



Notes From the Field

Insights gleaned from our strategy and organizational change engagements.



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Minding the Gap: Reconnecting with your employee culture

By the look in her eyes and the urgency in her voice, I knew my client was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. It was budget time and the first roll-up for the functional areas she oversaw was due in just five days. None of her managers had turned in their numbers the week prior as requested. Despite their frequent assurances, they hadn't produced a single spreadsheet for review and now the deadline was looming large with only a matter of days before she had to present her budget to the Finance Committee. The pressure was palpable.

Two cultures exist inside every organization: the leadership culture and the employee culture.

"How do I make them more accountable," she asked. "I told them all last week what I wanted, how I wanted it and when and I still don't have what I need. I was very clear—in fact I couldn't have been more clear. How do I get their attention?"

Following this discussion with my client, I couldn't help but reflect on the number of times I've heard similar refrains from clients—"How do I make (fill in the person's name) be more (fill in the area of deficiency)? How do I get his attention?"

In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Dr. Peter Senge talks about the two cultures that exist inside every organization: the leadership culture and the employee culture. I've found this theory to be true in all organizations with which we've worked. I've also found that the gap doesn't have to be a disruptive force if it is correctly managed.

In fact, the most productive organizations are so in part exactly because there is a gap between the leadership culture and the employee culture. Where there is a gap there is likely greater innovation and critical thinking that takes place at all levels of the organization. Think of the

cultural gap as a neutral zone in which leadership and employees are able to align on what is going on in their two worlds (the strategic and the tactical) and poke and prod in a way that is safe and unencumbered by the politics hierarchy.

The healthiest and most productive organizations are masterful at ensuring that the gap that exists between the leadership culture and the employee culture is narrow—meaning it is actually intentional with clear and consistent lines of communication between the two and a mutual appreciation for the realities of both worlds.

The least productive organizations are so in large part because leadership cannot discern the distinction between the cultures that exist in their organizations; therefore they cannot articulate and be responsive to the dynamics at play. Especially those disruptive dynamics that are the early warning signs of a cultural train wreck. When leadership chooses not to take time to evaluate the importance of a high morale and engaged culture, they risk organizational clarity, alignment and mobilization.

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My client with the budget deadline was experiencing the sting of a disconnected organization. Her people weren't clear, they weren't aligned and, as a result, they weren't mobilized for action. Her challenge was bigger than a pattern of missed deadlines. Much bigger.

Over the past year and a half or so, leaders have increasingly sequestered themselves from their employees. Understandably, they have been hyper-focused on survival—doing anything and everything possible to successfully navigate the economy and, in some cases, resuscitate their very existence.

Meanwhile, in the process of being in survival mode, the gap between leaders and employees has effectively devolved into an us against them mentality. The resulting rift between leaders and employees has become the omnipresent elephant in the room. Leaders in many organizations have lost sight of the importance of minding the culture gap as a top priority. Not surprisingly, their employees have figuratively crossed their collective arms and vowed to jump ship the minute the economy bounces back.

I recently had a conversation with the CEO of a fast-growing company who was about to go through a particularly complex organizational change process. “What we need around here is more strategic and critical thinking,” he explained. “These people just need to learn to transform how they think. And if they don’t, then I’ll be happy to help them work someplace else.”

I suggested to him that the transformational change he had in mind for how his people did their thinking would require him to first consider changing his own thinking.

Blank stare. My counsel made him anxious—as it should have. But, ultimately, he got it.

Take a deep breath and study what’s actually going on.

What is fascinating to me as a management consultant is that, unlike my client who ultimately got it, so many leaders don’t get it or, if they do, somehow it doesn’t make it on their long list of to-do’s. Instead they “Yea, but...” it to death until it drops back down to the bottom of their very long list of to-do’s. And then they are surprised and frustrated when their organizations aren’t responsive to their direction or the brilliance of their vision, aren’t thinking at the level they should be or lack the agility needed to...you get the point.

Take note: Whenever you find yourself tossing your arms in the air with frustration saying your own version of, “I told them all last week what I wanted, how I wanted it and when and I still don’t have what I need”,—chances are it’s time for you to step back, take a deep breath and study what’s actually going on. There is peace of mind knowing that all cultural gaps between leaders and their employees can be exactly defined and understood if you make it a priority to do so.

The breakthroughs that many leaders are hoping for or expecting within their organizations (i.e., be more strategic, more agile, less siloed, etc.) cannot happen unless there is a clear understanding of the composition that makes up the gap. When you understand your gap, you’ll have a clear shot at achieving the transformational breakthroughs you’re after.

As a leader, here are a few things you can do in your efforts to mind the culture gap within your organization:

1. Create a structured method for employees to provide their thinking. They are where the rubber meets the road between your company and your customers. Ask them questions that reflect the level of thinking you expect of them. Then listen closely to their insight.
2. If you’re embarking upon a transformational change initiative, be mindful of the importance of developing and effectively communicating the vision of what’s possible once the change actually occurs. With a clear and inspired vision that is consistently communicated by all leaders, your employees will be more likely to engage change rather than comply with it.
3. Avoid the perceived “star chamber.” As a leader keep in mind that whenever you and your colleagues meet behind closed doors, the rest of the organization is likely wondering why. Certainly the content of every meeting you have as a leadership team is not appropriate to share. However, much of it may be if appropriately framed.
4. Meet with people. Find out what they are thinking. Take an interest in what’s working well and what’s not.
5. Conduct a cultural assessment that will reveal the various cultural dynamics at play that may be impacting your organization’s ability to take that next big leap forward. Use the insight gleaned through this assessment to develop the right best approach to creating the symbiosis between leaders and employees you’re after.

Eliminating the gap is not the goal. Effectively managing it is. By taking time to understand what your culture gap is comprised of, you will be taking an important step toward finding practical ways to leverage it in a way that produces the right results for your organization.