L E A D I N G   C H A N G E

Is Your Team Too Happy?

BY **STEVE SIMPSON** CSP

One of the best indicators of a productive team is whether or not the team is happy—right? In my view, this is dead wrong!

A few years ago I was invited to develop and run a weekend leadership program for senior staff in one organisation. It went so well I was invited to run the program for three subsequent years.

During each of the programs and in the weeks that followed, I had some nagging concerns. At the time I couldn't put my finger on it, other than thinking the program had gone too well! It was almost as though this group of people got on too well. Disagreement was a rare event, and people just seemed to get on. I got the sense during discussions that people were mouthing what they thought were the 'right' answers (however they perceived that!) rather than sharing what they *really* thought.

It was only on reflection well after these events were completed that I think I got some insights into what was really happening—and I think this may happen in many organisations.

Many readers of this article will be aware of the concept of UGRs® (unwritten ground rules) that I have developed over the past few years. UGRs drive people's behaviour yet paradoxically, they are rarely if ever talked about openly.

In the context of the organisation for which I developed these leadership programmes, I think the following could have been a prevailing UGR:

Around here, people who have anything negative to say are trying to ruin our positive group dynamics, and are therefore to be frowned upon.

Two Worrying Signs

Sadly, most of us have experienced negative cultures. In these contexts, the impact on productivity is patently obvious. People work to rule, find ways not to carry out management requests, subvert change initiatives and work with one another to nourish and sustain the negative culture.

This kind of negative culture is a productivity warning sign that is fairly easy to spot!

A productivity issue that is much more difficult to identify however, is a team that is too happy! In these contexts, people create a façade of happiness and cooperation that is counterproductive. In these situations, people's thinking is not stretched and options are not considered for fear of upsetting others. The driving force here is group cohesion, at the expense of critical thinking.

In 1992, Edgar Shein, a respected and prolific author on organisational behaviour said "there is a possibility under emphasised in the leadership research, that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture".

Edgar Shein's wisdom risks being misinterpreted—to the point where leaders think that managing their culture is a matter of choice.

Nothing could be further from the truth. You cannot *not* manage your culture. If you as a leader are not consciously managing your culture, then you are simply managing your culture badly!

Time for a 'stock take'

If you haven't already done it, start sensitising yourself to the 'talk' that happens in your organisation and the accompanying body language. Do people feel free to disagree? In cases where there is disagreement, do you get the sense that people are disagreeing for internal political reasons (ie…to gain some political points)—or is it well intended and constructive? Do people stay silent at meetings only to privately complain immediately after the meeting? Are bosses challenged?

Given hindsight and perhaps a little more wisdom, I would have designed and run the leadership programmes quite differently.

I would have created counter-views, debate and disagreement. I would have set up scenarios that required people to take a different point of view—not wildly unrealistic, but viable and realistic counter-views. Mid session, I would have required people to switch views and to argue from the opposite perspective. In other words, I would have created and encouraged diverse and non-conventional thinking.

If we as leaders are to manage our cultures well, we must do the same. If we are to believe the horde of futurist thinkers, we need to create cultures that reward innovative thinking—and that can only happen if we challenge conventional thinking. Paradoxically, the 'happy team' might not be the end game for leaders of successful organisations. We may well need to create disharmony!

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