

The Human Factor to Profitability: People-centered Cultures as Meaningful Organizations

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Employees want to work for organizations that provide a sense of purpose. People centered organizational cultures promote meaningful organizations. People centered cultures operate on: 1) all people are important; 2) a strong belief in people shapes the culture; 3) people working together perform at higher levels; and 4) all people benefit. Seven elements these cultures share: 1) people-first core values; 2) leadership; 3) open communication; 4) trust; 5) aligned operations and work environments; 6) change responsiveness; and 7) organizational resiliency. This creates highly productive and highly profitable work environments. Emerging trends of people centered cultures and impact on society are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of organizational culture cannot be overstated. For the purpose of this paper, the authors advocate a culture built around people—the employees, management, and leadership. This is the human factor of profitability. A people-focused approach has been proven to lead to meaningful long-term, lasting success. The elements of a people-centered culture are woven into the fabric of the organization and are derived from the aspirations, talents, and dreams of the employees that constantly interact with and shape each other (Kendall & Bodinson, 2010).

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizational culture is the collective experience that emerges from the beliefs and social interactions of its members (Schneider, Brief, & Guzzo, 1996; Trice & Beyer, 1993). These interactions contain shared values, mutual understandings, patterns of beliefs, and expectations of behavior that are created over time within an organization (Schein, 2004). Organizational culture also distinguishes members from one organization to another, which provides a sense of identity (Alvesson, 2011). Culture establishes both inspiration and aspiration. A company's culture is the essence of the organization and dictates how the organization approaches challenges, as well as representing the beliefs and attitudes that inspire employees (Denton, 1996). It captures not only the character of the organization but also the emotional characteristics of the individuals within the organization. It provides the company with personality, moving it from a mechanistic and impersonal object to a living being capable of growing and transforming (Weymes, 2005). Organizational culture, when it is rooted in shared values and a deep sense

of purpose that people find meaningful, serves as a powerful framework and filter for making decisions at all levels within an organization.

People-centered Organizational Cultures

People-centered cultures are founded on the ideas of:

1. All people are important.
2. A strong belief in people shapes the organizational culture.
3. Happy people working together perform at higher levels.
4. All people benefit (Black & La Venture, 2015, p. 9).

All people are important

The view that all people (employees) are important provides the foundation for an exciting, supportive, dynamic, and innovative work environment. It also supports substantial growth and profits. To accomplish this, organizational leaders, middle management, and frontline supervisors must shift the focus from numbers and results to the organization's greatest asset—the employees. When the work environment is designed to focus on its people, it builds trust, leverages the talent within the organization, and can be used to develop performance measures and business success factors reflective of the organizational culture (Black & La Venture, 2015). Therefore, an organization's performance depends on the nature of the relationships formed by individuals within that organization and the relationships with external stakeholders.

A strong belief in people shapes the organizational culture

The decisions made by founders and other top leaders in the early stages of the organization's life cycle have a profound impact on its development and lead to the creation of strategies, structures, climates, and culture (Schein, 1992; Schneider, 1987). To achieve the desired people-oriented organizational climate, senior leaders must first make employees a priority. Doing this helps employees find meaning in work, while putting best efforts forward. Senior leaders should also set values that align with the employee-oriented vision proclaimed by the organization.

Happy people working together perform at higher levels.

Employees are rational individuals who are seeking self-actualization (achieving one's purpose in life), happiness, and wisdom. Thus, employees who are happy with the work environment and have a voice in organizational work life perform at higher levels. However, in a bureaucratic organization, the rules and regulations are designed to control behavior, while the reward structures are designed to buy the individual's desire for the perfect life. Unfortunately, the workplace can often create a work environment where employees have little commitment to the employer and, therefore, minimal loyalty (Weymes, 2005). But the organization that creates an environment that allows employees freedom may generate new and innovative approaches, foster harmonious working relationships, and build trust and integrity.

All people benefit

The success and synergy of the people centered approach to organizational culture is the foundational belief that all people—employees, customers, suppliers, and community members—are important. This belief in people and the accompanying values of treating each person and task with dignity, trust, and respect serve as both the bedrock foundation for business decisions and a springboard for performance, growth, and innovation. Thus, all people benefit in the challenges, risk, and success of the organization, resulting in increased employee engagement and commitment (Black & La Venture, 2015).

