# Transforming Workplace Culture: Ethics, Diversity and Innovation

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### **Abstract**

Today, collective knowledge building is a key strategic task for most firms, especially knowledge-intensive organizations. Leaders must inspire employees to be engaged at work and to share their knowledge, as knowledge workers must be motivated from within. This is essential to fostering innovation. However, leaders often suppress employees' autonomy rather than create environments conducive to knowledge-sharing. Various case studies, such as the WorldCom and Well Fargo fraud scandals, demonstrate how profound organizational flaws and uninspiring work ethics among the workforce can lead not only to employee disengagement, but also to fraud and fear of intimidation or retaliation for reporting misconduct, particularly when high-level employees are involved. Similarly, the #MeToo movement has drawn attention to similar patterns of egregious conduct, ethical breakdowns, intimidation and harassment. Trust in leadership and rates of employee engagement remain low throughout the workforce.

Workplace culture has the greatest impact on allowing negative work environments to exist, or, conversely, in preventing harassment. The importance of leadership cannot be overstated. The creation of workplace cultures in which misconduct is not tolerated and employees feel valued must start with and involve a companies' highest levels of management. To create a climate in which employees contribute their creativity and expertise, supervisors need to develop leadership, communication and conflict resolution skills, and invest in trainings that promote ethical behavior. Trust and commitment must be instilled within teams to avoid feet-dragging and the hoarding of ideas. Decision-making must be fair and ethical. This article outlines methods leaders should take to inspire employees and perform at the highest level of trust, sharing, and cooperation.

**Keywords**: Workplace Culture, Leadership, Knowledge Management, Holistic Training, Ethics, Employee Engagement, Social Psychology, Value Innovation, Management.

#### Introduction

The hard work of management and leadership at all levels is to encourage and nurture an open and sustainable environment where information is freely shared and expectations for performance are transparent. The measure of the leader's success is how well they inspire employees to not only to perform their best, but also to perform at the highest level of trust, sharing and cooperation. Employees feel that it is important that their employers foster such a

climate. A recent Hewitt Associates survey of employees cited 28 attributes that they felt were important for their supervisors to have. The top 5 attributes were:

- *Honesty*: not only avoiding the scapegoating of employees, but also knowing when the supervisor is part of the problem;
- *Integrity*: being invested in the success of others and not hoarding information for personal advantage;
- *Caring*: understanding that most employees experience some difficulty balancing the demand of work with family responsibilities;
- Fairness: letting employees know what's expected and having an ethical foundation for the use of discipline; and
- *Approachability*: making the extra effort to maintain positive relationships and actively listening.

In short, employees want their supervisors to be ethical leaders (AON Hewitt, 2017). Though employees desire leaders with integrity, many employers fall short of creating trusting work environments. Various case studies demonstrate how breakdowns in honest, ethical leadership can create a negative work environment. At Wells Fargo branches throughout the United States, for example, top-down pressure from supervisors created a caused pressure-cooker environment and led bank employees to open millions of fraudulent accounts for clients without their consent in order to meet high sales quotas (Tayan, 2019). In the earlier WorldCom scandal, telecommunications executives used fraudulent accounting methods to inflate stock prices from 1999 through 2003. They succeeded in part because leaders discouraged dissent, eliminated outlets for employees to raise objections, and hid information, forcing employees to allow the fraud happened despite evidence that senior officers were acting unethically (Beresford, Katzenbach, & Rogers, Jr., 2003). At best, these cases demonstrate profound ethical lapses by leaders and an uninspiring work ethic among their workforce. At worst, the cultures in these organizations perpetuate egregious fraud and criminality.

