
Building Community In The Workplace— How To Build It? & Leadership Lessons

Bill Campbell, Former Chairman, Intuit, stressed building communities in the workplace. And he also coached leaders in achieving that.

The research also shows that communities were a critical factor in building a sustainable business.



Shield Wall — Image Source:: Ancient-origins.net

DaVita's CEO Kent J Thiry says, *“Building a community is our organization's first priority. The company comes second. Our employees spend more than 50% of waking hours as an adult in the workplace. The workplace has become central to the employee's life mission. So, it is important that he could make emotional connections in his workplace. It impacts the work positively.”*

The BIG QUESTION — Do Humans Need To Be Part Of A Community? — We are social animals, and our evolutionary history shows that surviving in the immense diversity of habitats depended on culturally transmitted knowledge, abilities, and skills. It means that to ensure the survival of our genes, our ancestors had to be part of a community, working together for the common good. So, by nature, we need to be part of a group.

What is Workplace Community? — Workplace Community is a group or a team of individuals where there is high trust, effective

communication, equality, respect for differences, caring, support, and high levels of cooperation to achieve a greater purpose.

In the workplace, teams might have strong-willed, smart people with ambitious goals and large egos, often competing with each other for career advancement. Yet it is necessary to lure them into the community and inspire them to work for a shared, bigger goal—From the book ‘Trillion Dollar Coach’.

Workplace Community Benefits —

The studies show that-

- As a community, the quality & quantity of work output is more than the sum of individual yields.
- Being part of a community, people will care for each other’s work and well-being. Caring translates into mental, physical, and emotional support for an employee, encouraging him/her to remain faithful to himself/herself without faking his/her behaviour—An authentic self. As a result, employees face less stress at the workplace, ending in higher engagement at work, greater productivity, enhanced creativity, and happiness.
- Employees enjoy personal and professional growth, enticing them to remain loyal to the company.
- The involvement of multi-disciplinary people in the decision-making process leads to efficient and meaningful choices/decisions. The company could handle complex challenges. *Feeling part of a team motivates people to take on difficult challenges.*
- As employees are involved in the decision-making process, they have shown higher commitment & involvement in executing the decisions. They also happily took responsibility for the outcomes.
- Communities also improved communication among the employees, enabling a company to get things done faster.

Having a close friend at work can be the difference between a disengaged or highly engaged employee.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

Now, the challenging part—How to build a community in the workplace?

It starts with the leader.

The leader has to create a conducive environment that would encourage employees to form a shared community—An ecosystem that promotes trust, engagement, and collaboration among individuals.

How to build such an ecosystem or environment? What critical factors should a leader consider?

CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT — PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

For building a community, people need a fearless environment. It would empower people to freely air their opinions, ideas, concerns, or criticisms without fearing any repercussions or punishments, or

humiliations. A leader should strive hard to create such an environment.

A leader has to create an environment where people need not worry about protecting their image but focus on doing great work -Ray Dalio.

Dr Amy Edmondson says, “The fearless organization is one where interpersonal fear is minimised, allowing a freer flow of knowledge. It’s an environment where a person feels able to express their views on something openly and honestly without fear of recrimination, abuse, putdown or humiliation.” She calls such an environment as Psychologically Safer Place.

It is a fact that the environment plays a critical role in a person’s behaviour.

So, a leader needs to set safeguards in the workplace to create a psychologically safe environment for employees.

Let’s see some of those critical factors.

BE A COACH

The first step for a leader is to relinquish control and become a facilitator, letting employees take the reins in establishing communities. In Bill Campbell’s words, it means that a leader has to act as a sports team coach. He/she has to be an assessor, friend, facilitator, chauffeur, demonstrator, advisor, supporter, fact finder, motivator, counsellor, and fountain of all knowledge. Like a coach, the leader has to let the employees decide the team, roles, strategy, play, and on-field decisions. *His/her job is to host the gathering, help in people’s interaction/engagement among themselves, smooth out any visible tensions, and nudge them to make suitable decisions around a shared common vision and set of goals.*

CARING

“Caring for each other” is a critical factor in building a community. The leader should take the initiative. He/she has to care for his/her people. Soon, following him/her, employees would start caring for each other.

Through caring, employees would begin to enjoy each other’s company both inside and outside of work.

In a caring environment, people don’t fear opening up and to share their ideas, opinions, and thoughts. It would also help innovation to explode.

Let employees know that the company cares about their well-being.

