

## Toxic Cultures



Although you could fill entire libraries with the books written about organisational culture I believe that a good approximation of a definition is, “the way things are done around here.” The problem for many organisational leaders is what whilst they would like to believe that every member of their team is working to ensure that the organisation is a success as a whole the reality is that often the ‘the way things are done around here’ often means that people will be doing things that are counter-productive to what the organisation really needs them to

be doing or are doing things that benefit one group at the expense of another.

How can it be that organisations can fail when on the surface appear they appear to have all the right ingredients for success; a great business plan, well trained people, capable processes etc? The answer often lies in the fact that their underlying organisational culture is toxic.

So what is a toxic culture? Discord in the senior team can create competing tribes throughout the organisation and undermine inter-team working. Leaders with a lack of respect for their team or who are disengaged or disinterested in their work can also significantly undermine the ‘will’ of individual employees to do the right thing.

Toxicity spreads through inaction and inflexibility. Senior leaders who have lost touch with the feelings of their front line staff, a strong hierarchy that prevents the efficient and free flow of communication within the organisation and the ‘authorisation’ of negative behaviours, which is easily achieved by simply ignoring them, all help to spread problems.

The impact of a toxic culture is normally to decrease the flexibility of the organisation concerned. Because teams don’t work well together, attempts to improve performance are stifled and the development of new products and services slows down significantly. Individuals within organisations with a toxic culture will often either become disinterested in the fate of the business or will become vocal and spread the toxicity further.

Overall performance will suffer and it will be difficult to pin down why because each group or team will blame another for any underperformance and more effort will be

put into 'the hunt for the guilty' than in actually tackling any underperformance.

Changing organisational culture, as you can imagine, is not the easiest of things to achieve. It is made significantly harder when they have a toxic culture. Leaders within organisations looking to transform their culture, toxic or otherwise, need to do five things;

1. Ensure that the words they use to describe what they want from the organisation and how their leaders behave are in alignment. For example, saying that the organisation is 'family friendly' but holding meetings at 5pm on a Friday evening shows that words and deeds are not in alignment.
2. Tackling any tribal thinking and avoiding having measures that drive one team to do things that are not in the best interest of the whole organisation. For example, having a measure that drives procurement teams to reduce costs that results in your operational teams having poor quality materials to work with and increases their costs will create tribal thinking.
3. Recognising the 'right' behaviours and even more importantly not 'authorising' the wrong ones. Recognition of people who have shown the right values, such as achieving exceptional performance, delighting customers etc. The aspect of 'authorising' the wrong behaviours is related to turning a blind eye, for example not saying anything when a team member shouts at a colleague.
4. Celebrate every success, especially those that contribute to organisational success, but don't react too negatively when things don't go to plan. If a senior leader gets annoyed when a team tasked with improving performance or reducing costs do not achieve as big a result as they could have done, the next team will be more than a little reluctant to get involved.
5. Have the courage to keep going. Those who want to hang onto the 'old ways' will be looking for reasons for your cultural change process to fail and will also be looking for signs of weakness or distress. The art to this is to ensure that you and your senior team accept that when things start to roll you need to keep pushing the ball and that if you stop pushing the ball will be even harder to start rolling next time.

