



Overcoming negative organisational culture: what to do if negative organisational culture is effecting your team

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Abstract

There is no shortage of information about how to create a positive organisational culture or affect cultural change within an organisation. But what if you're not the CEO or General Manager and you don't feel like you have the power to create that change? What if you're a manager of a team that is part of an organisation with a negative culture? You may feel powerless to overcome the influence of the wider organisational culture. Like a butterfly in the wind, your efforts, regardless of how good a leader you are, may do little to negate the influence of the wider organisational culture.

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As a manager you have many challenges, not least of which is creating and maintaining a positive culture in your team. You may be an exceptional leader; you may have completed professional development in leadership excellence, and you may be doing all you can to be an effective leader. But many managers report feeling powerless to the influence of the wider organisational culture. In such an organisation negative impacts on your team's culture can come from above (the actions and decisions of senior management) and from all around from any member of the organisation.

Some examples of negative and positive organisational cultures

There are many examples of negative and positive organisational cultures. The table 1 contains some obvious examples.

There are many other examples such as fear of change, reluctance to embrace change, retaining poorly performing staff, nepotism, and high employee turnover. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list but merely to provide examples that help to illustrate the range of organisational cultures that can exist.

What is organisational culture and how is it created?

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Organisational culture is a system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs. It is the way in which people perceive reality, define it and act in it. Information that contributes to this 'reality' comes from a wide variety of sources: from within your team, from your organisation, and from the wider society in which you live and work. It comes from each person's past experiences and their interpretation of past and current events.

Each member of your team has past experiences that shape how they think, their values, and their beliefs. They carry these values and beliefs with them into any new role or situation. This forms their expectations of what are appropriate ways to think and act in the new situation. It is based on what they know of similar situations, what they have experienced, been told, read in books, seen on TV or movies, and any other source of information about the situation.

When people enter a new situation, they have expectations about how things will be, but they know that every situation is different, so they will keenly observe for evidence of what is appropriate and expected. This evidence can come from verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as what they read and see, and their interpretation of this information. Different people may find different meaning from the same information.

For example, if the organisation has its corporate values posted on a wall in the office some people may interpret this as management caring about organisational culture, whereas others may interpret it as the organisation having a poor culture that needs to be changed.

Often a newcomer receives conflicting messages. For

Negative	Positive
Unmotivated	Motivated
Avoid taking initiative, narrowly define job responsibilities, avoid taking responsibility, look busy while doing nothing, avoid hard jobs, uncooperative, blame others, lack of problem ownership, procrastination, poor attention to detail, boredom, undervalued, disrespected, lack of accountability, lack of recognition	Take initiative, go the extra mile, do what it takes, problem ownership, goal oriented, flexible, creative, cooperative, collaborative, team work, attention to detail, pride in performance
Socially harmful	Socially supportive
Gossip, rumours, ridicule, harassment, humiliation, bullying, indifference, lack of empathy, lack of support and understanding, lack of compassion, aggression, lack of social interaction, cliques or 'in' groups, fear of retribution	Supportive, compassionate, caring, lots of social interaction, inclusive
Distrusting	Trusting
Distrust in colleagues, distrust in management, blame, perceived injustice, victim mentality, micromanagement, lack of openness and honesty, lack of transparency, us and them mentality	Trust in others, trust in management, openness, transparency, honesty, taking responsibility, justice, shared understanding, collective action
Unethical behaviour	Ethical behaviour
Disregard for rules, actively take advantage of the system, theft, exploitation of remuneration or incentives, take shortcuts, low quality work output, corruption	Respect for rules and procedures, sanctioning of unethical behaviours, pride in work
Self interest	Group interest
Lack of commitment, lack of information flows, lack of helping, lack of sharing, lack of improving practices, lack of innovation, creativity, hypercompetition, everything is 'someone else's problem'	Commitment, information flows, helping, sharing, innovation, healthy competition, collaboration, cooperation
Unhappy	Happy
Dissatisfied, unfulfilled, low self-confidence, fear	Satisfied, fulfilled, confident

Table 1. Examples of negative and positive organisational cultures

example, they may have read in their induction pack that the company values honesty but on their first day they may witness someone being dishonest. If the messages the newcomer receives are consistent they will more quickly develop confidence in 'how things are' – ie the organisation's culture.

For every individual their reality is constructed and reconstructed with every interaction and observation. Their understanding of the culture is dynamic. It is constantly changing based on their experiences.

Each person has shared understandings with every social group they have membership with. They have shared understandings as it relates to your team, as it relates to the wider organisation, as it relates to their sporting team, family, friends, and any other social grouping to which they belong. These groupings are not distinct, they overlap and are interrelated. The shared values and beliefs from one context influence the values and beliefs in other contexts.

As a manager you have a strong influence on the shared understandings of your team. You can create strong and consistent messages about what is expected

and what is appropriate, and you can create strong and appropriate sanctions for deviation from these norms. In this way you can create a strong and positive team culture.

But you may have little control over the influence of the wider organisation. This is particularly a problem if your team culture conflicts with the wider organisational culture. Your team will be constantly exposed to, and influenced by, the wider organisational culture. This will create uncertainty by undermining the shared understandings that exist between your team members.

What can you do about the influence of the wider organisational culture?

The good news is there are some things you can do to limit the impact of negative external influence on your team culture. I'll discuss some of them below.

