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Engineering climate change in organisations

Managers need to take a weather check to see if their organisations have the right climate for optimum productivity and employee wellbeing

The climate of an organisation, 'what it feels like to work here, has a significant impact on the quality and quantity of the work that gets done. It also affects the happiness and wellbeing of employees.

People are social creatures who achieve things by working together. We have evolved attributes which enable us to co-operate, and to contribute varying talents and experience to a common task. At the same time we have also come to depend on our social context to meet a variety of needs, including: Developing relationships with people who value us; security; challenging activities (within the limits of our own individual comfort level); control over our own lives; the belief that what we are doing has purpose and value.

If our social interactions let us down we feel uncomfortable, insecure, stressed and unhappy, and we can't make our full contribution or achieve our full potential.

Modern lifestyles, or workstyles, have tended to separate work into an isolated compartment of our lives and, very often, into a special 'work' location. This is quite a recent development in the history of mankind. But the needs don't go away, especially since we spend a high proportion of our time at work.

Our subjective impressions of how well our work environment seems to provide for these deep-seated psychological needs determine the organisation's climate, which is distinct from culture. Culture is often summed up as 'the way we do things round here' or the 'organisation's personality.

Like human personality, it develops and changes slowly and to a large extent uncontrollably. Climate has a more personal, individual orientation, and it responds - often very quickly - to the behaviour of managers, for good or bad.

What does it matter? What's the impact on the bottom line of 'how it feels to work here'? Research evidence shows that it pays to improve the climate. There is a clear correlation between organisational climates perceived as favourable or benign by employees and positive performance outcomes.

To improve organisational climate, managers

need to act to reduce the negative influence of the perception of threat.

Threats fall into two broad categories. Firstly, purposive threats are consciously directed at people to make them do, or stop doing, something. They seldom have any lasting beneficial effect on output. After all, someone who threatens us is, by definition, an enemy; and few people would work enthusiastically to further an enemy's objectives. Even performance 'incentives' may be perceived as threats if people expect to receive them but know that they may be withheld if performance doesn't meet the criteria. Managers have a lot of control over purposive threats and can, if they wish, stop them altogether.

Secondly, environmental threats arise from natural events, from pressures in society, or from causes or policies determined remotely from the affected individuals. People often feel helpless in the face of such perceived threats, so that the most positive action managers can take is usually to try to give back some control, inform, consult and, where possible, protect their people.

The other significant factors are all positive, and the route to improved climate lies through boosting and reinforcing them wherever possible. Allow people to express their ideas freely and take notice of and value what they say; treat expressions of concern as positive inputs to the proper functioning of the organisation; encourage

people to question, especially decisions and policies determined by more senior people. Questioning shouldn't be seen as a challenge to authority. It helps clarify what managers are trying to achieve and can draw attention to risks and errors before they lead to serious consequences.

Ensure that people participate in defining their own goals and objectives. Try to make work intrinsically satisfying: real interest in and commitment to the task itself is far more motivating than rewards that you only get after the work's completed.

Finally, people have a need to try new things, and to test out new ways of doing things. If that need is denied expression it's likely to have adverse consequences for the individuals concerned, and on their performance.

If as managers we work to improve the positive climate factors, and to reduce or eliminate the negative ones, then we can expect not only to see improvements in performance, but also an improvement in the happiness and wellbeing of the people who work with us: a win-win outcome.

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