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RAY OF LIGHT

OFFICE CULTURE

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When we talk about office culture we must begin by acknowledging the fact that every business has a culture. Sometimes it is intentionally created, more often it just happens. Too often cultures that develop themselves are not the culture you would want for your practice. How can we develop the culture we want for our practice?

During these tumultuous times, creating a positive office culture is more important than ever. It seems our society is more divided and less tolerant than at any time since the civil war. Wear a mask / Don't wear a mask, Vaccinate / Don't Vaccinate, Pro Abortion / Pro Life, Conservative / Liberal, Socialized Dentistry / Fee for Service – I could go on and on. Is it just me, or do people seem more on edge, less kind, and more stressed these days? How can we create an island of calm in our practices – not just for our patients, but even more – for our team members and ourselves?

The answer is, develop a positive culture! It's that simple. How you ask? Read on:

First, your culture must align with your office vision. (Of course in order to have a culture that aligns with your vision, you must have a vision for your practice that is clear and well understood by your entire team.) For this article, I will assume you have an office vision. (If you do not and would like some points on how to create one – email me at davidpierdmd@gmail.com.)

If we were to ask most leaders, "What is your office culture?" – the answer we would get is akin to a Communist Party Line. The leader might describe an office culture that fits with the mission statement, core values of the business, vision, and purpose. I.e.: "Our culture is one where...

- "... our entire team is constantly looking for ways to do things better."
- "... whenever there is conflict, it is always brought back to the source. Gossip does not exist."
- "... there is no such statement as, 'it's not my job.' Every team member looks for ways to help others."
- "We are a family."
- "... blah, blah, blah..."

This of course is the ideal and the leader is right to describe the culture he or she wants in line with the vision, but......what is the culture really like?

Too often it is not in reality the way we leaders see it through our rose-colored glasses. In the case of office culture, it is not dictated by the "boss", it is created by every person on the team. The description of one person may be very different from another and remember, when it comes to culture, **perception is reality**.

Let's define culture: Organizational culture is the way we do things around here – in other words, organizational culture equals patterns of behavior. It is created by our attitudes, our actions, rules, systems, expectations, personalities, what is tolerated and what is not, etc.

- Rather than us defining culture, our culture is what defines us!!!

- One way to define office culture is to answer the question: **"What makes our practice different from those around us?"**

To further define office culture let's form two lists. One is a list of unfavorable culture traits, the other list is of constructive traits we would want to have in our practice.

- Favorable Culture Traits:
    1. Encourages Growth
    2. Empowers
    3. Motivates
    4. Increases job satisfaction
    5. Example: Every team member is a leader.
- Unfavorable Culture Traits:
    1. Limits Growth
    2. People are afraid to speak up
    3. Demotivates
    4. Decreases job satisfaction
    5. Example: I only do what I have to do.

Why is an understanding of culture important? According to John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett in*"Corporate Culture and Performance"* (The Free Press, New York, NY: 1992), **Organizational culture does three things**: It **aligns, motivates, and controls** large groups of people – three tasks that are extremely difficult to accomplish by any means. I repeat: "The culture of your organization helps you align, motivate, and control the people who make up your team." Without this alignment, motivation, and control, you cannot have a predictable result. It is the culture that decides your level of service, the attitudes and satisfaction of the team, and the success of your practice.

- Hence, culture is a powerful leadership tool indeed.
- Culture is going to happen. It can happen by chance, or it can be intentionally created.
- When intentionally created, **Culture gives a team both a compass and a magnifying glass.**

We have defined culture as: The patterns of behavior of the people on the team. Is it possible to summarize office culture? Again, the summary would answer the question: **"What makes our practice different from those around us?"** or, **"This is what we do."**

How can you develop a positive practice culture?

1. First, have a team meeting during which each member of the team writes the five best things about your current office culture and the five most negative things which are opportunities for improvement.
2. Next, get together in groups and go over your lists to pare them down to the five most important current culture traits and the five greatest opportunities. In these groups, write ideas on how to overcome negative cultural traits. By the end of this exercise, there should be no negative traits left without some suggestions for overcoming these cultural characteristics.
3. Finally, come together as an entire team and choose a final list.
4. Celebrate the positives! Consider, how did you make these positive traits happen.
5. Work together to solve where the challenges come from and how you are going to change those cultural traits. Write an action plan.
6. Commit!

