

Paper Cup Leadership Theory



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Paper Cup Leadership Theory:

*For any leadership style to be effective,
everyone needs to be on the same Corporate Culture page.*

Imagine for a moment that you are an hourly worker in an automotive parts factory. In the middle of the factory floor there is a discarded coffee cup. As the operator of a press, you are required to remain at your station for 8 hours, giving you the perfect vantage point to watch the true identity of your company culture unfold. For 8 hours you watch as your manager walks past the discarded coffee cup countless times without picking it up and throwing it into the garbage (which was only a few feet away).

As your shift comes to an end, the next shift manager does a walkthrough of the department and without missing a beat, walks over to the cup, picks it up and throws it in the garbage. Upon witnessing this act, you make very clear assumptions about the people leading your company. The coffee cup has become the perfect metaphor for the company's organizational culture reflected by the varying leadership style of both managers.

The first manager saw the coffee cup as empty, someone else's garbage and someone else's problem to clean up. The second manager saw the coffee cup as full, filled with the opportunity to lead by example and demonstrate how we can all do our part to keep the plant clean by chipping in. There is no right or wrong to this story, just the simple observation that both leaders, left to their own imagination, can equally affect corporate culture in their own way, even when they think no one is watching.

In absence of a clear corporate cultural identity, leaders can lead you anywhere they want to go. Cultures are defined by communities of people who have a shared set of common values and beliefs, which become the north star of their desired identity. The role of an effective leader is to have the autonomy to think independently, while acting consistently to reinforce and develop the desired corporate cultural identity.

1. Problem Statement: The old social contract between workers and employers is broken. The missing piece in most modern organizations is a shared clear corporate cultural identity. Today's leaders need to be intentional about developing a personal identity that reinforces the corporate cultural or run the risk of negatively impacting cultural identity without even realizing it. Unintentional leaders run the risk of creating a ripple effect that can erode trust, undermine respect and create disparity that negativity drives fear, suspicion and stunts organizational growth.

- **Who** the problem affects: The company and its customers at large
- **What** the problem is: No clear corporate cultural identity
- **Where** the problem occurs: In silo communities within organizations
- **When** the problem occurs: When multiple versions of corporate cultures exist
- **Why** is it essential to solve the problem: Because it takes 5 positive actions to counteract 1 negative action and at the speed of disruption in today's economy, leaders don't have the luxury of 5 do-overs to counteract every unintentional leadership mistake they make.

2. Hypothesis: If you don't clearly know what your corporate cultural identity is, then neither does anyone else. If organizations can create a shared corporate cultural identity that all employees can agree to, then leaders can intentionally lead by reinforcing the corporate cultural norm, which will spill over to employees, empowering them to create better work and customer experiences.

3. Proving the Hypothesis: The power of a unified corporate cultural identity:

As a high school rowing coach, I had the privilege and honor of coaching for the St. Catharines Rowing Club on one of the most historic and epic rowing courses in the world. A common problem on Henley Island is that plastic water bottles from athletes fall out of the rowing shells at the dock and remain in the water or on shore by the hundreds. In the moment when you are carrying a rowing shell over your head, you can't let go of the boat to pick up your bottle and when it hits the ground, it usually stays there. As a rowing coach and leader, I picked up the water bottles and put them in the garbage every day, thereby casting a vote in my own mind for my own personal identity. I believed that leading by example would inspire the rowers and other coaches to follow my lead and pitch in. They did not. The other coaches and athletes just saw me as the rowing coach who liked picking up other people's garbage. You don't want to be known as the leader who is constantly cleaning up someone else's mess.

The problem isn't the discarded water bottles. The problem is the mixed cultural identities within the club. The club's leadership placed a higher value on the identity of winning over the identity of being a world class organization at every level. Like many large decentralized organizations, verbal and non-verbal communication from leadership (coaches) can be highly individual and self-serving, where mixed messages can lead to confusion, a lack of engagement and lost opportunity. The cultural identity of the club should have been to hold everyone accountable to world class behavior both on and off the water which makes the whole organization stronger. This concept of shared cultural identity helps all boats rise with the tide.

4. The Solution: Draft a Corporate Culture Identity Code that everyone can agree to and then implement daily leadership behavior that reinforces the type of corporate culture you aspire to achieve.

5. Reach out to your Tribe: Sit down with your employees to draft a Corporate Cultural Identity Code. What does it mean to work for your company? What does it mean to represent your company? What is the expectation from co-workers, customers and others in the local community? What is your company known for? What is the Corporate Cultural Identity Code that every employee can agree to? Once you have your Corporate Cultural Identity Code completed, get every employee to agree to the Corporate Cultural Identity Code in the same way that they would agree to a code of conduct and post your new Corporate Cultural Identity Code where everyone, including your customers can see it, holding everyone accountable to each other.

6. Reflect, Refine, Repeat: Creating a Corporate Cultural Identity Code is an iterative process that takes time to in the beginning to develop and years of consistent behavior to establish. Your goal now as both a leader and member of the employee community is to strive to be 1% better every day at being consistent with the identity you aspire to achieve as a community. The boat goes faster when everyone's oars are pulling together in time and pulling in the same direction.