

Are employees really encouraged to challenge Business Culture?

This post reflects the view of Global Eloquence following discussions, views and results from over 4,000 individual managers at all levels in 420 engagement workshops across Europe in 2018.



Most Businesses have a complex and deeply rooted culture that can be a daunting task to challenge. Speaking out against the “norm” we have been told, can seem in some Companies, akin to Nelson Mandela in his fight against the apartheid in South Africa or the plight of the suffragettes as they fought for the vote and equality for women.

Whilst many Companies now claim to actively encourage staff, especially those new to the Business, to challenge ideas and culture at all levels, are Businesses truly open to such observations?

Scott Kelly, Chief Human Resource Officer of Hitachi Data Systems, states that “from day one on the job, new employees are not just encouraged, but expected to be self-starters with a solution-oriented mindset...”

Similarly, Steve Jobs said “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so that they can tell us what to do”

This is admirable and yet we know from our experience in workshops and coaching, that whilst Organisations are “talking about” the benefits of people working autonomously, stepping up and taking responsibility, in reality, employees often feel unsupported in doing so. This approach can only work with an open and honest dialogue and an understanding of risk and accountability at all levels.

Why is there a fear around challenging Business Culture?:



“A Harvard Business Review survey reveals 58% of people say they trust strangers more than their own boss” (Forbes March 2018). This is a shocking statistic! Trust is paramount in a successful and healthy Business and employees need to feel

comfortable about challenging the status quo and have visible proof that their suggestions will be taken seriously. Leaders and Managers need to understand the importance of trust at all levels of Business, as Patrick Lencioni says “Remember teamwork begins by building trust. And the only way to do that is to overcome our need for invulnerability.”

In short, a Business that will still shame, blame and punish will foster a fear of failure that stifles creative and innovative thought. Only in Companies where employees are encouraged to accept an element of risk and are able to share in both successes and failures, will we see a positive outcome to challenging Business Culture. As reported in Black Box Thinking by Matthew Syed, the ways in which we experience failure, despite all the shame and pain associated with it, is actually one of our greatest assets.

“Only by redefining failure will we unleash progress, creativity, and resilience.”



Trust and Fear Can't Co-Exist:

In a Ted Talk, Simon Sinek explains that:

“great leadership does not come from authority, but instead it comes from the ability to create an environment of trust. An environment of trust can affect your employees, your customers and the success of your business”

Indeed, as Patrick Lencioni outlines in ‘The Five Dysfunctions of a Team’ in order for a team to function effectively, it is important that all levels and requirements are fulfilled.

Values and behaviours can become so deeply rooted in to a Business culture it can be difficult to challenge and change, whether they are successful to Business or otherwise. If employees don’t feel “listened to”, they can become despondent and Companies may experience a high turnover of staff, increased absence and low morale. An environment of trust will allow an employee’s voice to be heard without fear of repercussion.

Working as a therapist, I can endorse the impact that listening to people can have on their feelings and behaviour.



As Louisa Baczor, research adviser at the CIPD, points out.

“Listening to people properly is as much about treating them with respect and dignity as it is about anything else,” she says, adding that people who feel their opinion matters are likely to be happier and more productive than those who don’t. And if people are encouraged to share their views and ideas, this fosters collaboration, creativity and innovation”.

Success Stories:

What has become apparent time and time again, through both research and my experience in coaching and consulting, is the need for individuals to take responsibility for their part in challenging and creating the culture in which they want to live and work.

Several high profile Businesses are adopting this more flexible approach and are seeing positive results.

Netflix: A Company which bases its culture on what is valued in its employees, creating a self-sufficient workforce that is integral to the business. By empowering staff, and with no formal working hours or number of holidays, employees are judged on their end product rather than how they have achieved it.

LinkedIn: A truly forward thinking Company where staff feel listened to because they can see the investment that the Business makes to the development of their employees. Employees who are happy and in a role that they want to be in, will work more effectively.

Skyscanner: A Company known for sharing accountability at all levels and where employees feel that they are in a trusting environment that positively strives towards a healthy work/life balance.

The examples above show that employees who “feel important” and have a voice at work are happier and more productive. The results speak for themselves!

“Happy employees are up to 20% more productive than unhappy employees. When it comes to salespeople, happiness has an even greater impact, raising sales by 37%.” (Forbes “Promoting Employee Happiness Benefits Everyone” Dec 2017)

In summary – Is there more we could do personally to shape and influence our culture directly or indirectly? Culture begins and ends with us. We create it, are in it and can change it.



Top 10 Considerations in Creating a Positive Business Culture:

1. Trust: Trust is critical in providing a positive and healthy Company culture where employees feel able to make suggestions without fear of repercussion.
2. Transparency: Encourage visible and affective communication between all employees and particularly between Management and lower levels
3. Allow Employees to have a voice: It is people that make a business successful. “The greater inclusion of people in the operation of the business has led to far more significant contributions by employees which spill over to more appreciation from customers” (Entrepreneur – May 2015)
4. Empowerment of Employees: Don’t micromanage! Allow employees the space to manage themselves and solve their own problems.
5. Innovation: Allow innovation to thrive, encourage new ideas and the environment for them to be built.
6. Sharing of risk and accountability: A Company that shares in both its successes and failures and doesn’t shame and punish individuals will promote greater employee inclusion and happiness
7. Appreciation and Recognition: “79% of people who quit their jobs cited lack of appreciation” (Forbes March 2018). Recognition inspires employees and results in increased work satisfaction and better workplace morale.
8. Support at all levels: Leaders and Managers need to be equipped with the skills and techniques to support their staff.
9. Taking personal responsibility to shape the culture as an individual
10. Learning from mistakes, sharing this knowledge and celebrating successes and achievement