

Is Behaviour Less Important Than You Think?

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Now don't get me wrong, no-one is more convinced than I am that senior leader behaviour makes the defining difference in organisational culture. But what if it's our reactions to the behaviour of others that makes even more of a difference?

Imagine being at an important meeting and having one of the critical executives leave early. This could be interpreted by some of the people in the room as “wow, he must be really busy if he needs to leave this meeting before the end – he must be very important and special”. It could be interpreted by others as “wow, that's extremely rude, he clearly doesn't understand how important this meeting is – he must be naive and unprofessional”. Same behaviour, different interpretation. In one case, the executive's status is seen to be increased by his behaviour and in the other, it is seen to be decreased. But neither interpretation has anything to do with his behaviour – how could it? He only did one thing.

It's far more likely that the interpretation of his behaviour has to do with the culture of the organisation he's part of. If being busy is routinely seen as a badge of honour in your organisation, if the number of 'back to back' meetings you have in your diary is a proxy for how important/intelligent you are, then people will issue and accept more meeting requests and that dynamic will be perpetuated. People will look at each other knowingly and say things like “I'm in back to back meetings for the next three days so I'll have to respond to your request at the end of next week”, shrug at how important they obviously are and never see how odd it looks to those who value having time to think. And they'll consistently leave important meetings early with decisions unmade and next steps unclear.

American psychologist and author Stephen M. Johnson PhD said, “Behaviours you exhibit will be copied. Behaviours you reward will be repeated. Behaviours you observe and do nothing about will be assumed to be condoned.”

These are words to live by if you want to change your culture.

Any behaviour that is seen to increase status in your business will be deemed to be 'successful' in that culture. So the first step is to start to notice what behaviour increases status or gets the approval of others, particularly those in positions of power. You can't choose if you don't notice. Is it turning up at 7am, even though you might be damaging your health and personal relationships? Is it saying yes to things in team meetings and then going out and doing just what you wanted to do anyway once you leave the room? Is it cutting less from your operating budget than you promised to because you know your peers won't either and you don't want to be the only one who takes a bullet? Is it leaving important meetings before the end?

Once you've identified what unhelpful behaviours are increasing status, figure out what the helpful behaviours are that you want to increase status and be considered 'successful' in your business. The

behaviours you want will be the ones that will accelerate the execution of your strategy the most. Then start noticing those who do them, pointing it out and making sure they know you approve of them. At the end of the important meeting, say “thank you all for giving this meeting the time it needed for us to reach a conclusion, I really appreciate your professionalism”.

In their 2010 book, *Predicting and Changing Behaviour*, social psychologists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen show that one of the critical elements in whether or not a person will select a particular behaviour in a particular situation is the concept of perceived norms. These take two forms, which they label as injunctive or descriptive. The injunctive norm depends on the answer to the question “most people who are important to me think I should (behaviour)” and the descriptive depends on the answer to the question “most people like me do (behaviour)”. The more likely the answer to each of these questions is in line with the helpful behaviours you've identified, the more likely your people will choose them over other alternatives.

If you consistently reward helpful behaviour with your approval and enlist your fellow leaders in the effort, you will start to notice a shift. 'What good looks like around here' will start to change and you will have nudged your culture in the right direction.

And it goes without saying that you'll have to walk the talk too.



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Her first book, 'Rules of Belonging - change your organisational culture, delight your people and turbo-charge your results', is published by Major Street Publishing. More articles are available on www.fionarobertson.com

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