Strong, consistent messages that are reinforced and sanctioned

As a leader you have the opportunity and responsibility to set the tone for interactions within your team. As with

many leadership tasks it is a careful balance between giving strong and consistent messages and listening without judgement. The consistency of your responses is very important so that you send the same message every time and in every circumstance. If you sometimes allow or condone words or actions that contradict the culture you are trying to create in your team then you are not being consistent. This does not mean you need to jump on every indiscretion, but ensure your team has absolute certainty about what you think is and is not ok.

Since culture is constructed and reconstructed with every interaction you should interact with your team often. Open and honest communication that is authentic and respectful is the best way to develop shared understanding. This also requires balance since too much socialising can affect productivity and ultimately can create problems where the strength of network ties starts to limit behaviour and creativity. Effective leadership is a balance between being vocal and listening. Remember, effective leadership is about being present, setting the example, being clear, consistent, and fair.

If a team becomes too well connected and familiar with each other they can start to develop negative outcomes such as exclusion. The strong bonds can limit people's behaviour to those strictly adhering to strong norms that are controlled by strong sanctions. This may limit the opportunity for change and innovation and may provide the breeding ground for corruption and fraud.

One aspect of leadership that is often ignored is the role of social sanctions. While sanctioning inappropriate behaviour (ie actions that contradict the group norms) is mostly the responsibility of the leader, most group members tend to engage in some degree of sanctioning. Even a disapproving look is a form of social sanction. As a leader you can determine what is and is not appropriate sanctioning. The norms of sanctioning have a strong influence on the group culture. Is your culture the type where ridicule is an accepted sanction?

By having strong consistent messages that are reinforced and appropriately sanctioned you can negate some of the negative influence from the wider organisational culture. Your team will have confidence in the values and beliefs shared within the team and be less susceptible to negative influence from outside the team.

Conscious and deliberate

Another way to reduce the influence of the wider organisational culture is to openly discuss the differences between the organisational culture and the culture you are trying to develop in your team.

Many aspects of culture are pre-reflective, meaning that they are not fully understood without reflection to uncover their meaning and significance. Culture provides the background context for knowing and acting. By discussing the issues with your team you can bring it into their consciousness and develop or strengthen the values and beliefs you are trying to create.

Doing this can help to create strong shared understandings where everyone knows the culture, feels belonging, confidence, and a sense of togetherness. They know and understand that there is negative influence from the wider organisation, and this will help to reduce this influence.

You must be extremely careful not to create an 'us and them' mentality that can setup social exclusion and a barrier to collaboration and effective working relationships between your team and other members of the organisation. There can be a tendency for your team to withdraw inward in response to dealing with a negative organisational culture. This is clearly counterproductive, and you should be careful to stop this from happening.

You should consider your team's role in changing the wider organisational culture by having positive influence. Don't withdraw, buckle down, protect, or become insular. Let your positive culture radiate outward from your team to the rest of the organisation. Be a beacon of positivity and helpfulness to others. Win over key people in the rest of the organisation, horizontally is a good place to start, but also vertically to more senior people where possible.

You can do things like set your team each the task of creating a positive bridge to another member of the organisation, ideally to someone who has some level of interaction or involvement with your team. Be clear about how you do things and what your values are, especially if they are different to the rest of the organisation. Set the tone and make examples of situations that can illustrate what you and your team stand for.

Influence from senior management

Regardless of what you attempt to do within your team, you operate within the context of the wider organisation. You must play by the organisation's rules and you have to operate and take direction from senior management.

Many managers are concerned that the behest of senior management may cause significant and lasting damage to their team's culture. I've talked to managers who struggle with this on a daily basis. They are often excellent leaders who know how to create positive culture in their team. But regardless of what they do, their team operates within the context of the wider organisation and therefore is subject to the decisions of senior management and the implications of these decisions.

Managers in this situation often feel like they need to protect or buffer against management decisions that result in, or could be interpreted as, distrust, disempowerment, demotivation, disrespect, exploitation, inequity, unreasonable demands, etc. But there is often little they can do so they operate in constant fear of what upper management will do that may destabilise their team and undo all the hard work they have done to create a positive culture within their team.

For example, a manager may have carefully cultivated shared values of trust, respect, and common purpose within their team, but a top-down management decision in an organisation with a poor culture could easily be interpreted as a betrayal of trust, lack of respect, or not valuing the efforts and expertise of the team. We know from social capital theory, and common sense, that this type of event can devastate positive cultures that have taken considerable time and effort to create.

Societies and social relationships- quite like Rome- are not built in a day, though they can be destroyed almost that fast. Norman Uphoff

Unfortunately, I have few suggestions about how to deal with poor senior management. You can be open and honest with your team and reinforce your commitment to them and their wellbeing. Make it clear you are 'in their corner' or 'have their back' or what every metaphor works for you. You need to manage expectations but be clear about limitations and things you don't have control over.

How did you come to be here?

There are a few ways you could have come to be a good leader in an organisation with a negative culture.

One way this can happen is when you develop your leadership skills within an organisation that has a negative culture. Another possibility is that you are a good leader in an organisation where the culture has deteriorated.

A final explanation is that you have been head-hunted to turn things around. Often senior management will attempt to resolve poor organisational culture by employing people who have a track record of leadership excellence. Unfortunately, this tends to create pockets of excellence that can become isolated from the rest of the organisation, or the people hired to turn things around may find the challenge too great and either leave or give up.

If this is your situation I strongly suspect your senior management is the cause of the negative organisational culture. Unfortunately, nothing you can do will make much difference. In my experience the senior management probably believes that they just 'have the wrong people' and that they need to hire new 'better' people to improve the culture. What they typically fail to recognise is that the problem starts with them, their attitudes, values, and beliefs. Negative cultures are rarely the result of 'bad people' but instead are normally the result of 'bad management'.