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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT CHEAT SHEET

How to start building a healthy company culture so that your organization thrives in today's fast and complex business environment.

INTRODUCTION

In moments of high stress or change, will we stand firm or crumble under pressure?



There's an ancient proverb you might have seen floating around the Internet that says, "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago; the second-best time to plant a tree is now."

It may seem counterintuitive, but there is no better time to restructure internally than when external conditions appear unfavorable. Still, I encourage you to take a step back and learn to see the hidden opportunities that are usually concealed by high-stress situations.

Before I share my perspective on culture building, a topic I am incredibly passionate about, let me start by acknowledging that this is a very stressful time and there's a lot of uncertainty and fear about the future. The adversity we face is being experienced globally and impacts both our personal lives and our businesses.

This is why I am more inclined to focus on a more optimistic perspective. One that enables us as individuals, teams, and companies to work together and focus on building healthy cultures, because when we have each other's backs, it's easier to weather storms.

INTRODUCTION

Why do you need to prioritize building a healthy company culture?

No matter what industry you're in, business today is faster and more complex than ever. This means the old rules of engagement and people management don't work the same as they used to.

In today's business landscape, companies with strong cultures survive high stress, crisis, and adversity better. They have more trust toward each other and work together for the greater good, creating the kind of atmosphere that leads to continued business growth and profitability.

MY DEFINITION OF CULTURE

To me, culture (derived from the Latin word *Cultus*, which means "to care") is simply this: "The prevailing mindset of your organization.

Mindset, not policy or training, is what determines the outcomes at your company.

An afternoon of training where all your employees are asked to sit through a generic "team-building" exercise—that is full of concepts they can't even relate to—will not build a lasting culture.

What *will* build a healthy culture is when you combine these types of training exercises and one-on-one mental and emotional training.

Why? Because, these inner game skills are the hardest traits for people to master.

WHERE TRUST COMES IN

We reward the employees who do their job really well (the 'high performers'). But we fail to notice that they might have low EQ skills and thus lack trust with their co-workers. This lack of trust is what contributes the most to an unhealthy culture.

I recently watched this **short video by Simon Sinek** where he talks about performance versus trust within a top Navy Seals team. He asked this highly respected team if they would want to have someone on their team that scores highly in performance and skill, and low in trust. Of course, a top Navy Seals team wants a high performer, but as it turns out, if they had to choose between performance or trust, they would pick trust as being the more important quality.

The same is true within your business. Process improvement and productivity are essential, but you can't lose sight of the value of trust.

Trust is more important than performance or productivity for a company to survive hard times.

LEARNING TO MANAGE CONFLICT

In this cheat sheet, you will learn:

1. How to develop what I call "the secret sauce" that helps create healthy cultures.
2. The kind of mindset and tools needed to empower you to become the kind of leader people want to follow.
3. How to have respectful confrontations and manage conflict in four simple steps.

BUILDING A HEALTHY COMPANY CULTURE

How do you develop your secret sauce?

According to Webster, corporate culture can be defined as “the set of shared attitudes, values, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.” Therefore, culture is not something your company is or a written statement that sits on the company website. Instead, culture is something you do.

RELENTLESSLY FOCUS ON YOUR PEOPLE

For a long time, business culture was solely focused on the bottom line. It might have been enough in the past to have a good, well-respected brand and to have sophisticated policies in place, but now people-culture is what makes or breaks a company.

Instead of being a corporate culture focused on the bottom line, businesses must become more invested and focused on people, communication, and interaction. This is a new game we’re playing, and as the years roll on, we’ll be seeing the rules of the game taking effect a lot more.

During my time in Victoria’s Secret as VP of Business Operations, I started to “feel” how broken the traditional system was. There was a pool for a different kind of internal environment, but few leaders (myself included) naturally knew what or how to make that shift. We were focused on business performance and not our management performance. Today, a key component of getting culture right in your company is this secret sauce: *Developing A High Degree of Connectivity.*

AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

When people aren’t authentically connected, the concept of culture remains precisely that. For a healthy culture to exist, it must be practiced across the board. It requires participation and integration of new communication skills, and behavioral change. As a leader, you can only foster this change by leveling up your leadership effectiveness and developing the skills to lead and govern yourself first.