How could a large organization, with an HR department and policies in place, make these kinds of mistakes – failing in its duties to investigate and discipline offenders and to protect its workers? Organizations with command-and-control, authoritarian structures can discourage employees from speaking up when they notice ethical lapses in their supervisors and co-workers. Additionally, these organizations can suppress employees' autonomy. "Autonomy" refers to a person's capacity for self-determination in the context of moral choices. Autonomy is demonstrated by a person who decides on a course of action and acts morally for the sake of the greater good and respect for moral duty, independent of other incentives. Compliance with a moral code contributes to human dignity and personhood (Kohlberg, 1976). Suppressing employees' autonomy can make their work dehumanizing and further cause to a lack of employee engagement and passivity.

To maintain employee autonomy and foster work cultures that lead to gains in employee satisfaction and productivity, leaders should strive to create work environments where communication is open, goals are transparent, and employees feel valued. Leaders may accomplish these aims through providing holistic trainings, tapping employees' ingenuity, and setting ethical codes of conduct. This is especially vital for leaders of knowledge workers, whose main capital is their ideas, and for whom open collaboration is essential. Leaders need to set a positive tone from the top.

#### **Discussion**

# Workplace Culture, Misconduct, and Productivity

The use of codes of conduct and ethics has been broadly recognized at most global corporations. Effective codes operate at two levels: institutional and symbolic. Within institutions, codes articulate boundaries of behavior as well as expectations for behavior; they provide clear markers as to what behavior is prohibited and what behavior is expected. They also have symbolic purposes: subscribing to institutional codes is the way that we define model professionals and determine how we see ourselves and how we want to be seen by others.

Many codes of conduct, ethics trainings, and compliance programs are ineffective, however, when organizations' values are highly deterministic and material. Executive leaders may use power, fear and intimidation to lead and view autonomous individuals with high self-esteem as threats to their organizations' missions.

To create an environment of trust, sharing, and integrity, leaders must target barriers in their organizations that prevent employees from performing well and feeling satisfied at work. Studies point to the pervasiveness of ethical issues in the workplace. A 2013 National Business Ethics Survey of the United States Workforce found that 41 percent of workers observed misconduct on the job. 60 percent of this misconduct involved people with managerial authority, and workers reported that 21 percent of misconduct was ongoing in their organization. Of the types of misconduct most observed, 18 percent of respondents reported abusive behavior that creates a hostile work environment, 10 percent reported co-workers misreporting hours worked, and 17 percent witnessed lying to employees. Alarmingly, 21 percent of employees who reported misconduct said they experienced retaliation (Ethics Resource Center, 2014). Retaliation rates are even higher for employees who report workplace mistreatment and harassment. One 2003 study found that 75 percent of employees who reported such misconduct experienced retaliation (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Fear of retaliation and suspicion of supervisory misconduct can dissuade employees from feeling speaking up.

Employees' lack of engagement contributes to a lack of reporting misconduct and can also impact organizations' productivity. A 2016 Gallup survey of the United States workforce indicated a troubling lack of engagement among employed adults. Only 33 percent of employees surveyed felt engaged at work. 16 percent reported that they were actively disengaged, while the remaining 51 percent - the majority of workers – were not engaged. Those employees primarily put in their time and maintain just enough productivity to avoid negative consequences, while putting little energy or passion into their jobs. To make matters worse, few respondents felt that better performance would even lead to faster growth at their organization (Gallup, Inc., 2017). Employee disengagement has a negative effect on organizations' creativity and productivity. Gallup has found that just 20 percent of "not engaged" and actively disengaged employees felt that their current job "brings out [their] most creative ideas" (Krueger & Killham, 2006). Only 21 percent of employees in general strongly agreed that their performance was managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work (Gallup, Inc., 2017). This indicates that a lack of employee engagement is influenced by messaging from superiors.

To ensure that employees are motivated, leaders should create a culture where ideas are freely shared. An organization's social environment can boost employee engagement and creativity. In his landmark *The Social Psychology of Work*, Walter Neff observed that the social context of work permits friendship and a sense of belonging (Neff, 1976). Work friendships are conducive to idea-sharing. Gallup researchers found that about 76 percent of engaged employees,

but only 21 percent of disengaged employees, strongly agreed with the statement "I have a friend at work who I share new ideas with" (Krueger & Killham, 2006). The research strongly suggests that of the relatively few employees who creatively generate ideas, group affiliation and friendship play important roles in engagement. When leaders encourage employees to collaborate and make friends at work, they foster a team environment where employees can more freely be creative.

