

# Building culture – one salt shaker at a time

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**When a leader focuses on impacting the culture of an organization, they impact the people.** Here's a great way to think about culture: Culture is like personality. In a person, the personality is made up of the values, beliefs, assumptions, interests, experiences, upbringing, and habits that create a person's behavior.

**Culture of an organization is made up of the values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors shared by a group of people.** Culture is the behavior that results when a group arrives at a set of - generally unspoken and unwritten - rules for working together.

We've all seen symptoms of a negative culture: a lack of integrity, employees talking about other employees in negative terms, complaining and whining, or little respect for the contribution of others on the team. When the culture is positive, people wake up excited to work on the mission with people they enjoy being around. Generally, this positive culture was a result of leaders who have broken down hierarchies, empowered and trusted people to do their work well, offered flexibility to employees and listened.

A few years ago, I was working with a healthcare group - they were trying to move from a physician-centric model to a patient-centric model and it was proving to be a difficult transition. Most of health care in the past has been provider centric. Things are set up for the convenience and efficiency of the provider and the future of healthcare is moving toward a patient-centric model. I asked them if they thought of their problem as a cultural issue.

To make that transition, the healthcare group had to, among other things, change the culture. They needed to get the physicians who were used to making decisions about themselves and their time, to making decisions more broadly focused on the patient. That might change hours and days of operation, communication methods, how they demonstrate empathy and a feeling of partnership between the patient and the health care providers. Other healthcare organizations had found that when they focus on the patient's basic wishes such as having evening, weekend or virtual appointments and email communication, patient health outcomes improve. The culture would also improve when there is less hierarchy, when the health care workers are empowered and trusted to do their work, they have flexibility and feel listened to.



Another story about culture and how leaders establish it involves two leaders who were talking, one of whom owned a restaurant. He shared that when you're running a restaurant you must pay attention to every last detail that creates the experience you want people to have – essentially the culture you want to create. There are so many details and the example he gave was about the placement of the salt and pepper shakers. He told us that first, as the owner of the restaurant, you get to decide where you want

the placement to be with the other items on the table and then how to ensure it's consistent. As the owner who made the decision, you notice that everyone moves the salt and pepper shakers. Customers use them; servers may move them to pick up their tip; bus people move them to wipe the table. And every time this restaurant owner saw the shakers out of place, he made it his job to put them in the correct place.

The story illustrates that there are many things culturally that a leader needs to be attentive to, and when they are out of place, the leader is responsible for putting them back in place. When someone is not as polite as possible to a customer, or someone makes an error on their expense report, we must put it in place and show "the way we do things here".

As a leader, we change a culture one small salt shaker at a time.