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Do you know your impact on your organisation's culture?

You have a team member who has behaved unethically, and you decide to end their employment as a result. If your people think you made that decision because the person was behaving unethically, it is likely to have a significantly positive impact on your organisation's culture. If they think it's because you didn't like the person, it is likely to have a significantly negative impact on your organisation's culture.

Everything you say and do and every decision you make is constantly being interpreted by your people (no pressure). What you do and say matters hugely of course, but how they interpret it matters far more because they'll act upon their interpretation, not your intention. If you don't know how they're interpreting what you say and do, how can you know what impact you're having on your culture?

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This is not a matter of self-awareness. You might have had years of 360 degree feedback, leadership development courses and coaching and have a very clear idea of the way your personal style impacts others. You might be working diligently on course-correcting your most challenging behaviours and building on your most helpful ones. But even if you did a 360 every six months, it won't tell you how your people have interpreted what you've said and what decisions you've made during that period. Not even an engagement survey will tell you that, because those surveys never ask your people questions like: When the boss sacked person x, why did you think that was? What did you think of that decision? Why?

Imagine how lovely it would be to have someone tell you every quarter: When you did x, your people thought y. That way, if their interpretation was different from your intention, you have some choices. You can choose to let sleeping dogs lie and leave the misinterpretation as it is - it will inform your next decision. You can choose to authentically explain why you made the decision you made back then in the hope they'll understand your intention and believe it. Or you can choose to change your decision and explain why you're doing so. It will obviously depend on the original reason for the decision and the situation you're in at the time. But if you don't know what they thought, you are simply flying blind, crossing your fingers that they know what you intended and are giving you the benefit of the doubt.

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And unfortunately, just having told your people why you were making a decision at the time doesn't mean they'll believe what is said. It's not only a matter of trust, it's also a matter of context. A wise ex-colleague of mine from my marketing days, Peter Cudlipp, was fond of saying: "If you want someone to think you're funny, you don't tell them you're funny, you tell them a joke." His point was that your people have brains that interpret what you say and decide what they think about it, which means your intended message is often not the same as their interpreted message. Marketers have long since wished that they could simply inject their intended messages directly into the thoughts of their target audiences, but sadly (or happily), there's a person's brain in between. And obviously if they received some version of the message that your recently departed team member left 'to spend more time with his or her family', they didn't believe that. Does anyone? That's the equivalent of saying "I'm funny" and expecting them to believe it.

"If you want someone to think you're funny, you don't tell them you're funny, you tell them a joke. They decide if you're funny."

After many years of gathering employee feedback, running engagement surveys and qualitative and quantitative market research, I think the best way to gather this kind of feedback is through some form of regular - perhaps quarterly - informal focus groups, and, ideally, with someone running them who is not part of your organisation's 'system'. That helps participants to believe that the moderator has no agenda other than to take the accurate pulse of sentiment so they'll be more likely to speak frankly about what they think. And an outsider will have less to lose if they need to give difficult feedback to senior leaders.

Although an outsider is usually the best option, in certain cultures a trusted internal advisor can be just as effective. What matters most is making sure you gather the feedback and making sure the senior leaders get to hear it - in as unvarnished a condition as possible.

Without it, your impact on the culture of your organisation is a constant coin-toss. You can't be deliberate about the culture you want to create and you can't ensure you're nudging it in the right direction to support the execution of your strategy.



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