creativity. *Forbes Magazine.* Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com

Waltuck, B. (2012, July 24). Adaptive organizations: Towards mastery in the moment. [blog post] Retrieved from http://complexified.wordpress.com/2012/07/24/adaptive-organizations-towards-mastery-in-the-moment/