

Leading Ways: LEADERSHIP WHEN CULTURES CLASH

Over the past couple years, many of the organizations I work with have gone through tectonic movements while making major strategic changes that almost always result in bringing two fairly different working cultures together. Whether this has been Medicaid agencies merging the physical and behavioral health programs or pharma companies adding informatics and AI and machine learning to more traditional drug discovery and development, it has led to major disruptions in traditional corporate cultures.

At their heart these moves have not been made to improve or change the culture per se; rather, these have been essential strategic moves. Merging health into a more holistic framework or using computational technology to produce drugs more effectively or provide better services to patients is a necessity in order to remain competitive and relevant.

When cultures of different worlds clash, leadership must create an environment in which the corresponding tensions are as productive and creative as possible. Here are some thoughts about leaders' roles at all levels of the organization.

1. At the top, the leadership team needs to make sure that the **vision of the direction is as clear and coherent** as possible. There are five questions to answer here:
 - a. Where are we headed?
 - b. How will we get there?
 - c. What will it look like when we arrive?
 - d. What is driving this change?
 - e. What is the upside?

It is quite OK for the answers to be in broad strokes at first, incorporating more specificity as the two cultures come together. In change work, the messages from leaders on these five questions must be consistent and repetitive, rather than continually creative and surprising. We are asking folks to give up the familiar and successful past and move to something unknown and dislocating. As such, they will need ongoing reinforcement and encouragement that this new direction is the smart thing to do.

2. Recognize the **value added from each side** of the merging cultures. From the top, communicate the value over and over. From practice and work, create opportunities for the two cultures to be successful together. When they are successful, celebrate and share it widely.
3. Related to this point, but worth a special call out is the need to **value action and work over theory or concept**. There are good strategic and conceptual reasons for moving cultures together. But truth will be found not in debates over the different cultures or the new one

emerging, but in the problem-focused activities of very able professionals from both cultures, working through problems to find new and creative answers.

4. When worlds collide, it can create anxiety on both sides, and this can lead to fear and then to judgment. Encourage everyone to **replace judgment with curiosity**. Why do you do it that way? How does this work? How would you think about this moving forward? How do you measure success?
5. Leaders down in the organization must **take these messages and interpret them** for their unit, department, team, and division, engaging their people in a dialogue of what this will mean for the work that they do now and in the future. Giving names to problems, principles and progress and encouraging communication will be an essential task of all leaders.
6. **Listening** is always important for leaders, but at all levels it will be paramount amid change. The listening must go beyond the immediate issue, see the bigger concerns, hear both the rational and the emotional side of what is being said, and be willing to sit with it, not immediately jumping to a conclusion or solution.
7. As cultures evolve the **structures inside of them must also change** to accommodate and reinforce the desired change. So, decision processes, team structure, promotion, training, evaluation, reward and values, and other working structures must also evolve to reflect the changes. It is rarely the case that these structures can lead the change. Rather, leaders must be open to changing core structures to reinforce the qualities that they see emerging.
8. When shifts of this significance occur it can leave a lot of power and resources up for grabs. The day-to-day experience can take on a **bit of a wild west land grab feel**. Leaders should be aware of this possibility and ensure that the moves for power are consistent with the direction and the culture they want to see come to life; otherwise, the process will become a shoot-out.

Work of this sort can be upsetting and alarming, but at its core it can also be exhilarating and transformational. Leadership at all levels needs to understand the nature of the challenge, use or develop the skills needed, and stay committed to the work through the tough times that will inevitably be a part of the process.