Leaders have the power to structure social environments within their organizations with the aims of producing better outcomes. They can further improve culture by increasing diversity. It is well-documented that diverse teams outperform homogenous teams. Diverse management teams' companies are more likely to yield higher-than-average financial returns, more carefully consider facts, make sound business decisions, and innovate (Rock & Grant, 2016).

These improvements can be particularly beneficial to employees performing knowledge work. Knowledge work tends to be modular, non-linear, and performed in teams. Because knowledge must be actively shared by, rather than forced out of, employees, leaders need to create climates in which employees contribute their creativity and expertise. They need to develop communication, team-building, and conflict resolution skills. Trust and commitment must be instilled within an organization to avoid hoarding of ideas and feet-dragging. In such an environment, the measure of a leader's success is how well they inspire employees to cooperate and trust each other.

## The Goal of Organizational Transformation

Managers of knowledge workers often do not understand how to best manage their staff. Organizations that hope to harness their knowledge workers to the fullest potential must produce effective collaborate environments with diverse teams and encourage the sharing of information by listening to and trusting their workers. They may achieve this through loose hierarchies, where managers serve their staff, rather than dominate them, and allow their employees to make decisions where value is created – at the frontline. These environments can drive employees to commit to their organization's goals and go above and beyond the requirements of their job description. In knowledge work-centric organizations, where supervisors must draw ideas from their employees, a manager's role becomes less about setting and policing rules for workers and more about establishing strategy, setting goals, showing leadership, and measuring results. Knowledge management is less about managing people and more about giving them the right goals, motivation, and tools, and clearly articulating how success and failure are measured.

Effective knowledge managers must pay attention to their employees' strengths and weaknesses in setting these goals and strategies. When employees feel ignored, they are significantly more likely to actively disengage. When managers focus on employees' strengths, a 2014 Gallup survey found, active disengagement falls to 1 percent. 61 percent of employees who feel their managers focus on their strengths feel engaged at work (Sorenson, 2014). This shows that clear communication is critical to enhancing knowledge workers' performance. Through better communication, leaders may better learn employees' individual strengths and weaknesses and encourage them to contribute to the best of their abilities.

Accessing the higher levels of human creativity and motivation often requires employers to adopt new mindsets when it comes to training and dealing with their employees. Holistic training offers a comprehensive method of managing employees. Holistic training is by nature interdisciplinary and synthesizes the fields of human resource management, organizational psychology, law, and ethics (Bunch, 2007). Participants gain insight into knowledge as a human

resource and learn how they can work more productively within diverse work teams. Participants, under a holistic training approach, have the following goals:

- Evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as leaders and teammates,
- Improve existing communication and interpersonal skills,
- Learn how to think and act like a highly motivated person based on ethics and transparency,
- Tap into co-workers' goodwill and maximize their cooperation,
- Understand the difference between discipline and cooperation,
- Leverage core values to maintain performance and engagement,
- Motivate employees by being authentic and genuine,
- Empower employees to make positive changes,
- Maintain civil and respectful personhood,
- Be a constructive third-way participant,
- Protect the organization legally from misdeeds, and
- Evaluate lifestyle and career choices consistent with nurturing and expanding self-respect and dignity.

Holistic training is empowering to participants and is an effective means of creating a more trusting, open culture.

## **Ethics Training**

The goal of ethics training is to break the cycle of cynicism, dependence, and fear and unleash teamwork, collaboration, and friendship. It is essential to providing holistic training to employers. Ethics training can improve workplace culture by eliminating barriers to employees' enthusiastic participation at work, such as concerns about misconduct and fear of retaliation for reporting their co-workers. Ethics training should strive to instill in each person a special sense of responsibility and a commitment to his or her workplace community.

