Coaching Culture Is
HUMAN CULTURE

BY JERRY COLONNA AND KHALID HALIM

In the book *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu warns leaders not to engage in battle when angry. Anger is blinding.

It can result in disaster and lead to grave mistakes. And while few corporate leaders are able to admit when they are angry, they lead battalions and make decisions every day.

A coaching culture forces leaders to sit with and face those uncomfortable feelings so that the workplace does not become a battlefield. The ultimate outcome of an organization backed by leadership coaching is a more human workplace with leaders who not only voice emotion but also recognize and support it in others.

THE INFALLIBLE LEADERSHIP FACADE

When it comes to courage, many leaders try to project an image of infallibility. Further, they believe that if a leader shows fear, that emotion can become contagious, causing teams to lose faith in an organization. The facade is unrealistic and superhuman. The thought that follows is that employees will leave an organization if leadership shows emotion. The opposite is true.

Employees tend to leave organizations that have leaders who haven't spent time working on self-inquiry. Getting a leader to admit that she is scared is one of the hardest things to do, but it is also the only way to show teams that they are human. Admitting fear is where real courage lies—not the fake kind of courage that comes with bravado.

There's safety in knowing that all humans suffer in the same ways. From the top to the bottom of an organization, each member of a team experiences the same basic emotions. Tirelessly working to stifle those emotions is, well, tiresome. Emotion suppression can also lead to aggressive behavior.

Build a culture of openness beginning with leadership. Allow teams to admit frustrations and fears. Ensure that leaders participate actively and honestly in those conversations. Enforce the fact that everyone is human and nobody is untouchable. Learn to set ego and resistance aside and accept all ideas. This creates a safe atmosphere.

Innovation is the cornerstone of a successful organization. Developing new ideas and products is not only exciting, it is essential to the lifespan of any company. But it's also easy for companies to get stuck in a creative rut. It's likely that somebody on a team has a new idea. It is likely that team members with new ideas do not present them for fear of failure.

Or, worse, an idea might succeed and result in uncomfortable change. Suddenly, there would be a shift in culture that requires adaptation. Give teams the space to fail spectacularly, and try again. Discuss the feelings of fear and change and what comes next. Find the lesson in failure. This process will spark further creativity and foster a culture of clear communication.

WHAT IS A COACHING CULTURE?

The purpose of coaching is to move people from where they are to where they want to be. Most organizations considering a coaching culture have been stuck in the same place for a long time. Building a culture that is more open and accepting is the way to move forward. It's a continuous learning process that asks the same basic question over and over again until the root of every matter has been unearthed. That question is: What am I really afraid of?

The process is frightening and often paralyzes a leader and his or her team. When leaders find themselves in a situation gripped by fear, the immediate reaction can be outrage or frustration. But the most effective action is to stop, slow down, and drop into inquiry. Fear is a reactive state; we can only react to what is in front of us. It is when we ask a question that we open a window of possibility that we would not otherwise consider. This is where the opportunity for innovation happens.

Type the word "resiliency" into Google and count the number of article hits. It's somewhere in the hundreds of thousands. It's a sexy word with thousands of different opinions on how to be "resilient" and why it's important to be so. A less sexy word is "grit," but it's the right one. Grit is the way that we hold fast and steady onto truth and don't let go—not because we can't but because we believe in a team's ability.

We trust the process and the people behind the process, but we do so with an openness and kindness. We forge ahead and get the task done in a communicative and safe environment that allows for all emotions and opinions to be voiced. That's grit, and it's what we need to push our teams forward and trust that the work we are doing is the right work.

HOW TO DEVELOP A COACHING CULTURE

At the heart of every company decision should be this question: Am I building a company that I would like to work for? If you could be the proverbial fly on the wall, would your company make you shudder or smile? Without inquiry, we may build organizations that are far from our own belief systems—ones that we'd never stand behind or work for.

Developing a coaching culture can mean going back to the drawing board by asking some qualitative questions:

• Do we have a clear vision? Are we executing for it?

• How are we currently interacting with clients? Does this need to change?

• How are we treating our employees? Are we creating safety and belonging?

• Do we know what problem we are solving? How can we keep this goal in mind?

• How can we keep growing without stifling creativity?

These questions have to be asked and answered regularly. They are guiding stars, and they are meant to be guideposts in case we get lost along the way. The answers to those questions are meant to be acted on by leadership. A coaching culture cannot develop unless leadership acts accordingly and leads by example.