MUTUAL RESPECT

The first step to care for people is to respect everyone. Every leader and his employees should believe that people want to do a great job, irrespective of job titles & hierarchies. They should also firmly believe that every other individual in the organization is inherently valuable. So, everyone deserves respect.

How the leader respects and values people working in the lower-level jobs, defines the expanse of Culture of Respect inside an organization.

Sam Walton considered people working in his stores/warehouses as partners and called them 'associates' rather than employees.

A survey conducted by Georgetown University revealed that most workers ranked respect as the most influential leadership behaviour in building trust. The employees added that they enjoyed the work when they feel respected in the workplace.

The people inside the organization should see each other as PEERS.

TRANSPARENCY

Creating a psychologically safe environment involves practising candour at all levels, all the time. It means that a leader has to build an ecosystem that allows people to be more honest and open to sharing every information. *Build transparency into the organizational culture.*

Transparency has to start with the leader. He/she has to share all the business information with every employee — purchases, stocks, revenues, profits, inventory, plans, strategies, decisions, and other essential data. He/she should also share what he/she feels about an individual. It would encourage others to do the same.

The more comprehensive the information available in the community pool, the better the knowledge about the constraints, opportunities, personalities, and the more valuable the ideas and relationships.

Transparency has to be practised by employees at every level inside an organization.

- Transparency in meetings would bring all the hidden problems, information, and insights from the work environment to the surface.
- Transparency bars managers from showing favouritism to anyone. As every essential data was available for others to see, managers are forced by the system to show

fairness to every idea/person. It is a *critical factor in building a community*.

- Transparency ensures honest feedback about personal shortcomings. It results in improved self-awareness. The more we are aware of our own biases, mistakes, abilities, emotional states, the more we could evolve our relationships with others. We also would have a clearer picture of others' behaviour, interests, desires, needs, and other details. *We would know what to expect of others*. This kind of certainty is essential in building trust between people. *Trust leads to enduring relationships*.

Transparency forces people to exhibit only a single identity inside/outside the organization.

FOCUS ON CONTENT, NOT PEOPLE

At Pixar, in movie concept review meetings, Ed Catmull made sure that participants will only discuss the story and not on any personal agenda. No one is allowed to ridicule anyone for his/her idea. The people who would share their feedback on the concept earned no credits or rewards or favours from their supervisors.

Ray Dalio, CEO of Bridgewater Inc., says, *“In our company, on hearing any information or idea, the first thought an employee would get was to ponder about the accuracy of the information.”* It is a way to separate the content and the person.

Don't let people ridicule or laugh at or punish or ignore somebody for their actions and ideas in the workplace environment.

QUESTIONING

Create a culture of open-mindedness by encouraging employees to learn by asking questions. Only by asking questions and listening, the person could understand the reasons behind another person's perspective/thoughts/actions — it would help him/her to think from other's shoes.

Leaders should inspire every employee, irrespective of his/her hierarchy/job title, to challenge thoughts, traditions, decisions inside the organization without fear.

Ted Thomas writes, “A questioning culture is determined by the type of questions the leader asks and by the freedom with which their subordinates can ask questions to their leaders.”

Questioning improves curiosity — Curiosity leads to knowledge — Knowledge leads to broadening of mind — Open-Mindedness helps us to feel psychologically safer.

When we feel safe, we become more open-minded, resilient, motivated,

and persistent. It is a positive self-fulfilling cycle.

DON'T CONDEMN FAILURES

While growing a business, failures are inevitable inside the organization. So, a leader has to help people learn from their failures and leverage it. He/she has to guide them to find ways to prevent them in the future.

If a leader punishes a person for his/her failure, then it would encourage other employees to hide their setbacks and lead to the proliferation of dishonest culture. It would further paralyze the ability of employees to learn from failures and grow.

So, a leader has to create an environment where an individual would be happy to acknowledge his/her failures frankly and openly. It would encourage other employees to take risks. In that way, innovation would explode inside the organization.

REWARD EFFORTS, NOT RESULTS

In the 1970s, Jack Welch was working as a General Manager at GE. One of his teams developed a Harlac light bulb that lasted ten times longer than the typical light bulbs at a fraction of energy but expensive to buy. Unfortunately, consumers did not pick up the light bulb, and the project failed. GE lost more than \$50 million. Jack Welch didn't punish those involved in the 'Harlac' project but celebrated their great 'efforts' by handing out cash awards and promoted several of them to new jobs. This act fostered the thought that taking risks is encouraged, and failing is not bad in GE—a positive step in building a fearless culture.

