FIVE ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCKS FOR IMPROVING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Thomas R. Krause

Few leaders can honestly say they know how to create, maintain, and enhance their culture. At the same time, the success of a culture change effort depends on the degree to which leaders understand and relate their own decisions, behaviors, and thought processes to the culture itself.

The most challenging part of culture change is often for leaders to learn how they've created the culture they currently have. What actions and decisions have lent themselves to dysfunction and discord?

To make culture change happen, leaders must move from being distant observers who hope something will happen, to authentic leaders intent on creating a great organization. This involves some principles that cut across levels, regardless of whether you're a senior executive, a board member, or a first-line supervisor.

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Start by asking and seeking answers to questions such as these:

1. To what extent do we consider the cultural effects of our decision making?

2. How much variation in cultural leadership exists across leadership groups by level?

3. What do we really value in this organization? (Not what we claim to value.)

4. Do we actually value upward communication, organizational justice, and providing support for our team members? (Or do we really prefer not hearing about the problem until it's fixed and to avoid questions of fairness in favor of expedience?)

Then, when delving into the answers to these questions and responding in such a way that necessary changes will occur, work to implement these five essential and interconnected building blocks of authentic leadership:

ACTIVATE YOUR ABILITY TO LISTEN

When decisions are made without the full benefit of knowledge held by others within the organization, the consequences can be serious. Leaders must create a culture in which communication isn't hampered. This comes down to the art of thoughtful listening. Even in large complex organizations, effective listening skills enhance the way leaders learn "what's going on." Letting people know that you are genuinely interested in what they have to say by focusing on listening more productively. By doing so, you stimulate a culture of open and upward communication.

INCREASE TRUST

A leader's ability to inspire trust is essential to motivating team members and allowing the organization to flourish. Trust follows credibility. When people trust their leaders, they're more likely to have faith that what benefits the company also benefits them. When leaders examine their decisions, actions, and implicit assumptions in light of building trust, they move the culture in significant ways. Trusted leaders seek authentic interactions and make it known that they care deeply for their people such that the welfare of their people is as important as delivering business results. They continuously develop themselves in order to better support the team.

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EXPRESS GENUINE EMPATHY

Genuine empathy, including the ability to put oneself in another's shoes, allows leaders to form meaningful connections with their staff. By endeavoring to understand what someone else is feeling and experiencing, leaders can better appreciate what others are up against. Empathy paves the way to mutual understanding and support. It promotes a helping culture that's needed for a strong, positive work environment. People who feel valued are more willing to invest energy in their work.

PROMOTE HIGH LEVEL COLLABORATION

Whereas the other building blocks provide the foundation for interpersonal relationships, collaboration is what translates interpersonal relationships into collective intelligence that leads to productive teamwork. Leaders who put effort into thoughtfully promoting an environment in which people desirably collaborate at a high level are able to improve performance and well-being. Value and include a variety of perspectives to increase organizational intelligence.

PROVIDE SUPPORT

Leaders must show their commitment to supporting their people in meeting their objectives. People need to recognize that they have sufficient support to be able to succeed. Strive to create an environment in which people feel that leaders genuinely care about their well-being. Let them know that their contributions and their role in the team's success are appreciated and valued. When employees know they have the support of their organization, it connects them more meaningfully to their role and enables them to see the company's goals as their own.

As you work to bring about positive change, you will be ensuring that people feel listened to, can trust their leadership, are valued and included, and being treated fairly. **You will be putting in place a cultural infrastructure that provides an essential foundation for performance.** ◙

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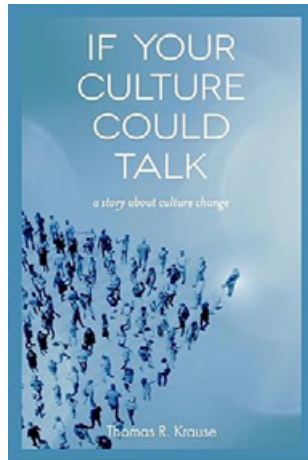
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Thomas R. Krause, Ph.D. is a world-renowned thought leader focused on decision making, leadership, and behavior in the creation of positive organizational culture. He has designed culture change interventions in the service of the prevention of catastrophic events, fatalities, and disasters. He founded Behavioral Science Technology, Inc., and is presently Chairman of Krause Bell Group. He has authored five books on leadership, safety, and culture change, and his articles have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *USA TODAY*, and more.

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