Elizabeth Morrison, ITT Harold Geneen Professor in Creative Management and the vice dean of faculty at NYU Stern School of Business, well summarizes the challenges that drive employees to stay silent on instances of misconduct: "You have to confront the two fundamental challenges preventing employees from speaking up. The first is the natural feeling of futility feeling like speaking up isn't worth the effort or that on one wants to hear it. The second is the natural fear that speaking up will lead to retribution or harsh reactions" (*Plenary 2: Beyond Carrots and Sticks: Encouraging a speak up culture at Ethics By Design*, 2016). A manager's reactions to an employee's concerns set the tone for whether or not employees will raise future issues. If a leader reacts with even the slightest bit of annoyance, they signal that they are not really open to hearing employees' concerns. The National Business Ethics Survey also reveals that, in addition to fearing retaliation, 24 percent of those surveyed who stayed quiet on misconduct feared their co-workers might react against them (Ethics Resource Center, 2014). Leaders who emphasize ethics training signal to employees that their workplace is an environment where managers are willing to listen to employees who report their concerns.

Leaders must accept that they are held to higher standards than others. They must be extra vigilant about not just their intentions, but about how is others might interpret their behavior. While they cannot control every possible misinterpretation, leaders who know their employees well make careful choices in how they react to stressful situations, how they confront poor performance, how politic they are in the face of controversy, and how receptive they are to

bad news. Above all, even in what might be considered the smallest ethical lapse, ethical leaders are careful not to signal that hypocrisy is acceptable.

# **Diversity Training**

Most diversity training efforts at American companies are ineffective and even counterproductive in increasing the number of women and minorities in managerial positions, according to analyses that turn decades of conventional wisdom, government policy and court rulings on their head (Bregman, 2012).

A comprehensive review of 31 years of data from 830 mid-size to large U.S. workplaces found that the kind of diversity training exercises offered at most firms were followed by a 7.5 percent drop in the number of women in management. The number of African Americans and female managers fell by 10 percent, and the number of black men in top positions fell by 12 percent. Similar effects were seen for Latinos and Asians. The analysis did not find that all diversity training is useless, however. Rather, it showed that mandatory programs - often undertaken to avoid liability in discrimination lawsuits - were the problem. When diversity training was voluntary and undertaken to advance a company's business goals, it was associated with increased diversity in management (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007).

To enhance maximum performance in a diverse team, employees still need to know what conduct is unacceptable in the workplace, whether or not they might describe such conduct as harassment. Managers and supervisors need effective tools to respond to observation or reports of behavior that may impede performance or undermine teamwork. Regardless of the level of knowledge in a workplace, research demonstrates that organizational culture is one of the key drivers of success or failure. Though mandatory diversity training presents a problematic solution, leaders who voluntarily undertake efforts to train employees in diversity and build diverse teams can build more inclusive, productive workforces.

# **Workplace Civility Training**

Employers have offered workplace civility training as a means of reducing conflict in the workplace. Unlike standard compliance training, such training does not focus on eliminating unwelcome behavior based on characteristics protected under employment non-discrimination laws, but rather on promoting respect and civility in the workplace generally. A 2016 task force report from the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) found that incivility is often an antecedent to conflict, stress, unproductive behavior, even workplace harassment, as it creates a climate of "general derision and disrespect" in which counterproductive behaviors are tolerated. The report further stated that uncivil behaviors can often spiral into bullying behaviors (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016). Workplace civility trainings help organizations prevent the negative outcomes associated with poor work relationships, such as stress, burnout, and increased turnover, and increase job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and management trust (Leiter, Day, Gilin Oore, & Laschinger, 2012).

Workplace civility training focuses on establishing expectations of civility and respect in the workplace, and on providing management and employees the tools they need to meet such expectations. The training usually includes an exploration of workplace norms, including a discussion of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in the workplace. The training also includes a heavily skills-based component; including interpersonal skills training, conflict resolution training, and training on effective supervisory techniques. This practical

training helps ensure that employees feel comfortable with one another; comfortable to share their creative ideas, form friendships, and share concerns.

