

ORGL 610 Communication Leadership & Ethics

Caring and Doing: Critical Analysis

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Introduction

The first time I recall hearing the verbiage “agent of change” was via an HBO television series titled *Enlightened*, which premiered in the early 2010’s. The series, created by and co-starring Mike White, focused on a vapid upper-level brand manager at a cosmetics company who eventually metamorphosizes into an ethically aware whistleblower exposing toxic leadership, various unethical and illegal practices, and sexism in the ranks of her organization. The main character was played by Laura Dern and the series regularly chose to depict her adoption of ethical understanding from a somewhat cringeworthy comedic perspective. Nonetheless, by the conclusion of the series, she had emerged as an ethical powerhouse who took down her entire toxic organization.

As I recall this series during the final days of our coursework, I am forced to reflect on the many revelatory, somewhat uncomfortable realizations that I have encountered via reexamining my past participation in various power or political structures that were made clear to me in the light of new concepts and ideas.

I also admit that I feel very emboldened to do my best to take action to improve my surroundings in any way I can. If I ponder the question “*What characterizes a well-lived life in my organization?*” then certainly action is what will count when it is all said and done. In fact, I

consider ignorance to be a much more relatable and powerful defense. In the face of understanding comes a responsibility to become an agent change. However, this may be the heaviest lift of all. As a result, the scope of this paper will be to examine ways to utilize the teachings of this course to enable action and subsequent change.

The Dilemma

My employer is a national healthcare services and medical equipment supplier based in Florida. The organization generates just under \$2 billion annually and is the industry leader. Our German-based parent company places a great deal of pressure on our executive leadership team to meet both top and bottom-line budget expectations while maintaining a pristine safety record. As is commonplace for many organizations, the national healthcare emergency has generated a whole stack of long-term issues for our organization including equipment shortages and supply chain delays impacting patient care. This has resulted in especially low employee retention rates, increasing safety-related incidents, and a noticeable uptick in existing employee burnout and compromised service standards due to partially staffed local branches.

The workforce is made up of 11,000 employees. The bulk of these employees are staffed in the 850 geographically located patient service branches around the country. More specifically, these employees are hourly paid field sales representatives, patient clinical advocates, customer service representatives, equipment delivery technicians, and hospital liaisons – essentially the boots on the ground.

In Q2 of 2022, the organization pumped a substantial amount of financial resources into a redefined and expanded Safety Department including adding ten positions and hiring a new Director of Safety from outside of the organization. This long-overdue focus on Safety was seen as a breath of fresh air for many in the organization who had become keenly aware of the rising incidences of accidents and workplace injuries, likely due to many open positions and field representatives rushing to take care of patients while exhausted from being overworked and filling-in multiple roles. A further significant investment was made when dash cameras were installed in each patient delivery van that would be activated when a driver was in violation of a tenet of safety (if the brake was applied abruptly or if the driver exceeded the speed limit, for example).

The organization adopted several informal and formal components of ethical culture to drive this employee-safety focus. “Every ritual has an impact on ethical behavior” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 295) so using Rites of enhancement to reward managers whose team met or exceeded safety parameters was well-received. Conversely, coercive power and rites of degradation that “identified punishable behaviors” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 294) were met with less zeal from managers whose bonuses were taken away and service representatives who received warnings and terminations from Human Resources. Since these actions “signal the organization’s willingness to stand behind its values” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 294), I justified that it was a necessary means to end.

Just one quarter later, mid-way through 2022, in an effort to contain costs and meet the budget expectations from Germany, our CEO placed a hiring freeze on the already partially staffed field and enacted a zero-overtime policy. The timing of this credo was viewed as

especially upsetting to the field who had weathered staff and equipment shortages during the pandemic and were now finally seeing a light at the end of the tunnel as more applicants seemed poised to return to the workforce. Just as many final interviews were being conducted and offers being made, the field was again faced with an almost un-winnable situation. What's worse: while the previous situation seemed to stem from the effects of the pandemic, this new situation was facilitated solely from the organization's executive leadership team, a group acutely aware of the struggles and obstacles that the field had faced in the during the previous two years.

Additionally, the freeze on overtime was seen as an opportunity to further cut costs. However, it was reasoned that workers would not work late into the evening, increasing restfulness and clarity the next day on the job, thus reducing the likelihood of accident or injury. Most, who were polled later (after accidents and injury began to spike again), reported that the opposite occurred: they now had to contend with managing the responsibilities of multiple positions within an abbreviated amount of time leading to rushing, careless errors and decreased workplace safety – and expedited punitive measures.

Using Influence Tactics & Self-Empowerment to Improve Employee Safety

As a focus on safety was launched and adopted in our organization, many things were done ethically – being clear and transparent about the parameters of the employee surveillance dashboard cameras. However, after the subsequent hiring freeze and fresh increase in safety issues, ways to exercise influence over the field changed and seemed somewhat less ethical.

The launch of the safety re-focus utilized components of self-empowerment with “soft-power strategies” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 143) of ethical influence that gave the initiative a morale

boosting quality many in the field stated that they were thirsting for (via 2022 employee survey data).

Our COO, who is a very compelling speaker, appealed to each employee's sense of responsibility to their families saying: the most important stop of the day is home. He empowered each person with zero safety occurrence receive recognition that came in the form of both public accolades and increased bonus structure. If not entirely, many factors that contribute to psychological empowerment were utilized: providing meaning to the task at hand, adding belief that each member of the organization possesses the competence to accomplish the ask, being clear that self-determination will play a vital role in the effectiveness of the safety program and discussing the impact overall that this will have for the organization, as a whole (Johnson, 2022, pg. 138).

