

Don’t Fall into the Messiah Trap

Career Development





Everyone knows that companies can achieve optimal performance by having a fully engaged workforce with high morale and esprit de corps. Data from numerous independent studies consistently shows that organizations with such attributes have significant advantages over others that do not. But, let’s suppose that you’ve just done an employee survey and discover your firm falls far short of the mark and that a significant fraction of your employee population is dispirited and disengaged. What can you do to change course and point your ship in the right direction?

Before I propose an answer to this question, let me tell you what you should not do: You should not hire a “cultural fixer,” “talent development professional,” or some other corporate “messiah” with the belief that they, by themselves, can set things right. This is not to say that you should not seek and heed expert advice. If you need this kind of assistance, hire professionals who can guide you in the right direction. But, if you do, know this — they cannot, by themselves, “fix” your culture. There is no magic bullet. Only you and your leadership team have the power to turn things around.

Step 1. Recognize that you and your leadership team “own” the culture

If your employees have poor morale and are disengaged, it is your doing. For many, this reality is difficult to swallow. After all, we all like to view ourselves in a favorable light. We’re “good guys” with “good intentions” working hard to run a business the best way we know how. But, internalizing the fact that you and your team are the problem is an essential first step in improving performance. In so doing, don’t delude yourself by thinking it is the “other leaders” who need to change. If you are part of the leadership team, no matter how good you think you are, you too are responsible for the poor work environment you aim to fix.

Step 2. Establish a higher purpose

Put your spreadsheets aside for a moment and ask yourself, “What is our reason for being in business?” “What good do we bring to the world?” Time and again throughout my career I’ve seen business leaders focusing virtually all their attention on the scoreboard rather than on their players and the game on the field. The most successful firms know why they are in business and take great pride in the positive difference they make for their employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, creditors, and the communities in which they operate.

Leaders of successful companies exhibit a genuine passion for pursuing their firm’s higher purpose. That passion is infectious. If you want great morale and an engaged workforce, help your colleagues see a reason for coming to work beyond getting a paycheck. Identify and authentically communicate your higher purpose, beyond “making your numbers.” Consistently deliver this message in multiple forums. Create communication tools (videos, brochures, customer testimonials, employee award programs, etc.) regarding your higher purpose and train leaders how to use them. This is not a “nice to have.” It is essential to promoting and retaining an engaged workforce.

Step 3. Establish leadership behavioral standards

If you’ve got morale and engagement issues, you and your leaders are failing on a fundamental level with human relationships inside of your organization. To set things right, you must establish leadership standards centered on the five fundamental cornerstones of all human relationships:

1. **Integrity.** Knowing and modeling honest, trustworthy, ethical behaviors
2. **Respect.** Treating everyone with dignity regardless of their position in the company
3. **Responsibility.** Holding yourself and others accountable for their actions
4. **Fairness.** Being impartial and just without favoritism or discrimination
5. **Compassion.** Exhibiting caring, kindness, and understanding even when others make mistakes

“Establishing” these leadership behavioral standards does not mean displaying them on posters around the office. It means living them. In fact, save the money and forget the posters altogether. Instead, execute step 4 below.

Step 4. Implement and enforce your leadership behavioral standards

Merely writing leadership behavior standards down and announcing them to the team will not get you

very far. Instead, deliberate action must be taken to make them real. To achieve this objective:

1. Provide training and professional development programs to help leaders understand how to live by your leadership behavior standards.
2. Measure leaders against the standards.
3. Swiftly remove leaders who cannot or will not model the standards and promote those who do.
4. Incorporate leadership standards into the recruitment and hiring process.

There is more to be said about the four aspects of this implementation phase outlined above than space in this column permits. So, let me focus on measurement. The best way to measure your leaders against these standards is via a simple, anonymous 360-degree survey in which participants are asked to rank leaders' fidelity to the leadership behavior standards on a scale of zero to 10. If the survey reveals some leaders who have low scores across many or all five standards, you've just identified an opportunity for improvement — either via coaching or a management change. In so doing, it is essential that you take swift action. Every day you leave a "stinker" in a leadership position causes significant damage to morale and undermines your ability to drive the culture in a better direction.

Step 5. Over communicate

One of the most common complaints from employees is that they don't know what is going on in the company. There is no such thing as overcommunication when it comes to answering the following three questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. How are we going to get there?
3. How can I help?

Of course, this supposes that you and your leadership team know the answers to these questions. If you don't, you've got another big problem to solve — and you've got to get at it quickly. Your competition is not going to wait for you. Regardless, once you know the answers to these questions, share them with your employees as frequently as possible. In addition to getting them in the game, it is also an important way of showing them respect.

For better or worse, your corporate culture starts and ends with your leaders. So, forget the messiahs, set your course, equip your leaders well, hold them accountable, and the rest will take care of itself.

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