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Organizational climate is defined as “a set of measurable properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the people who live and work in this environment and assumed to influence motivation and behavior” (Litwin & Stringer, 1968, p. 1), is important in organizational

development primarily because providing a good workplace for employees is a key consideration for modern organizations. Value systems are the foundation of an organization's climate, and a good workplace environment entails a strong value system that has been put into action (Momeni, 2009).

It is important to differentiate between the concept of organizational culture and the concept of organizational climate. Organizational climate refers to the perceptions of organizational practices and procedures that are shared among its members (Schneider, 1975). In contrast, organizational culture is a collective experience that emerges from the members' organizational beliefs and social interactions (Schneider et al., 1996; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Culture is based on the underlying values and assumptions and includes those values, beliefs, myths, traditions, and norms.

Organizational climate is a manifestation of the culture. Both an organization's climate and culture have a strong impact on the organization, especially during times of change. The members of an organization describe organizational factors (i.e., the climate) in the same way but are interpreted differently because of the cultural influences of an organization (Rosen, Greenhalgh, & Anderson, 1981).

Key Elements of a People Centered Organizational Culture

Research by Kendall and Bodinson (2010) and Krueger (1994) suggest that people-first cultures share the key elements of:

- leveraging people-first core values;
- leadership that 'walks the talk';
- open communication;
- high levels of trust;
- aligned operations and work environments focused on HR and talent development practices,
- change responsiveness, and;
- organizational resiliency (Kendall & Bodinson, 2010; Krueger, 1994).

These elements are incorporated into the fabric of the organization and are built on the aspirations, talents, and dreams of the employees and constantly interact with and shape each other (Kendall & Bodinson, 2010). Organizations that promote values such as openness, trust, initiative, teamwork and collaboration, the humane treatment of workers, creativity, quality, empowerment, and delegation obtain better organizational results (Becker, Huslid, & Ulrich, 2001; Huang & Dastmalchian, 2006).

People first core values

Organizational values are general standards or principles that are considered desirable, such as loyalty, helpfulness, fairness, predictability, reliability, honesty, responsibility, integrity, competence, consistency, and openness (Olson & Zanna, 1993; Rokeach, 1973). These "core" values are a company's foundation for governance and generally, employees incorporate these organizational values into personal value systems and prioritize them in terms of relative importance as guiding principles (Rokeach, 1973). An employee's value system guides his or her behavior and interpretation of experience by furnishing criteria that can be used to evaluate and understand events and actions in the surrounding work environment. The visible dimension of culture is reflected in the espoused values, philosophy, and mission of the organization, whereas the invisible dimension lies in the unspoken set of values that guide employees' actions and perceptions in the organization (Martins & Meyer, 2012; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001).

Leadership and Walking the talk

De Geus (1997) found that organizational longevity does not depend on the ability of a company to return the investment to shareholders. Organizational sustainability was a symptom of corporate health but not a predictor or determinant of it. Optimizing capital was secondary to optimizing people. The challenge for leaders is to consider the needs of both the organization and its people—that is, to be practical and humanistic. It's also important that the leader model behavior in line with the organizational culture and embed them in management systems (Hultman, 2005).

Leaders of people-centered organizations make an intentional and values-based decision to foster the beliefs that all people are important and people working together achieve more. When an organization's culture aligns with the industry culture and the competitive environment, the employees find it easy to implement the company's strategy successfully. Organizations do best in terms of productivity, profitability, and engagement when the focus the success of the business through the support and success of the employees. Because leadership and frontline managers care deeply about employees, leaders listen more intently to what the company's various stakeholders say. An organizational culture founded on strong values, practices, and norms helps energize employees to be effective, efficient, and innovative by encouraging and rewarding these traits (Sagiv, Schwartz, & Arieli, 2011).

