Five things science tells us about robust cultures that thrive

Graeme Cowan

After a long business career in senior management, the author of this article went through a horrendous five-year battle with depression, which his psychiatrist described as the worst he had ever treated. He then went on to write the best seller *Back from the Brink in 2007 and Back from the Brink Too: Helping your loved one overcome depression* (SANE’s 2009 Book of the Year). He is also the author of *Best Practice in Managing Mental Health in the Workplace*, a board member of RUOK?Day, and the creator of the RUOK?atWork Program. He now speaks and writes around the world about how people and teams can bounce back and thrive from challenges.

There are proven things that leaders can do to create and enhance robust work cultures in challenging times. It is also easy to have management practices that destroy organisational energy. Many people confuse busyness with effectiveness. Multitasking is standard practice. Research by David Meyer (Meyer & Kieras 1999) shows that switching tasks increases the amount of time it takes to finish the primary task you were working on by an average of 25%. In short, juggling activities is incredibly inefficient and ultimately weakens a culture. This juggling of tasks contributes to extraordinary levels of unhealthy stress. The recent RUOK?atWork survey showed that 40% of Australian workers typically feel stressed out every day, with 12% experiencing extreme stress (RUOK?atWork Survey 2011). Extreme work stress leads to suboptimal performance, and for some, depression or an anxiety disorder, or both (La Montagne & Sanderson 2010). A recent report, ‘Sick at work’, reveals that 40% of Australian workers typically feel stressed out every day, with 12% experiencing extreme stress (RUOK?atWork Survey 2011). Extreme work stress leads to suboptimal performance, and for some, depression or an anxiety disorder, or both (La Montagne & Sanderson 2010). A recent report, ‘Sick at work’, reveals that 40% of Australian workers typically feel stressed out every day, with 12% experiencing extreme stress (RUOK?atWork Survey 2011). Extreme work stress leads to suboptimal performance, and for some, depression or an anxiety disorder, or both (La Montagne & Sanderson 2010).

Having carefully weighed up the evidence, I believe that five things are critical to having a robust work culture that thrives.

1. **‘We’ trumps ‘me’**
   
   Ideas workers are motivated by purpose. Knowing how their work contributes to the greater good is essential for an energised workforce. Leaders who can communicate their mission in a compelling way will increase their employee's energy levels. No, I’m not talking about ‘Our mission is to maximise shareholder value’ but something that lets everyone know your raison d’être, for example, Ramsay Healthcare’s (RHC) ‘People caring for people’.

   Most organisations have these statements framed on the wall, but in my experience, it is quite rare for leaders to consistently ‘walk the talk’. If it is done consistently well it will pay dividends. In the last 10 years, RHC have returned 2500% to shareholders versus 147% for the Australian Stock Exchange (Ramsay Healthcare n.d.). Only 27% of highly stressed employees in the RUOK?atWork Survey agreed with ‘my organisational purpose energises me’ compared to 66% of employees with low levels of stress.

   *Can your employees clearly define the purpose of your organisation? Does it excite them?*

2. **Acknowledge progress and setbacks**
   
   In the *Progress Principle*, researchers Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer interviewed over 12,000 employees, in particular knowledge workers and members of project teams, to discover what motivates them. Respondents said employee recognition is the least effective way to motivate them. Yet, 95% of managers surveyed said they believed employee recognition was the most important way to motivate employees. In their research, the authors conducted an analysis of daily diaries kept by teammates on a variety of projects. Their conclusion is clear: what motivates people on a day-to-day basis is the belief that they are making progress – successful steps forward to achieve a goal (Amabile & Kramer 2011).

   So, as a leader, what specifically can you do to motivate your team members by supporting their progress? It is not hard to see where coaching fits in here. However, the above authors go on to highlight a couple of interesting areas on which to focus introducing the concepts of Catalysists and Nourishers, Inhibitors and Toxins (Amabile & Kramer 2011). It is also essential that supervisors learn to identify and develop employee’s strengths and utilise these to coach and mentor. Mastering the art of asking ‘Are you OK?’ is essential to stop little problems turning into big ones.

   *Do your leaders regularly acknowledge progress?*

3. **Encourage physical wellbeing**
   
   In the recent RUOK?atWork Survey, only 42% of highly stressed employees said their employer encouraged physical wellbeing compared with 73% of low stress employees (RUOK?atWork Survey 2011). Physical wellbeing can be encouraged by arranging walking or standing meetings, enrolling employees in the Global Corporate Challenge, having flexible work arrangements...
that allow time for exercise, and gym subsidies. Other elements of wellbeing include knowing and practising how to relax. Interestingly, when we asked employees what were the most effective strategies for reducing harmful stress ‘doing more exercise’ rated second after ‘speaking to someone at work’. All other strategies nominated were very expensive for a business, such as ‘take days off’ and ‘look for a new job’.

How does your organisation encourage wellbeing?

4. Focus on outputs not inputs
Despite extensive research in Daniel Pink’s book, DRIVE: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us, making it clear that autonomy and mastery motivates employees, many employers still operate with ‘industrial age’ thinking. For example, most legal firms operate on the billable hour method, where employees are asked to account for every six-minute interval. They are evaluated by how many hours they bill, rather than on results delivered. I do not think it is unrelated that lawyers have the highest levels of depression, substance abuse, and anxiety levels of any profession. This mastery factor obviously has massive implications for the systems and processes that are utilised by organisations.

Do your rewards and processes encourage or inhibit autonomy and mastery?

5. Invest your time wisely
In 2011 Jennifer Aaker, Melanie Rudd and Cassie Mogilner from Stanford University published a paper titled ‘If money doesn’t make you happy, consider time’, in which they discuss how happiness is indeed a consequence of the choices people make. So what can people do to increase their happiness? Their answer is surprisingly simple: invest your time wisely. Although happiness is clearly relevant for individuals, businesses should also pay attention. Building a workforce of highly qualified, hard-working, and loyal employees is an essential aspect of staying competitive in today’s global markets. Therefore, being concerned about employee happiness is not just a moral thing to do, but it makes smart business sense as well. They conclude that the activities that generate the greatest wellbeing are spending time with people you like, working on projects that energise you (these usually allow you to use your strengths), enjoying experiences without actually doing them; focusing on the here and now (Aaker, Rudd & Mogilner 2011).

Do your leaders allow people to use their strengths and manage their weaknesses?

References
RUOK?atWork Survey (2011). Full results can be downloaded from: http://www.box.net/shared/1dr2f08xhd2kalizpv

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