Jack writes that it would be extremely demotivating to those "Harlac" team members if they didn't get recognition for their extra effort and at the same time, they had to witness their lesser competent colleagues receiving both cash awards and promotion.

Jack feels that leaders must focus more on the *effort* of employees than on just their *results*.

ADMITTING MISTAKES

It's natural for humans to make mistakes. The leader has to show that there's nothing to feel bad about mistakes as they provide an opportunity to grow in one's career. As usual, the leader has to set the tone by admitting his own mistakes and weaknesses publicly. His/her

behaviour should reinforce that errors are a natural part of the evolutionary process.

If leaders can openly talk about their mistakes, then the workplace environment will become safe for others to open up.

Ed Catmull says, “It’s futile to run from mistakes or pretend it doesn’t exist. This is why I make it a point of being open about our failures inside Pixar because they teach us something important: being open about problems is the first step toward learning from them.”

SHARING BAD NEWS IS NOT A PROBLEM

Robert J Bies writes, “The empirical evidence suggests that bad events have more enduring and more intense consequences than good events.”

Robert also adds —

- Bad events wear off more slowly than good events,
- the affective consequences of negative information are stronger than those for good information,
- people overestimate the effects events will have on them, and that effect is stronger for negative events than for positive events.

Bad events in close relationships are five times as powerful as good events.

Fortunately, the above information also presents us with an opportunity to create a community with minimal effort. How a leader reacts to bad events/news than to a good event can have profound implications in building a community. It would set the behaviour pattern and confidence levels for his/her employees. The leader must take initiatives to dispel some of the concerns like blaming people or targeting messengers.

Encourage the sharing of both good news and bad news equally.

Transparency inside an organization would reduce the impact of bad news as people would be aware of the impending event.

AUTONOMY

Stephen Schwarzman, CEO of Blackstone, says, “Brilliant people do not like to work at a place where they have tight controls. There is no dignity if there is no autonomy”.

Blossom Yen-Ju Lin, Yung-Kai Lin, Cheng-Chieh Lin, and Tien-Tse Lin

writes in their article, “Job autonomy can be defined as ‘a practice, or set of practices involving the delegation of the responsibility down the hierarchy so as to give employees increased decision-making authority in respect to the execution of their primary work tasks.’” They also add that empirical studies have shown that job autonomy is positively related to job involvement, satisfaction, general health and well-being and employees’ motivational and meta-cognitive learning processes.

The leaders need to provide sufficient autonomy so that the employees could think that they are valued and have self-worth. The employees should feel that they have plenty of freedom to use their talents. The leader should also allow unlimited access to information, support, resources, and growth opportunities that directly affect employees’ autonomy.

Autonomy encourages employees to take risks. It stimulates creativity and invigorates experimentation.

Stephen Schwarzman says that incredible people like to be in charge of their destiny and would like to have ownership of their growth. A leader has to help them in their pursuit of growth.

ENTREPRENEURIAL MIND

To build and sustain a community, leadership should encourage employees to think like entrepreneurs. *The entrepreneurial mind makes employees fearless.* Allow an employee to decide on continuing the new idea if he/she believed in it, even though the leadership team was against it. Empower them to find the resources inside or outside the organization without breaking any crucial practices. Don’t punish them even if the project fails unexpectedly. Encourage passion. It is a way to nurture autonomy and independent thinking.

IT’S NOT ABOUT COMPANY, BUT EMPLOYEES

As a leader, he/she should think everything from employees’ perspective and also for the welfare of them. It’s not only the leader, but every employee should do the same. *Think about what’s right for the employees.*

It also has additional benefits— Since the focus would be on the company or other employees and not himself/herself, an employee would have less pressure while opening up in the meetings or sharing

his/her ideas/thoughts/opinions. He/she could express them without fear.

DaVita's CEO Kent J Thiry says, *"If we are a community, act as a community, why can't we call ourselves a 'Village'?. If we need to make any decisions, we would think from the perspective of the Villagers. How a village mayor take a decision? For the welfare of the villagers? We too do the same. Every decision centres around the welfare of our employees."*

Bill Campbell writes, "A leader should always think about everything from his people/employee's perspective. Planning to make a decision— Think about how it would affect employees? Check whether the decision would maximize the opportunities for an employee to grow and achieve his/her goals."

Challenge your people to focus on us & we, instead of me and mine.

PEER-TO-PEER RECOGNITION

When a person feels valued by other members, he/she will remain loyal to the group.

As a leader, how do you bring people around and help them flourish in your environment? It's not by being a dictator. It's not by telling them what the hell to do. It's making sure that they feel valued by being in the room with you. - Trillion Dollar Coach.