Open Communication

Organizational communication is a shared responsibility in a people-centered culture. Weaving communication into the fabric of the company means that communication, public relations, and marketing are considered a part of every person's job description. If employees are not equipped with these at the time of hire, the company needs to provide all team members with ongoing training, coaching, mentoring, and support. Having employees understand each facet of the business allows for focus on solving problems to communicate effectively with customers. Working together and sharing information across business units and geographic areas provides a more cohesive message and creates a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Such communication practices increase and encourage commitment, interpersonal relationships, quality of information exchange, feedback, dialogue, and persuasion. This type and quality of communication decreases misunderstanding and conflict and results in increased cooperation, participation, and group cohesion (Kara & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2011).

The following statements describe success and sustainability in a people-centered culture:

- Communication is vital to success;
- Open doors and transparency build trust;
- Listening is more important than talking and;
- Communication is a shared responsibility (Black & La Venture, 2015, pp. 82-83).

Leaders of people-centered organizational cultures value diverse opinions. In a global marketplace, such leaders expect employees to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and seek new options. Employees and transformational leaders know that intelligent disagreements lead to better decisions and unique solutions (Shin & Zhou, 2003). A shared vision and shared values drive change in employee-centered cultures. People-centered organizations value and respect employees integrating transparency within every aspect of the organization. The organization's commitment is enhanced because there is a strong belief and acceptance of the values and goals of the organization, a willingness to undertake substantial efforts (by the leadership) on behalf of the organization, a strong desire to stay in the organization, and a commitment to the core values of the organization (Ortega-Parra & Sastre-Castillo, 2013). Today, more than ever, competitive advantage hinges on how people communicate with each other, relate to one another, and work together. As a strategic organizational function, effective communication improves teamwork, builds trust, and enhances creativity.

Trust

Leaders who passionately believe in and practice respect for employees discover a powerful business ally: trust. Fostered by open communication and making good on corporate promises, trust is one of the single most important ingredients in helping people and organizations perform at the highest level and beyond. Employees who trust each other work together more efficiently. Trust enhances listening and communication skills by reducing emotional barriers (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Armed with clear goals and free from worry about hidden agendas, employees can focus on getting the job done.

People are disposed toward fairness, a necessary condition for trust and trustworthiness. This tendency toward trust and reciprocity is balanced by a willingness to punish those who fail to act fairly. Cultural variations are very likely and condition the degree to which people are willing to trust others (Fichman, 2003). With unconditional trust—in which shared values create a common bond—a different scenario occurs: Employees are viewed as not merely coworkers or business acquaintances but

colleagues, friends, or team members. Unconditional trust also promotes social processes that can lead to the development of synergistic team relationships in organizations. In turn, these can lead to superior performance.

For organizations to have real synergy with employees, unconditional trust must be developed. Only unconditional trust promotes intense interpersonal cooperation and synergistic relationships (Jones & George, 1998). Organizations that choose to encourage the development of unconditional trust among employees benefit, especially in terms of cooperation and teamwork that promote high performance and competitive advantage (Jones & George, 1998). People-centered cultures trust employees and view employees as a competitive advantage.

Aligned Operations and Work Environments

Human Resources (HR) plays a vital role in incorporating a value component into practices such as employee selection, appraisal, training and development, compensation, and reward systems (Hassan, 2007). Investing in the human and social capital of employees is critical for today's organizations (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006). Denison (1990), reported organizations achieve greater effectiveness to the extent that consistency in translating core values is developed within HR policies and practices. Enhancing the employability of employees fosters engagement from those employees, and organizations realize the added benefit of increased commitment and ownership (Luthans et al., 2006). Successful organizations employ innovative talent development practices to retain and support employees (Zairi, 1998).

People-centered cultures develop processes and systems, from flexible benefits and profit sharing to top-notch training, equipment, and research and development facilities that reflect the organization's core values. Sustained profitable growth requires alignment between the goals and objectives of the employee value proposition and the total rewards strategy of the business. It also requires a culture that attracts and retains the talent with the skills that the organization needs by creating meaningful work, empowering employees in shared decision making, quality, and opportunities for advancement (Birt, Wallis, & Winternitz, 2004; Towers Watson, 2014b). People-centered cultures manage the organization's intellectual and social capital—as well as the ability to listen and respond to customers and employees—as critical factors in developing effective assets and talent development strategies. These strategies are focused on workforce development practices and smart business strategies targeted toward results.

