



Mindsets & Behaviors:

Building Ownership on Your Teams

INTRODUCTION



There are many ways to define organizational culture, but one that we often share with our clients is “the way people behave and work together.” What’s interesting about this definition is that the ways we behave are not always intentional – but it’s those small, everyday actions that over time define our culture and determine, to a large extent, our capacity to perform well together. In fact, we have identified what we call “microbehaviors” – small, often

unconscious actions and attitudes – that have a macro impact on the culture and performance of teams. These microbehaviors are logical and often well intended, but they can have unintended consequences. Left unchecked, they can strip your team of a sense of ownership and significantly affect the performance and growth of your people.

Let’s begin by looking at a fairly typical team interaction.

A TYPICAL TEAM MEETING

Jon is the leader of a team that has been charged with solving a major COVID-related supply chain issue that the company has been experiencing, and things are not going well. The team is in a meeting to discuss their progress, when Jon stomps into the room, slams his notebook on the table, glares around the table, and with a big exhale, says:



JON

Look, everyone, this isn't going to fly. We're not where we need to be. What have you got for me?

I did some research, and I think we have a good chance to establish a relationship with Supplier A, since they ...



JOAN



JON

(interrupting) Oh no, we've worked with Supplier A before. They're a no-go. Who's next?

Well, I was going to speak to Supplier B, but when I looked into our past relationship with them, there was nothing I could use in the CRM.



PHIL



JON

Well, of course not. The CRM ... more like Creates Real Messes. Not like there'd be anything in there we could use.

Right. We just can't get work done with that system in place.



PHIL



JON

Anyway, we get it; it's the worst. What else have we got?

I've got Bill doing some research on alternate routes. I think he's got some great ideas that he's pursuing.



GAIL



JON

Wait now, Bill dropped the ball last quarter when we thought he had a great idea. Let's not rely on him. What else have we got?

I was about to close a deal with Supplier C, but they've just come back with a whole slew of new requirements.



PETE



JON

OK, not looking good. Let's get on this, people! Let's reconvene tomorrow and see if you can fix this mess.

The team leaves the meeting room.

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Rushing to Judgment – In our example team meeting, we saw Jon cut off Joan and quickly come to judge her idea about Supplier A, dismissing it outright.



THE INTENT

Behind this, we often see thinking that says, “I need to be the expert.” Throughout the progression to senior leadership roles, managers are typically promoted for being good at what they do and becoming experts in their field. This cultivates an expectation for the leader to be the one with the answers, saving the company time and money by using their extensive experience to screen out ideas that won’t work.



THE IMPACT

When ideas are quickly shot down as something “tried before” or that “didn’t work,” employees often don’t have visibility into the logic behind why it may not have worked in the past. This makes them unable to challenge assumptions, which may have changed since the last time the idea was raised, or to learn from that prior thinking. What they do see is that new ideas aren’t welcome. Inertia and complacency can take root when a boss is consistently the one to come up with the solutions. Why bother thinking critically when someone will solve the problem for you? This desire to be the expert stymies the number of new ideas flowing through the team and lowers engagement, initiative, and ownership for results.



THE CHALLENGE

Before rushing to judgment, ask yourself:

- *What can I share to help team members improve their ideas (rather than dismissing them outright)?*
- *What was the logic behind their suggestion, and how can I build on it (or correct it)?*
- *How might circumstances have changed since the last time we tried this?*
- *Do I always need to be the expert?*



Playing into the Running Joke – The leader jokes about the company’s CRM with a play on the acronym, implying how ineffective of a tool it is in the business.



THE INTENT

They say nothing forges friendships like a common enemy, and it can be tempting for leaders to apply that same thinking as they bring together their teams. Thinking that we can all coalesce around common pain points of the employee experience, we often point fingers and cast blame through humor. The underlying sentiment may also come from a belief that we are limited by the systems or tools that we are given and have limited ability to influence other parts of the organization.



THE IMPACT

When they first begin, these casual jokes about things outside the team’s control may be accurate – but they tend to stick around long after reality has changed. They become common refrains that build rapport and get a laugh, but few people often bother to revisit the underlying assumptions. Are the assumptions outdated? Is it still not possible to download a report on the CRM? Are there workarounds that help alleviate the issue? The “running joke” keeps us stuck in where the world used to be, underplays the importance of data and fact-based decision making, and risks the team operating with outdated assumptions.



THE CHALLENGE

Next time you notice a running joke in your organization, consider:

- *What impact is this having on the team’s level of ownership for the issue?*
- *What is the reality today?*
- *Are the constraints involved really as limiting as we perceive them to be?*
- *What part of the issue can our team own? What more can we do?*

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Using Frustration as a Motivator – The tone of the meeting set by the leader was not one of reflection or creative problem solving, but one of visible frustration and anger.



THE INTENT

Leaders don't typically plan to get angry. But it's the natural, in-the-moment response to setbacks when our mental model is "it's not OK to fail." If that's what we truly believe, then not becoming upset when something goes wrong must surely signal that we don't care. In the same vein, we may assume that team members who aren't visibly frustrated, worried, or apologetic are not taking matters seriously. For some leaders, expressing frustration can become a tool to impress upon the team the importance of an endeavor – "if I could just get them to feel what I feel, they'd work harder, do better, etc."



THE IMPACT

Lower mood states such as anger and frustration restrict our access to higher brain functions, such as trying to understand what went wrong, creatively brainstorming solutions, and extracting learnings for the future. Indeed, it's probably the worst place for our mood to be when we're under the gun. Instead, these lower mood states set the stage for excuses and finger-pointing. The team learns that when something goes wrong, there must be someone to blame (and I better make sure it's not me!). Mistakes get hidden, trust suffers, and negative energy can cascade throughout the organization, sapping the entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and collaboration necessary for innovation.



THE CHALLENGE

Next time your team experiences a setback, consider:

- *Is my current mood limiting or expanding my perspective on the issue?*
- *What do I need from the team, and what type of energy can I create to get the best out of them?*
- *How can I establish a tone of curiosity on the team to better understand what happened?*
- *Focus the team on the future, by asking, "What more can we do to get the desired result?"*

CONCLUSION



At times, our thinking – however well intentioned – can lead us to behaviors that have a negative impact on the engagement, growth, and accountability of our teams. So how do we recognize this dynamic in the moment? One important way is to pay close attention to the impact we’re having on our team members. What behaviors do I see in my team that I may have contributed to? How might I be role-modeling behaviors that I wouldn’t want others to emulate? What assumptions am I making about team members? Only once we’re aware of our mental assumptions and thought habits can we challenge them and shift our approach to one more suited to problem solving and accountability. Small adjustments can make a significant impact!

AUTHORS

HEIDRICK CONSULTING

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The result: great leaders, effective teams, and thriving, future-focused cultures—and organizations that can accelerate performance, effect transformative change, and boldly create the future they envision.

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