How to Use Culture as a Leadership Tool

Organized culture is our patterns of behavior. Patterns of behavior must be guided to create your ideal culture. Why is it necessary that a leader know what the culture is and what it is for? Before answering, here is another question to give you a clue: What do you think is the most important ingredient in shaping the culture of an organization? The most important ingredient in shaping the culture of an organization is the behavior of its leaders. If you are the CEO and you
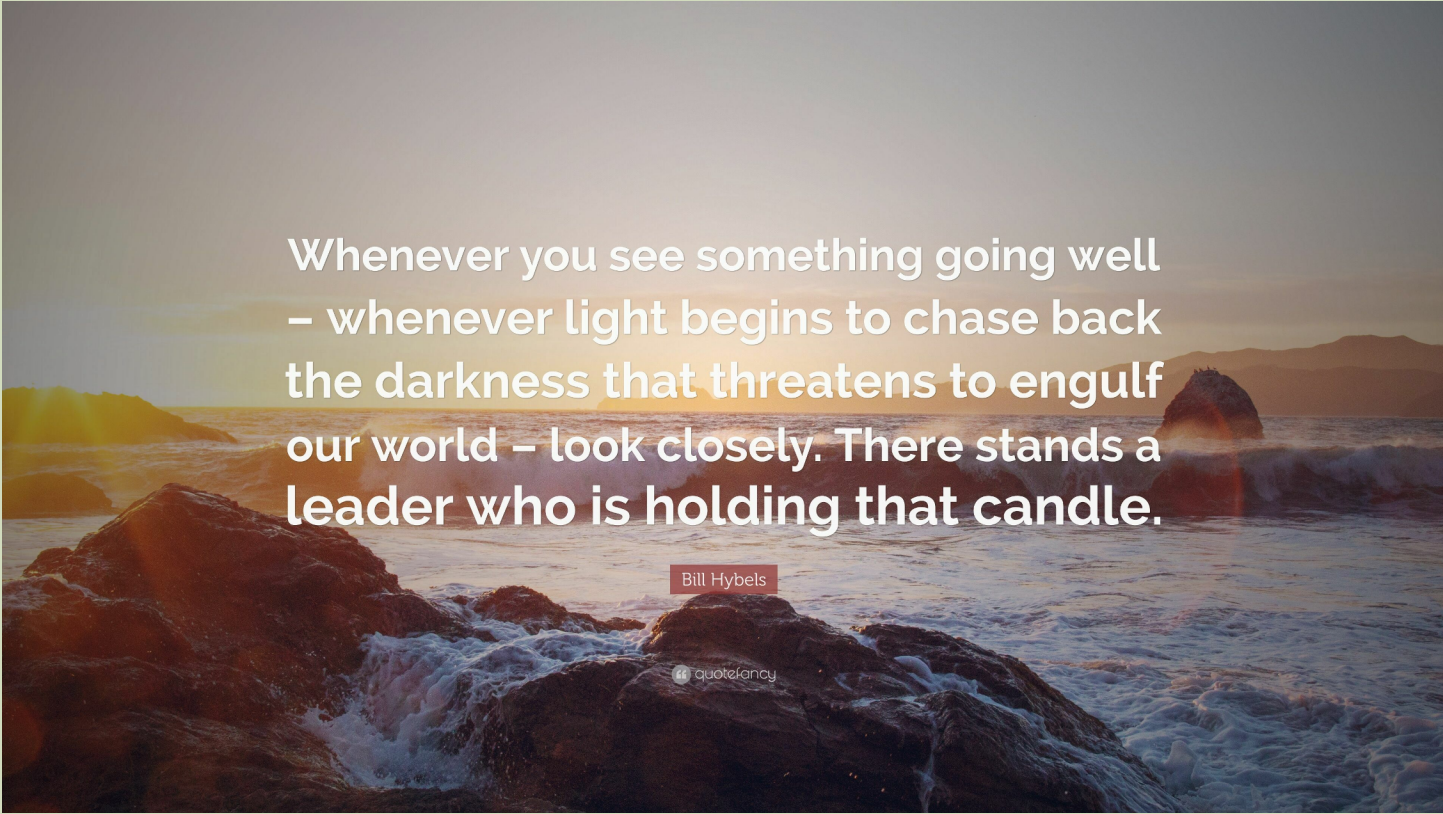
know your behavior is the most important ingredient in shaping your organizational culture, you will be much more careful about how you behave and about what you say. (Note: Since every member of the team is a CEO it is up to every member of the team to help create the positive culture.) If you ask your organization for candor, if you ask your entire workforce to be frank in their day-to-day performance conversations, if you ask them for a truly open communication environment, but you don't exhibit such behavior in your own daily manners and deeds, it is very unlikely that you will be able to create a culture of candor in your organization. Conversely, if you expect everyone to be on time for morning huddle and you are always on time, it is likely your team will also be on time.

How will you continue to direct it? You can never let your foot off the throttle. Culture, like the trust the leader has built and the respect he or she has earned, is built one brick at a time, but like Jenga, can come tumbling down much more easily than it can be built.

- It is you as leaders who must decide what the culture will be and then act accordingly. You need to decide "Up with which I will not put."
- Culture is going to happen – make it intentional.

Review of Culture: Fundamental in our definition of organizational culture:

- Culture is patterns of behavior.
- Culture aligns, motivates, and controls large groups of people. It sets the tone.
- The most important ingredient in shaping the culture of an organization is the behavior of its leaders.

Whenever you see something going well – whenever light begins to chase back the darkness that threatens to engulf our world – look closely. There stands a leader who is holding that candle.

Bill Hybels

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