Change responsiveness

Whether change is invigorating or devastating hinges on the quality of leadership provided at all levels in the organization. The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among employees being led in terms of personal leadership, self-confidence, and engagement in the organization. A shared vision and shared values drive change in employee centered cultures. Focused on nurturing people and know-how, these cultures are uniquely positioned to thrive in today's knowledge-based economy.

In people-centered cultures, the organizational structure and design; facilities and architecture; and behind-the-scenes services such as research and development, marketing, accounting, finance, and HR are carefully aligned to support people, relationships, and the process of working together (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Such flexibility and a willingness to embrace change are hallmarks of a people-centered organizational culture. These companies encourage people to share ideas, pool resources, and work together to solve common problems. Trust, invention, and innovation flourish in the open organizational climates and environments these cultures create. Employees are encouraged to experiment with unconventional business practices and to test and develop new technology, ideas, and products (Black & La Venture, 2015).

Organizational resiliency

Organizational resiliency is the capacity of an organization to respond to and even prosper from negative circumstances (Luthans et al., 2006, p. 30). Many corporate leaders have used today's fast-paced business environment and the need to stay nimble as justification for massive layoffs, a heavy use of temporary or contract workers, skyrocketing executive compensation, and the elimination of employment

security. Organizational resiliency is important for these leaders for continuous improvement and success in today's marketplace and to avoid massive layoffs. The ability of leaders to convey the message of hope in the change process to employees results in a significant organizational resiliency and capacity for change in organizations.

The adaptive nature of employee centric organizations consistently and substantially outperforms companies with more traditional corporate cultures in the areas of employee engagement, revenue, workforce development, stock price, and net income. Flexibility and a willingness to embrace change are hallmarks of a people-centered culture. Employee centric companies encourage people to share ideas, pool resources, and work together to solve common problems. Trust, invention, and innovation flourish in the open organizational climates and environments these cultures create. Employees are encouraged to experiment with unconventional business practices and to test and develop new technology, ideas, and products (Black & La Venture, 2015).

EMERGING PEOPLE CENTERED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

Employee Stock Ownership Plans

The phenomenon of employee-owned companies has been widespread in the United Kingdom, some parts of the European Union, the United States, Japan, and the former Eastern Bloc countries (Ben-Ner & Jones, 1995). The philosophical concept of employee stock ownership plans is that people are likely to become better stewards of all the systems—social, political, fiscal, cultural, and natural—gaining a personal stake in the economic system, with the rights and responsibility that implies.

Leadbeater (as cited in Sauser, 2009, p.152) identified six advantages of employee ownership as:

1. Cooperation: Employee ownership reduces conflict between workers, managers, and shareholders, and promotes cooperation because of shared interests.
2. Productivity: Employees with a stake in the business identify with it and voluntarily make efforts to cut costs, raise productivity, and improve quality, in part by monitoring the work of colleagues.
3. Patience: Employee shareowners are more knowledgeable about the company than outside shareholders and therefore more patient. This should help protect the company from the short-term demands of the stock market.
4. Loyalty: Employees with a stake in the company are more committed. This is particularly more important in sectors with high labor turnover, and it is difficult to retain skilled staff who are in short supply.
5. Flexibility: Employees as owners recognize the case for pay flexibility as the fortunes of the company fluctuate. Pay automatically becomes more flexible if more of it is linked directly to profits.
6. Risk taking: Employee-owned enterprises come to understand the nature of the risks taken by the owners of capital. This helps underpin the legitimacy of shared ownership.

Benefit Corporations (B Corps)

Another type of people-oriented organization is the B Corporation, or Benefit Corporation. The core purpose of a B Corporation is to ensure the goods and services benefit society while continuing to return profits to shareholders (Kelly, 2009). The purpose must be the creation of a “general public benefit” (Clark & Babson, 2012). B Corporations actively include the voice of multiple stakeholders and regard themselves as living systems that deliver social benefits as a core purpose, not an incidental by-product (Kelly, 2009). In practice, the Certified B Corporation is formed as a standard for-profit corporation under state law, but then undergoes certain procedures to obtain certification from B Lab. The benefit corporation is a legal status in states that recognize it as a legal business under the Model Benefit Corporation Legislation (MBCL) B Lab (Clark & Babson, 2012).