# **Bystander & Third Side Trainings**

Bystander intervention training has long been used as a conflict prevention and resolution strategy (Schulte, 2018). Bystander training empowers people to intervene when they witness harassing behavior. It has been shown to change social norms and empower individuals to intervene with peers to prevent destructive behavior from occurring. Most bystander intervention trainings employ at least four strategies:

- Create awareness: Enable bystanders to recognize potentially problematic behaviors,
- Create a sense of collective responsibility: Motivate bystanders to step in and take action when they observe problematic behaviors,
- Create a sense of empowerment: Conduct skills-building exercises to provide bystanders with the skills and confidence to intervene as appropriate, and
- Provide resources: Provide bystanders with resources they can call upon and that support their intervention. (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016)

Bystander intervention contributes to workplace cultures where employees and managers feel comfortable standing up to misconduct. Though organizational leadership plays a major role in setting an organization's workplace culture, bystander training works to empower employees at all levels to reinforce a culture where harassment is not tolerated.

Third Side training offers a similar promising method for approaching conflicts in the workplace. The Third Side approach, proposed by William Ury, co-founder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation, involves the entire work community. It asks "thirdsiders" to take the middle ground in conflict by seeking to understand both sides and helping mediate, with the goal of finding a solution beneficial to all. The program proposes ten practical roles that employees can play, such as "bridge-builder," "teacher," "referee," and "healer" (Ury, 2000). Employees and managers can take on any of these ten roles on a daily basis to prevent destructive behaviors at work.

Like Bystander Intervention Training, The Third Side harnesses the power of peer pressure and the force of public opinion. It uses the power of persuasion and influences parties primarily through appeals to their interests and to community norms. Bystander and Third Side trainings build on other workplace trainings by involving the entire work community and focusing on creating cultural change.

### **Conflict Resolution Training**

Through conflict resolution, two or more parties can find a resolution to a disagreement which may be personal or work-related. When conflict occurs, one of the best courses of action to take is to face the issue directly and work to resolve the disagreement. In a diverse workforce, the ability to resolve conflict in a timely and effective manner can prevent escalation and increase productivity. Training aids employees in identifying the most common causes of conflict within their organizations, provides techniques for managing workplace conflict, and identifies the negative effects of unresolved conflict so that employees grasp the importance of immediately resolving their problems with co-workers and management (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012).

The following conditions may give rise to conflict in the workplace:

SubstantiveEmotionalDepartmental GoalsMistrustAllocation of ResourcesAngerDistribution of ResourcesFear/ResentmentPolicies/ProceduresPersonality

(Patterson et al., 2012)

Conflict may escalate for several reasons, including:

- Latent Tensions: Resulting from frustrated needs, poor communication skills, and weak relationships;
- Overt Conflict: Resulting from disputed rights, unequal power, conflicting interests, and injured relationships;
- Power Struggle: No limitation, no attention, no protection
- Litigation No viable alternatives. (Lytle, 2015; Ury, n.d.)

By teaching leaders and employees to identify and manage conflicts and tensions, conflict resolution training can minimize existing conflicts and prevent escalation. By minimizing conflict, leaders can create a more inviting workplace for employees.

## **Value Innovation**

Leaders can improve their workplace culture by making changes that go beyond offering trainings. Knowledge is created through social interaction and collaboration, and effective leaders should adopt management styles that allow for effective knowledge-building. As noted above, traditional, bureaucratic management strategies of controlling information and power, where supervisors direct workers, might run counterproductive to the successful management of knowledge workers. Different, less hierarchical and more flexible management styles might be more appropriate. Leaders must manage their workers in ways that encourage voluntary cooperation.

