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For Workplace News

When an organization launches a new initiative, employees are usually eager to go forward together to accomplish those aims; Of course, there are always cynics, reluctant traditionalists, or destructive naysayers. But leaders are generally given the benefit of the doubt. If senior leaders say this is the way the organization needs to go, most people are willing to help get it there.

The credibility of leaders is like an inherited trust. Under normal circumstances, that account has a high balance. Those who have a stake in the company, like shareholders, customers, and employees, prefer to see the value increase rather than go down. In fact, it takes a lot to deplete the accounts and put the perceived “value” of the organization in dangerous standing.

But when management breaks promises or fails to live up to the organization’s values, the drop-off in committed belief is often proportional to the disappointment. It’s as though credibility, the currency of leadership, has proved to be counterfeit. The result is something I’ve learned to call “earned cynicism.”

I first heard the term when I was working with a focus group to

validate an organization’s value set. The group was composed of a number of middle managers — the key link between the leadership team and the rank and file. Most of the group had been with the organization for over 10 years, but there were two “outsiders” who’d been hired within the last year.

As we discussed how the organization exhibited each value, sparks began to fly. One manager declared, in an increasingly emotional voice that the values all sounded good but the organization never acted that way when the chips were down. In other words, she continued, we were talking about some ideal world, not reality.

In the real world, internal politics would get in the way, or the organization would never stick to its guns, or some people— usually important people — would act contrary to the values, yet face no consequences. Whether the values matter depends on who your boss is, and how willing he or she is to live by them. What’s the point in declaring something to be of value if it doesn’t apply equally to all people and circumstances?

I waited to see what would happen. Finally, one of the recently hired managers, still energetic about the company, said he thought the values were inspirational and could help guide people in their growth and decision-making. Therefore, he said, “we should learn to live up to those values, instead of being cynical about them.”

Earned cynicism

The older manager, who had seen initiatives come and go, said:

“Just wait and see. When you’re here as long as I am, you’ll have earned your cynicism.”

People who’ve been around an organization for a long time know what it means to earn their cynicism. Although Dilbert may have lost its steam as a cultural phenomenon, it still strikes a chord.

When people have been told that something is going to happen and that it’s going to create a new and better way, they get excited and become emotionally invested. When it doesn’t happen, or happens for only a short time, their cynicism grows.

What makes this happen?

Management fads come in with great fanfare and go when the shine wears off— with no lasting effect. For example: Declarations that people are the most important asset — followed by layoffs or cutbacks in training budgets. Another: Managers who don’t have the courage to deal promptly with the under-performers or — just as important — those who achieve results but do so in a way that is counter to the organization’s values and culture.

Another core source of “earned cynicism” comes when rewards, recognition, and promotions go to the favoured instead of the worthy.

Think about the impact on morale, on the spirit of bringing in new employees, on the enthusiasm of your current employees as ambassadors of your organization. Earned cynicism is a powerful and destructive force because it is the offspring of broken promises.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Creating a series of safeguards from the top down, manager by manager, can stop earned cynicism. In fact, that's what leadership is all about.

Our assumption starts with this premise: talented people leave even the best-run organizations when their direct supervisor is a poor fit to the company culture, and an employee will stay in a bad organization when the direct supervisor is a hero, keeping the promise despite the environment.

People don't leave organizations — they leave managers. If the managers are the stewards of the company values, and they are enabled by the executives to not live the values, you hold in your hands the key to preventing or overcoming the destructive force of cynicism.

Yet, how many managers are really held accountable by more senior executives for their behaviour, especially if the manager is "getting their numbers?!"

In real life, we don't often think in terms of a "fun place to work" being a place with the right values. If we think it is the right mix, we join the company. Once we begin work we look to our manager for the definition of "successful behaviour," understanding it through how he or she treats people and what he or she does during a crisis.

To get ahead, we do what our manager does so they will see themselves in us and review our

performance favourably. In other words, our direct manager has the greatest influence on how we behave and how we believe in our organization's stated intentions.

It starts with senior leaders. Leaders bring values down to the level below them. Each level of manager or supervisor helps to reinforce the word through what they do and how they treat others, not through what they say. The manager who doesn't believe in something perpetuates that cynicism and gives direct reports implicit permission to do the same.

If your organization's level of earned cynicism is high, try this approach when launching new initiatives, especially initiatives about values and behaviours: For the first eight months post-launch, reserve 15 to 30 minutes on the agenda of each monthly meeting to discuss the initiative, what it means for the organization's vision and strategy, and how it impacts daily work and decision-making.

I would suggest you have two managers from different divisions meet with their direct reports together. This way, not only are managers reinforced by each other, but also employees get to see how vital the ideas are to different areas of the organization.

The more ideas or beliefs are talked about, the more real they become. This isn't a cynical trick but a basic aspect of human psychology.

Discussions about how belief systems contribute to achieving real-world objectives are natural and healthy. They help people grapple with the right way to accomplish their day-to-day work in ever-changing circumstances.

A healthy organization doesn't shy away from that debate or sweep the issues under the rug. Instead, it brings them to light, celebrates

those who do the right thing, and is consistent about dealing with those who don't. ●

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