Blount and Offei-Danso (2013) have identified the seven components or services of a public benefit corporation. These components are: 1) Providing low-income or underserved individuals or communities with beneficial products or services; 2) Promoting economic opportunity for individuals or communities beyond the creation of jobs in the ordinary course of business; 3) Protecting or restoring the environment;

4) Improving human health; 5) Promoting the arts, sciences, or the advancement of knowledge; 6) Increasing the flow of capital to entities with a purpose to benefit society or the environment; and 7) Conferring any other particular benefit on society or the environment (p. 628).

B Corps translate ideas into action by creating higher quality jobs that improve the quality of life in communities, and create value for society, not just shareholders (McDonnell, 2014). B Corps inspire greater economic opportunity, and establish themselves as leaders when addressing challenging environmental problems, while offering a workplace environment where people find fulfillment and are encouraged to be present at work. B Corporations are certified by the nonprofit B Lab to meet rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency. Certified B Corps distinguish themselves in the marketplace by voluntarily meeting higher standards and offering a positive and responsible way to do business.

Low Profit Limited Liability Company (L3C)

The low-profit limited liability company (L3C) is a branch of the limited liability company (LLC) in combination with a low-profit entity structure that allows for philanthropic entities to invest in a company similar to an angel investor (Kucher, 2012). The L3C is a hybrid not-for-profit/for-profit entity and is taxed as any other for-profit business. It is more commonly considered a for-profit start-up nonprofit organization. The L3C structure is an attempt at creating a method for investment in companies that do charitable work that can provide some small return to investors (Furick, 2013). This type of organizational structure emerged as a result of the 2008 global economic downturn in an effort to assist and sustain nonprofit organizations that had been significantly impacted. The uniqueness of this structure is that the not for profit can both accomplish the charitable mission and be self-sufficient by attracting outside investments and generating a positive cash flow.

The L3C status allows firms to pursue any legal purpose, with whatever mix of for-profit and nonprofit goals. This also provides great flexibility in management structure, scope of fiduciary duty, financial structure, and exit rights. L3Cs were created to help encourage “program related investments” by charities along with investments by for-profit investors. However, the very flexibility of LLCs may present some problems. Designing a detailed set of rules to fit the needs of a specific enterprise with such flexibilities and complexities in structure may require extensive legal representation, and much uncertainty may surround this type of organizational structure, which utilizes business processes that have not been tested by prior experience or by traditional methods (McDonnell, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Trends in People Centered Cultures

To be sustainable, people-centric organizational cultures are competitive and results driven. Productivity and profit matter at the individual, team, corporate, and community levels. Leaders at all levels within an organization need to identify trends quickly and take risks to create new opportunities for employees, product development, service, and profit. The following are the primary drivers of the competitive advantage in an employee centered organizational culture:

- Profits are the lifeblood of business, and those profits are invested back into the organization’s people.
- Open communication increases productivity and profits.
- Employees are viewed as a long-term investment.
- Happy people yield high returns.
- Profit and people must be viewed over the long term (Black & La Venture, 2015, p. 47).

Kotter and Heskett (as cited in Sullivan, Sullivan, & Buffton, 2002), report people-first-value-led companies outperform others. Understanding that long term investment in employees nourishes company health by providing money for research and development, equipment, and training. With a steady stream of profit, companies can build new facilities, implement new technologies, and launch new ventures. In

addition, this people centered approach fosters innovation by keeping the organization in touch with its customers' changing needs, empowers employees, and enables the organization to spot new trends and business opportunities. Profits, in this context, also help companies pay employees well, not only in wages but also in an array of flexible benefits, profit sharing, incentive plans, and investments in education and training.