Few companies practice this style or management, in part because they face mental barriers. Knowledge and expertise are often viewed as sources of power. As such, ideas are not easily shared because some managers believe they can retain power only by keeping their knowledge to themselves to maintain their managerial discretion. They may also maintain power by keeping employees at a distance, preventing challenges to their ideas. (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). Ironically, this is even truer in a knowledge-intensive economy, where the forces of globalization have been unleashed and where the premium and power attached to valuable knowledge escalates. In the absence of natural economic incentives and with the perceived power disincentives to diffuse knowledge, it follows that high-quality knowledge creation and collaboration will be stifled.

Similarly, value-added knowledge work requires a greater degree of personal autonomy. In today's modern workplace, where the primary resource is knowledge, collective knowledge-building is a key strategic task. Production machinery remains present, but unlike physical production, knowledge-sharing and teamwork rely on strong interpersonal relations. To the extent that knowledge and other intangible assets become the indispensable ingredient for value-added work, the nature of the work and the social identities of workers change.

Because knowledge work can be performed without the necessity of a bureaucratic structure to command and control it, work is guided less by concerns for procedural conformity and more by concerns of autonomy and personal expression. Such autonomy, however, requires personal responsibility for creating and contributing value, and strong ethical leadership by supervisors. Organizations that value moral or creative autonomy are better able to tap the reservoir of ingenuity and know-how that exist within the organization.

Autonomy, of course, is not absolute and is usually, to one extent or another, waived to another authority. In a corporation, employees cede autonomy and agree to conform to corporate rules in order to be team members. Thus, the innovation ethic presupposes working with awareness, passion and a level of engagement that expresses individuality and attachment to community. "Innovators" do not need to be original or ingenious and do not need to create or invent something new. To be faithful to an innovation ethic, workers need to contribute something of value by working with heart, body and mind on tasks that they are asked to perform or choose to do. For this to occur, leaders must commit to that innovation ethic, valuing their team members and inspiring the free sharing of ideas. Values and value are inextricably linked because knowledge workers tend to be intrinsically motivated and tend to share information rather than hoard it. Workers in open environments add value and instinctively aspire to be ethical leaders and good stewards of collective assets.

### Conclusion

According to researchers W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, "the ability to express one's ideas or bilateral communication, which is the key element to engagement, implies the opportunity to voice one's perceptions, knowledge, and ideas, and the need to hear opposite parties out. This increases the likelihood that a high rate of knowledge and expertise will be diffused and shared" (Kim & Mauborgne, 1998). Sustained communication may go a long way in creating a social environment for innovation. Leaders must proactively work to foster environments where managers and employees operate at a high level of trust and cooperation. They may achieve these aims through targeted trainings that promote ethical behavior, diversity, and conflict resolution. Additionally, they must listen to their employees, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and use this knowledge to keep their employees engaged. This is critical to the effective management of knowledge workers. Leaders should value innovation while setting clear expectations and ensuring that managers are open to hearing employees' concerns. Related to open communication is trust; in fact, trust is the foundation of communication. Environments that foster open communication, trust and friendship produce the catalyst for innovation, as autonomous persons freely sharing within teams predicates ethics, self-respect and innovation.

## **International and Managerial Implications**

Breakdowns in ethical, effective leadership extend beyond United States workplaces. Studies indicate a disconnect between employees and leaders that exists across the globe. The World Values Survey, which assesses basic values and beliefs in more than eighty counties, found that people care as much about integrity and fairness as they do about their own pecuniary interests. At work, most people care about ethical values (JD Systems Institute, 2014). Yet, a Willis Towers Watson Global Workforce Study in 2014 indicated that about half the workforce

simply did not trust their employer. Most of this distrust centered on communication that is perceived as secretive or dishonest (Willis Towers Watson, 2014). People value ethical leadership, yet trust in the workplace remains low. When employees do not trust managers to make good decisions or to behave with integrity, their motivation is seriously compromised. Their distrust and attendant lack of engagement is a big, often unrecognized problem in many organizations that leads to inefficiency, mistakes, and unethical lapses. Leaders must recognize that ethical leadership is essential and take practical steps to create a trusting workplace.

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