How to make an employee feel valued?— One of the methods is to provide them with the recognition and appreciation they deserve. It could take many forms. The research shows that recognition and appreciation should go beyond economic value to make a person loyal to the company.

Value Through Peers— Several companies have relied on Peer-To-Peer recognition to make an employee feel valued. They have created a system that allows employees to show appreciation and gratitude for each other's work in a public setting. It is a system that empowers workers to voluntarily recognize a colleague's activities that offer benefits to the company/people.

Research also shows that the peer-to-peer recognition model not only improves the financial position of a business but also other workplace factors like employee welfare, motivation, stress management, and

collaboration. *Peer-to-peer recognition vastly improves employee relationships by exploiting the 'Reciprocity Principle' of psychology.*

Southwest Airlines — One of the reasons why employees love working for Southwest Airlines is 'The Culture Of Appreciation'. Southwest team love to recognize and award every employee who goes out of their way to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others. The company has a program called Kick Tails. It is "a stand-alone dual-purpose recognition and incentive program designed to encourage employees to demonstrate appreciation to one another." Any Southwest employee can give an unlimited number of 'Kick Tails' to any other employee as a way to say thanks for the job well done. Each Kick Tail has a chance to enter a monthly lottery system to gain SWAG points that could be redeemed by the person for various prizes.

The 'Kick-Tail' program is more about appreciating colleagues and thanking them.

Zappos — Zappos also has a similar program where the employees give each other "Zollars" to reward the other employee for his performance, help, or any other support activities. An employee could redeem the "Zollars" for various gifts.

Julianna Young, a Zappos employee, writes, "*Not only does this allow employees to reward one another, but it provides one more incentive for your coworkers to be their best. They never know who may be watching and ready to reward them with some "company cash."*

ADD FUN AND LITTLE CRAZINESS

To allow people to bond with each other, they need to meet colleagues often in a fun/informal environment. A leader has to find a way to add fun and little weirdness in the company's culture. *Being formal all the time seems to be boring and uncreative.*

Zappos — One of Zappos' core values is 'Create Fun and Little Weirdness'. Zappos motivates people to create funny situations in everyday work and laugh at themselves. The company encourages employees to do things differently, in a little unconventional way so that the employees could think outside the box and be creative.

Zappos CEO says that 'fun and weirdness' makes employees more

engaged with the work, and the company as a whole becomes innovative. It builds spirit, breaks down barriers among employees, and improves communication. It helps in creating the community.

Fun At Walmart— Once Sam Walton (Walmart's founder) wore a grass court and did a hula dance on wall street after losing a bet with one of his colleagues. One of the senior managers had to wrestle a bear after losing a challenge with his crew regarding sales projections. Another time, the Vice-president of the company had to come dressed in pink tights and a long blonde wig and ride a white horse around the town square.

Once Wal-mart's president was made to wear a crazy dress and ride a donkey around the store's parking lot. One of the executives had asked even customers to play hide and seek to collect mystery prizes. There was a 'Kiss-the-pig' contest to raise money for charity. The manager who ended up with the most donations had to kiss a pig. There was a costume competition, fashion shows using senior people. There's the world championship of the 'Moon Pie Eating' contest.

Wal-mart's culture encourages employees to think up all sorts of crazy ideas that break the mould and fight monotony.

METHOD— The company Method also has several programs to encourage fun in the workplace. There is a day of Food-fight, a day of showing a weird moustache design, a day of crazy costumes, a day of Ping-Pong competition. The employees have their freedom to modify the interior of their place and make it weird.

LAYOFFS/FIRINGS

Bill Campbell says, "Letting people go is a failure of management, not one of any of the people who are being let go." So, it is important for management to let people leave with their heads held high. Treat them well, with respect. Be generous with a severance package. Send out a note internally celebrating their accomplishments.

Ben Horowitz says, "Treating the departing people well is important for the morale and well being of the remaining team." He further adds, "Many of the people whom you lay off will have closer relationships with the people who stay than you do, so treat them with the appropriate level of respect. Still, the company must move forward, so be careful not to

apologize too much.”

Research also confirms that people who stay back follow who's doing the layoffs and how good an explanation laid-off employees get.

Layoffs impacts both the laid-off people and the people who stay on with the company.

CONCLUSION

To build a community in the workplace, a leader has to set the tone. He/she has to show respect and care for everyone. He/she has to create an environment where people can feel secure, trust each other, get support & encouragement, can connect, and collaborate for a greater future goal.

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