Further, proactive influence tactics like rational persuasion (sharing current data about number of accidents from distracted driving, after extended overtime or long overnight patient on-call services, and warehouse or office injuries and arguments as how we can better protect each other), inspirational appeals (the COO shared his first hand experiences attending the funeral of a 24 year old service representative who fell asleep behind the wheel after working double shifts), and ingratiation (praising the field for their commitment and teamwork at the height of the pandemic) were also employed.

These actions were very effective, and the culture/climate of the organization moved toward one focused more on safety. If "as communal creatures, we learn to conduct ourselves primarily through the actions of significant others" (Gini, 2014, p. 34), then this top-down call to action seemed to be effective and rooted in an ethical approach.

Alternate Perceptions of the Stakeholder

Some stakeholders had reservations about the genuineness of this call to action, with questions about why the initiative was being driven by the parent company in Germany instead of being identified and addressed much earlier by the organization.

After the organization fell behind the budget decided upon by Germany amid the healthcare emergency, the CEO decided to take drastic measure to get the organization back on track. Near the middle of Q3, a hiring freeze was put in place and all overtime pay was restricted.

The organization's executive leadership team saw this as a way to not have to cut existing jobs and regain their position meeting budget. However, when safety incidences began to rise due to a sense of hopelessness, punitive actions were taken to address this surge. "An organization's reputation as a good, responsible, honest, responsive company is based on judgements about previous outcomes activities and outcomes. Similarly, an organization's reputation as dishonest, irresponsible, or inappropriate arises from judgements of its previous (past) activities. Legitimacy, in this sense, is an inevitable byproduct of the organizations past and the efforts to retrospectively make sense of that past" (Seeger, 2014, pg.109).

In this case, recent strides toward further legitimacy seem to erode for stakeholders who believed the organization put into place a set of actions and beliefs out of care only to see this as yet another hurdle to jump through making their job increasingly difficult.

In step six of becoming an ethical conflict manager, Craig Johnson advises the use of apology: "Sometimes saying "I'm sorry" is the best way to defuse conflict" but "our motivation for apologizing should be based on our ethical obligations, not on hope of personal gain"

(Johnson, 2022, pg. 176). In this way, apologizing would have done a great deal of good because it would not have eroded the good that had been done earlier in the year when upper-level management engaged with the field in such a healthy manner. Acknowledgment, Remorse, Explanation and Reparation are the four tenets to this restorative act (Johnson, 2022, pg. 176-177) but “sometimes the remorse and sincerity of the apology itself is enough to address the harm you have caused” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 177). The explanation as to why this was occurring, yes to meet budget, but also to avoid having to lay anyone off or further eliminate additional positions, would have completely changed the perception that many in the field held that the safety program was lip service and could not possibly be maintained in the face of a hiring and overtime freeze.

Agent of Change

“The inability to state what an organization does and why it does what it does announces a communications ethics danger that invites pragmatic communicative consequences” (Arnett, 2018, pg. 143) and prevents ethical change. Renowned organizational culture pioneer Edgar Schein argues that cultures are much more difficult to change: “There are other words, like the word “climate,” that can be used for...easier-to-change (elements)” (Mike, 2014, pg. 322) but does discuss the Hewlett Packard model, one in which “the espoused values” of the culture were “totally out of line with the reality of ... which people acted (Mike, 2014, pg. 325).

As a result, the first action to take is to evaluate the action of the organization from the lens of ethically decoupled versus ethically transformed organizations. In the safety scenario, the organization demonstrated the following decoupled behaviors: saw ethics as a means to an end,

exhibited behavior inconsistent with stated values, was driven by the bottom line, demonstrated ethically inconsistent reward structures (Johnson, 2022, pg. 278-279).

Next, it is necessary to reconfigure and build upon both formal and informal components of the ethical culture to affect change. “The enduring and guiding principles” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 280) of the organization’s core values must be re-established and communicated via a mission statement. There is already a mission in place, however, in some respects its form is nebulous and the more concrete and ethically inspired parts of said mission do not meet the true definition of organizational communication as stated in the Arnett text.

Adopting a formal ethics code must occur, even if it starts departmentally and grows from there. “While adopting a code doesn’t guarantee moral improvement, the evidence cited demonstrates that codes can play an important role in fostering an ethical environment” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 286). Since there is not currently a formal ethics code at my organization, this formal element will need to be built from the ground up.

The benefits of a rewards and performance evaluation system that can be implemented by rewarding people doing good and avoiding a bottom-line mentality to discourage “selfishness and dishonest behavior” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 290) would also be a structure to reconfigure, especially as it relates to the number of safety violations.

An ethical aspect of an informal culture to build upon is storytelling. “Heroes play a particularly important role in organizational narratives” (Johnson, 2022, pg. 295). We have many pragmatic speakers in leadership roles; however, we need ensure their stories are being properly broadcast to all stakeholders with a consistent overarching theme.

Conclusion

As I continue to fully commit to improving the ethical culture at my organization and in my surroundings in general, I believe building and reconfiguring the existing elements of formal and informal ethical culture is priority number one. Thereafter, it will be easier to welcome others my ethically centered dwelling place and further define and clarify the community of memory within our organization. With little to no effective communication practices in place for an organization of nearly 11,000 employees, this necessitates the genesis of a good dwelling place “which then shapes communicative practices and our interpretive engagement with a community of memory” (Arnett, 2018, pg. 135). Once the community of memory, “the pragmatic equivalent of an organizational conscience” (Arnett, 2018, pg. 133), is forged and allowed to adapt to the organic changes that industry experiences, I am confident that as an agent of change, both easy to change climates and deeper-rooted cultural norms will begin to shift via open and transparent ethical organizational communication.

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