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The CEO's role in creating culture

Steven and Chutisa Bowman

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About the authors

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Culture is a term that is often used to describe the underlying working environment of an organisation, yet there is much mystique and misidentification of what actually makes up "culture" and how it is created. The culture of an organisation is routinely created from the verbal and nonverbal messages expressed by the CEO and leadership team about how people are expected to behave, what is important, what is valued, and what people have to do to fit in and be rewarded. Most organisational cultures, in our view, are formed unconsciously by the CEO and leadership team and habitually sustained by employees and stakeholders. In working with numerous organisations from a diverse range of industries, we observe that in most organisations the CEO and leadership team are often unaware of the messages they display and express. Our point of view is that culture is something that can be consciously influenced and crafted by the CEO.

The culture of an organisation powerfully shapes the identity and behavioral norms for the employees and stakeholders. It influences the employee's enthusiasm and impetus. The culture of an organisation can be either expanding energy or sapping energy, depending on whether it is conscious, unconscious or anti-conscious. A truly conscious organisation is one where the CEO chooses to embrace a culture of consciousness and aims to operate consciously across the broad spectrum of the business concerns – from strategic planning, to recruiting, to operating systems and processes, to developing the vision that guides the organisation. The conscious CEO creates a balanced integration of organisational vision, strategic and operational realities by encouraging and nurturing higher levels of conscious behaviour and attitude among staff and stakeholders.

The CEO is the single greatest potential influence on the organisational culture. The CEO can provide conscious and aware leadership and thus create a conscious culture of awareness and innovation, or can provide unconscious leadership and watch a series of subcultures be created around them, possibly without even being aware of them, or in fact can provide anti-conscious leadership and

create a culture of fear and blame.

The culture of an organisation that has a conscious CEO is characterized by a focus on integrity, trust, creativity, intuition, innovation, freedom, flexibility and generosity. The culture is one which searches to create conditions for cohesion, community spirit, and mutual accountability, and that recognizes the importance of strategic alliances with suppliers and customers. There is a shift from control to trust, fear to truth, privilege to equality, and fragmentation to unity. The conscious CEO knows what culture they want, and establishes the processes to ensure that the culture is implemented.

The culture created by an unconscious CEO is characterized by hierarchical power structures, a strong emphasis on quality and process, very busy being busy with a general unawareness of what is influencing decisions, actions and feelings related to the results, a general lack of creativity and an unwillingness to uncreate and destroy form and structure. One of the indicators of an unconscious CEO is when many subcultures have been created within the organisation.

The culture created by an anti-conscious CEO is typically autocratic, uncaring, fear driven with attempts to control everything. There is a general underlying fear of invalidation and reprisals, and a distinct lack of sharing of information. The culture is one of what is right or wrong, good or bad, and is typified by the "you are either with me or against me" point of view. This environment is a major incubator for the CEO Syndrome, where staff will only provide information they know the CEO is able to accept, and will go to great lengths to filter, manipulate or hide information they perceive will cause a reaction (see www.lifemastery.com.au/CEOSyndrome.html).

If you choose to be a conscious CEO, then how might you go about creating the culture you perceive is most expansive for your organisation? From experience we have found that leaders have a number of key responsibilities in developing a culture that can provide expansiveness to their organisation and people if applied consciously.

The Five Conscious CEO Practices for developing Culture :

1. Describe Your Desired Culture

This is not a group effort, rather an understanding by you of what you wish to create, consciously. As a CEO, first and foremost you must recognize and acknowledge what the culture is like now. Why is it the way it is and how you have allowed it to be that way? What impact is it having on your business performance? What is driving it to be that way? What is it going to take for it to change? Next, you need to be able to describe what kind of culture you want, and how does this connect to your business strategy and vision.

In describing the culture you wish to create, there are five key areas that you should consider that will facilitate a deeper understanding of this culture

- **Vision, values and strategy:** Take your organisation's Vision statement, and ask yourself, "What is the culture I wish to create that will drive the Vision of the organisation?" "What is the culture I wish to create that is in keeping with my values, and what I perceive to be the most expansive for my organisation?" Be aware of the strategic direction of your organisation, and again ask yourself the question "What is the culture I wish to create that will drive the strategic plan of the organisation?"
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Ask yourself "What messages do I want to put out regarding accountability and transparency?" "What disclosure will I provide regarding processes, procedures and assumptions?" "What am I willing to commit to?" We have found many instances where leadership has not held staff to account for clear performance outcomes, and standards are variable due to lack of individual accountability.
- **Internal Relationships:** Often sadly lacking in many organisations, what is the culture around internal relationships that you wish to create? Is it about silos, team work, do you want staff to treat other staff as if they were customers?
 - **External Relationships:** What type of relationships do you wish to facilitate with external parties?
- **Creative Edge and Innovation:** How much innovation do you wish your staff to show? How important is being at the creative edge to you and the organisation? We have worked with organisations where staff have taken a fixed point of view on how the world is in relation to customers, competitors and their job and therefore cannot see anything that does not fit these fixed points of view. They don't seem to connect the idea and the notion of innovation with their responsibilities and position.

2. Lead with Questions

A tool for you to begin to create your culture with awareness is to live in the question. Conscious leaders use questions to encourage full participation and teamwork, to inspire creativity and encourage outside-the-box thinking, to empower others and to solve problems resourcefully etc. When you learn to live in the question rather than being besieged by the problems or become vested in finding answers and solutions, you are able to create your culture more consciously.

CEOs, through asking questions, can cultivate a culture in which questions are welcomed, assumptions are investigated and new possibilities to solve problems are explored. Questions promote an inquisitive way of life in an organisation, and such inquisitive behaviors build an innovative climate, a culture of accountability and a truly conscious organisation.

3. Consciously Model the Way: mindset, behaviour, symbols and processes

As a CEO you will have to become a role model of what you would like the culture to be. This can be done by establishing **mindset, behaviour, symbols and processes** with regard to the way staff, stakeholders, and customers should be treated and the way business objectives should be pursued. Your behaviour and your decisions send a message to your staff about how people are expected to behave, which in turn sets the cultural standard for others to follow. To consciously model the way, continually ask the following questions...

- What mindset is guiding my actions as a leader? What mindset do I want my staff to adopt?
- What would it take for me, through my behaviour, to create an environment that promotes this culture?
- What would it take for me to create symbols that support this culture?
- What would it take for us to develop processes to support this culture?

4. Promote a Common Vision

Conscious leaders create and articulate vision and strategy, which can provide the cohesion that enables all people to, at the very least, understand why they are doing what they do. Conscious leaders share this information freely and articulate the vision of the organisation to those who have an interest in the organisation. Continually ask the following questions...

- Do I communicate my values and vision in the things I do, how I spend time, and what I consider important?
- What would it take for me to articulate a vision of the organisation when things are unpredictable?
- What would it take for me to share power and information and still maintain accountability?

5. Foster collaboration and build spirited teams

Conscious leaders actively involve others and empower staff and stakeholders to embrace infinite possibilities and function in a state of creative expansion that lets them go over their limits everyday.

Fostering collaboration and building spirited teams can be initiated by:

- Willingness to receive all points of view by welcoming and hearing all perspectives, without resisting or reacting.
- Supporting staff to envision that there is no limit to what they could create by facilitating change constantly and encourage staff to discover more expansive and innovative ways of doing things.

