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How to Change Your Organization's Culture

Adapted in part from "The Wall Street Journal Guide to Management" by Alan Murray, published by Harper Business.

As a manager, you may have the power to change your organization's policies with the stroke of a pen. And you may have the ability to hire, fire, promote and demote people with relatively little effort.

But changing an entrenched culture is the toughest task you will face. To do so, you must win the hearts and minds of the people you work with, and that takes both cunning and persuasion.

In their book "Blue Ocean Strategy," W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne cite four hurdles that face a manager trying to institute broad change in an organization. The first is cognitive – people must have some understanding of why the change in strategy or in culture is needed. The second is limited resources – inevitably, changing an organization will require shifting resources away from some areas and towards others. The third hurdle is motivation – ultimately, workers have to want to make the change. And the final hurdle is institutional politics. They quote one manager who complains: "In our organization, you get shot down before you stand up."

To overcome those hurdles, they suggest a "tipping point" approach to management. First of all, recognizing you won't be able to convert everyone at once, start with people who have disproportionate influence in the organization. Get them committed to the change, or, failing that, get them out. And once they are committed to change, shine a spotlight on their accomplishments, so others get the message.

Second, instead of just lecturing on the need for change, look for ways to get people to experience the harsh realities that make it necessary. Mr. Kim and Ms. Mauborgne tell the story of New York Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, who in the 1990s made his top brass – including himself – ride the subways day and night, to understand why frightened New Yorkers had come to call it the "Electric Sewer." Other companies have taken a similar approach, requiring managers to take calls from disgruntled customers.

Third, look for ways to redistribute resources toward "hot spots" – activities that require few resources but result in large change – and away from "cold spots" – or areas with large resource demands, but relatively low impact.

Finally, Mr. Kim and Ms. Mauborgne advocate appointing a "consigliere" – a highly respected

insider, who knows who is fighting you, who is supporting you, and what you need to do to build coalitions and devise strategies for change. All leaders run the risk of losing touch with what's really happening underneath them. A good consigliere can go a long way toward solving that problem.

A few more general ideas:

If you want to stimulate creativity in the workplace, evaluate your company's personnel structure. Managers typically tap only a small portion of workers' creative capabilities. Identify employees' strengths and consider creating new groups with a tailored mix of talents. If you have a project, create a task force. Mix employees with different experience levels: Younger team members may provide energy and optimism; veterans may provide insight from past experience. Want a different spin on brainstorming? Consider creating a plant-packed "green" room or exterior garden where workers can spend an hour a week with nothing but a blank pad and pencil.

Encourage innovation through an egalitarian culture, flexible schedules, few meetings and interdisciplinary project teams. Employees want to feel trusted. One way to foster that is by allowing people to work at home sometimes.

Other times, just changing the office set-up helps spur innovation. To encourage teamwork, eliminate exclusive-looking private office suites and assign everyone work stations in close proximity to jump-start communication. Consider using the extra space to create office amenities, like a better break room or an office gym.

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