Corporate social responsibility

People-centered cultures make sure that all people benefit from the company's success. The belief that all stakeholders—employees, customers, suppliers, vendors, shareholders, owners, and community members—should reap the benefits of the company's success. Compensation can take several different forms, including gain sharing, profit sharing, stock ownership, payment for skills, and various forms of individual team incentives. This sharing gives the employees a sense of ownership in the company, and when employees are owners, employees act and think like owners (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). By tying compensation to individual, business unit, and overall company performance, people-centered cultures give people a genuine stake in the financial health of the enterprise and in the process of working together. Employees who see a direct correlation between the day-to-day performance and paycheck tend to be more highly motivated, productive, and cost conscious.

Van Marrewijk (2004) found that, to enhance organizational performance, corporations need to focus on social dimensions. This means that the need to align both the individual and the collective interests of employees, and the employees need to match individual values, personal drivers, capacities, and ambitions with those of the workplace environment. "The alignment of personal and collective interests has become essential to contemporary business. No longer can companies treat employees as resources, as numbers, as costs, but as human beings" (van Marrewijk, 2004, p. 136). Employees should not be thought of as assets or liabilities but, rather, as human beings, who have social needs.

Russell, Haigh, and Griffiths (2007) determined that there are four distinct understandings of sustainability in organizations. Managers described sustainability as: 1) a corporation working toward long-term economic performance, 2) a corporation working toward positive outcomes for the natural environment, 3) a corporation that supports employees and social outcomes, or 4) a corporation with a holistic approach to conducting business within a community.

The sustainable people-centered organization can be described as one that reflects the definition of the sustainable organization as those organizations that build on natural capital, enhance human and societal welfare, and contribute to appropriate economic and technological development (Russell & McIntosh, 2011). These companies are innovative and people focused. Sustainability principles are embedded across the organization and within every aspect of the organizational culture. This is the way people focused leaders conduct business through the adoption of long-term perspectives that support employees, business, and communities.

Companies with a thriving employee-oriented culture care about the community. Such organizations recognize that strong local and regional communities help nurture a people-centered culture within the organization. In a people-centered organizational culture, leadership at all levels must understand, believe, practice, and reinforce the core values. This daily practice at the individual and team levels builds and maintains the culture. Corporate culture is the best tool to enhance organizational commitment (Yukl, 2006). This commitment to the organization's core values is related to economic concepts and the efficiency of the leadership and management of the organization because people-centered cultures focus on employees as the engines of the organization. These types of leadership affect communication and influence on employees within the organization. Such leadership behaviors drive communication and public relations outcomes such as perceived organizational reputation and quality relationships (Dowling, 2004; Men, 2011).

CONCLUSION

People-centered cultures focus on helping all employees and prospective supervisors and managers develop and advance to full potential every day in the daily operations of the business. Culture matters. Not only does culture reside within us individuals, but it is also the hidden force that divides most of our behavior both inside and outside organizations (Schein, 2004). The essence of culture is not what is visible on the surface. It is the shared ways groups of people understand and interpret the world. People-centered culture organizations and the leadership of these employee-centered organizations understand, embrace, and leverage the people focus as a means for cultural and business success (Tidor & Morar, 2013).

A supportive culture facilitates shared leadership in an organization (Erkutlu, 2012). These people centered organizational cultures are fully aware that by the sole focus on employees as the greatest asset of the company; communication, transparency, trust, HR and talent development practices facilitate the foundation for supportive culture and shared leadership practices, which increase organizational trust, resiliency, productivity, and profitability.

In today's global marketplace, it is essential to work effectively with others. When leaders are asked about challenges in the workplace, relationships with employees tend to be the most noted concern (Brotheridge & Long, 2007). Today's more global and diverse workforce requires a leader's awareness of cultural nuances resulting in flexible leadership; focused on employees leveraging collaboration and coaching. These tasks require leaders to balance their own strong identity with the daily effort to understand that people (employees) are different from themselves. The concepts and research presented in this article illustrate that when organizations emphasize an employee-centric (people-centered culture) approach combined with social responsibility, creates a host of benefits, including more productive and satisfied employees, stronger ties to the community, and greater corporate visibility (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Such efforts provide needed services and support to local communities, collaboration with other organizations, and incorporating the needs of society into long-term corporate business goals and strategies for success (Edersheim & Wynette, 2008; Hesselbein, 2008; Vail, 2007).

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