Of course, this is easier said than done.

That’s why, before we get to the four steps of conflict management, I want to help you step into the kind of mindset that will make you better suited to develop a healthy culture.

“
Culture is
not something
you *are*;
it’s something
you *do*.”

BJ GRAY

BUILDING A HEALTHY COMPANY CULTURE

What mindset do *you* need to withstand high-stress times and facilitate a healthy company culture?

You need a mindset that isn't ruled by ego.

Sometimes, the hardest thing we can do as leaders is to take that first step and confront the hard truths.

For example, I want to point out that most of us operate with an inward mindset. During moments of conflict or high stress, there is evidence that our brains tend to default back to old patterns of thought and behavior. In most cases, this will cause us to react defensively, avoid true collaboration, and lack open-mindedness.

I'm not suggesting that we're not operating in good faith, but subconsciously we go inward when times get tough and these behaviors impair our ability to have a high degree of connectivity. This is why individual accountability becomes part of fixing the culture.

So, it's got to begin with your willingness to step back and really analyze where you are and where you want to be with your employees and team members.

Remember, it's not about being a perfect leader; it's about catching yourself and knowing how to acknowledge mistakes when they happen. For optimal outward mindset, you have to develop familiarity with self-awareness so you can have better situational awareness.

Now, are you willing to put in the practice that will enable you to lead your employees through challenging times?

If yes, let's move on to the four steps you can take to become more effective at having necessary difficult conversations, one of the key components of outward mindset.

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Success is hard if you can't learn to leave your ego at the door.

BJ GRAY

BUILDING A HEALTHY COMPANY CULTURE

The four steps of respectful confrontation that will support healthy culture.

As you start shifting your mindset to become more of a servant leader and facilitate mental and emotional intelligence among your people that will help build trust and open communication, you need tools to help you handle unpleasant situations. One powerful tool I use is the healthy confrontation technique. Feel free to borrow it and apply it within your circle of influence. Here are the four steps:

1. Set the stage for success.

Before you start a difficult conversation, identify an overarching objective and obstacles or power struggles that might get in your way.

2. Get curious and empathetic.

Learn to generate empathy about the other person's situation before you react. This is what I call moving from an "inward" to an "outward" approach when dealing with your team and peers.

3. Ask questions to engage in diplomatic dialogue.

The main thing here is to seek clarity. Through questions, you can avoid making assumptions, which often lead to misunderstandings and poor perception.

4. Practice the art of listening to directly influence the outcome.

Experts call this active listening. There's plenty of research out there that can help you identify the difference between active and passive listening.

A quick exercise you can start doing is to take notice of what's happening in your head whenever someone is talking to you. Are you busy planning what you're going to say to them or arguing with their idea, or are you sincerely listening attentively?

5. Take a moment for self-reflection.

After a difficult confrontation, it's important to step back, breathe, and do a self-analysis of your behavior. This enables you to understand what mindset is ruling your interactions with other people.

If you got defensive, think about why. Was conflict necessary, or is it your ego or poor judgment getting in the way?

A FINAL THOUGHT

There's never been a better time to set your company up for success.

Running a successful company is always going to be demanding and stressful, even more so when hard times hit. The more you and the organization can develop mental and emotional techniques that help foster and promote the right mindset, the easier it will be to establish a strong internal structure and build a healthy culture.

Leaders, teams, and employees will not only perform at their best, but also have the ability to communicate and resolve conflicts with more trust. The tool I have shared with you is one of many that you'll have to integrate into your own leadership skillset if you want to start building your healthy culture.



How can I help?

If you'd like to get more tools and resources or have a conversation with me around business operations, leadership, and culture building, I encourage you to drop me an email or give me a call.

And if you've got any feedback for me or want to share some of your insights after going through my cheat sheet, I'd love to hear from you as well.

Best,

BJ GRAY

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