So often, we see organizations guided by company philosophies that are meant to be followed by employees but that leadership largely ignores. This won't work. At the very origin of the word "coaching" is the word "teaching," and one cannot exist without the other. But there's a fine line between leading by example and disallowing discussion.

With teaching comes immense responsibility. Great leaders guide and challenge employees helping them (and, in turn, the organization) grow. This includes accepting new ideas and cultivating those ideas whether they result in success or failure. Guiding employees and creating open communication channels not only are at the crux of growth, but they also lead to a more productive and trusting workplace.

Many leaders do not know how to coach. To them, teaching means providing a quick solution to a problem without discussion. This is the way that many leaders have been doing business for years, and it's a hard habit to break. But it can be done using two basic human skills that are often overlooked: listening and discussing.

Teach management to ask questions and discuss problems instead of providing solutions, and to work on the art of active listening. These skills can be honed through listening and communication exercises during leadership training.

As a leader, your team often comes to you with problems to be solved. The default reaction is to be helpful and provide an answer to the problem. But this is not how a coaching culture is built. Remember, coaching is about taking people from where they are to where they want to go.

So when presented with a problem (where the team does not want to be anymore), you can start the coaching conversation by simply asking: Given all of this, what would you like? (Where do you want to go?) This is the start of inquiry, but it is important to remember that where we want to go is usually not about getting what we want, but about what that makes possible and the opportunities it opens up for us.

So the next question to go deeper into inquiry is to respond to the answer to "What would you like?" with the question "What will having that do for you?" With each answer, ask again, at least three times, "What will having that do for you?" to go deeper and deeper into what is really being asked for. Most important, with this inquiry, the solution is self-generated instead of given by the leader.

A coaching culture also generates a greater sense of responsibility. When employees are allowed to grow and change, work becomes personal. Projects that would otherwise be checks on a list turn into engaging challenges filled with purpose. That purpose results in engaged employees committed to building better projects and striving for a stronger organization. In other words, coaching creates a company that you would like to work for.

HOW TO DEAL WITH RESISTANCE

Sometimes coaching is incorrectly used as a form of reprimand. When this happens, employees will resist. If you have recently implemented a coaching culture structure and find regular employee resistance, consider how and when leadership has used coaching methods.

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Are employees being scolded under the guise of coaching when something goes wrong? More often than not, this is the underlying issue when coaching fails. Nobody likes to be pulled into the corner office and taught a condescending lesson after making a mistake. It's important that leadership understand what coaching is and isn't.

A coaching culture is a dynamic culture. Leading by example and guiding teams every step of the way are not things that happen only when something goes awry. Teaching, in this sense, must be woven into an organization's culture so that it happens at every turn.

If implementing a coaching culture is being met with heavy resistance, it's likely that coaching is being used as a form of lecture. This won't suffice. But it's hard to be certain where resistance is coming from without asking questions.

Find out why people dislike a newly implemented coaching structure. Ask people to name the emotions that arise when discussing the changes. Work together to discern how to implement further changes that everyone feels good about.

The simple act of sitting down to discuss resistance is, in fact, part of dynamic coaching and should become the go-to method used regularly (not just when problems arise). As soon as employees learn that the workplace is now a safe place where discussion happens, a coaching culture will begin to take root.

NO MAGICAL METHOD

Becoming a more human organization isn't an overnight fix. There's no handbook that can be read or wand that can be waved. Growth is continuous, as are the problems and emotions that arise every day. True self-inquiry is an ongoing process that requires work (hard work). It's also work that will be met with a lot of resistance because it is uncomfortable and unfamiliar. But it is essential to the innovation, growth, and environment of any organization.

Most organizations take pride in creating a happy culture, a laid-back culture, or an open culture, but few focus on shaping the humans that are part of that culture. Implementing an open-door policy is not enough. Leaders must adopt coaching strategies, learn to be teachers and guides, and welcome creativity from every level. When leaders turn into mentors and employees learn that the workplace is a safe place, change begins.

The most important point about building a coaching culture is recognizing that this change impacts an entire organization from the top down and bottom up. It's not contained within the walls of management, but it must begin with introspective leaders who ask the tough questions.

Keep those questions nearby, look at them regularly, and remember to sit still in the face of fear to avoid an unexamined negative reaction. Remember, too, that failure is beautiful and always results in lessons learned. Self-inquiry through a coaching culture not only helps leadership unpack uncomfortable feelings but also allows leaders to recognize the same feelings in others, resulting in a more human workplace. AQ

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