

Happy people make

Geoff Dodds looks at how to create the kind of positive culture that can lead to an inspirational brand.

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“**B**rands are built from the inside” – a mantra that I, and many others have used over the years, especially in relation to professional service brands.

People obsess about differentiation, but the truth is that, in service industries, brand strength and coherence are driven by more basic and yet more significant characteristics:

- quality people
- a strong sense of common values,
- a supportive and cohesive environment, and
- enlightened leadership.

When I think of the clients I have worked with, I recall how much easier the branding process was for those with a positive culture than it was for those with

weak or dysfunctional cultures.

It's very hard to define a brand where you have to paper over internal cracks. It's much easier to define and create an inspirational and coherent brand when you start with a cohesive internal platform.

So it's all about culture?

Given its importance, you might expect that firms would be spending a lot more time working on their culture. Some are. Many are not.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) in the UK, conducts regular employee surveys, which have shown, over the past several years, a stable level of employee engagement of between 35-39%. So that's just 35-39% of employees indicating a positive level of engagement. Which means that 61-65%

of employees are not positively engaged. Staggering!

The Barrett Values Centre® conducts hundreds of values surveys every year amongst organisations of varying types. As well as asking what values people actually experience in their organisation, they also ask what values they would like to see in place. The largest jumps between currently experienced and desired are the two values: 'Employee recognition' and 'Employee fulfilment'.

Anecdotally, I have lost count of the number of people I have spoken to in recent years who are deeply unhappy because of the situation they find themselves in at work. Often this is because of a poor relationship with their immediate boss. Just as often, it is about their discomfort with the overall culture of the organisation.

Seven levels of personal values



happy brands

In short, the evidence suggests that many leaders are failing to do enough.

But isn't culture complex?

To be fair to leaders for a moment, engaging every member of staff in an organisation is a tough call, for a number of reasons:

Different personalities – All organisations consist of different personality types.

Those familiar with the Myers-Briggs (MBTI®) model will recognise how radically different are the behaviours of an individual with preferences for ISTJ from those of someone with preferences for ENFP. Let me explain.

Those with an 'introverted' (I) preference won't take kindly to a leader who bounds up to their desk with a new idea, demanding an immediate response. They will want to take it away and think about it.

Those who favour 'intuition' (N) will want goals described in the broadest

terms, whereas people with a 'sensing' (S) preference will want to know exactly what, when, how and where.

People with a 'thinking' (T) preference will be quite happy to get feedback from their boss at the end of a project. Those with a 'feeling' (F) preference will want (preferably positive) feedback throughout.

People with a 'judging' (J) preference will have everything carefully planned and structured to deliver on time, whilst those with a 'perceiving' (P) preference will leave it all to the last minute and potentially drive their (J) boss to distraction.

Different values – According to Richard Barrett of the Barrett Values Centre®, people can operate from any one or a combination of 'seven values levels' (see diagram opposite).

Someone with values towards the higher end of the hierarchy (such as compassion, collaboration, giving back) would need quite different leadership and

motivation from someone operating with values towards the survival end (such as security, loyalty, financial stability).

It is inevitable that in any one organisation, whilst there might be some common ground on values, there will be people with quite different values profiles, requiring quite different treatment.

Different life stages – Once again, Barrett explains that, throughout life, we can all expect to pass through sequential stages of psychological development – see diagram left.

This is complex enough as it is, but bear in mind that some people will, for various reasons, not have completed certain stages and will be suffering the pain and frustrations associated with that failure. There are few leaders with the understanding and sensitivity to deal with this.

So managing culture can seem daunting.

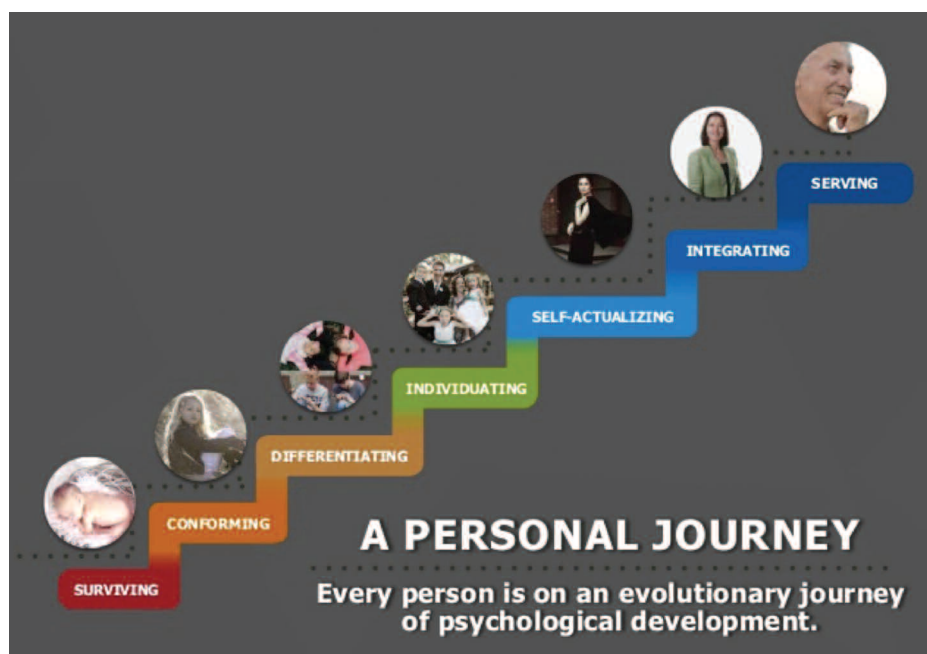
But there are tools that can help (see Barrett Values Centre®, MBTI assessment, etc) and leaders need to be more prepared to invest time and money on measurement, so that they are better tuned to their people's needs. Exploring personality types, measuring values, understanding where people are on their life journeys.

What about good leadership?

Of course, creating a positive culture is also about the quality of leadership. But what kind of leadership?

It was while I was pondering this, that I had an interesting conversation with a friend about his experiences of leadership.

This man had for years been captain of a luxury yacht owned by a Russian oligarch. Recently, he had taken a shore-based job as MD of the office that ran the yachting business. He was deeply



depressed about his new role.

When he was a captain, the owner (his boss) was anything but easy. He was well known for changing his mind and making unreasonable demands on the crew. Typically, he would call the captain in and say, "I know we had planned to go to HongKong, but now I want to go to New York."

The captain would call the crew together. There would be a few rumbles of surprise and then they would all get on with the job. It was a happy ship.

In his new shore-based role, if he tried to make any kind of change, there would be a revolution. People complained. They wouldn't support each other. They grumbled at every opportunity. They even failed to refill the milk in the office fridge – in his view symbolic of the entire culture.

This was a man who was clearly a highly effective leader of a ship's crew, but was really struggling with his new remit in a (negative) culture he had inherited.

So we talked more about what it was that made his previous tenure so successful. He concluded that there were three things.

The first was that on the ship, there was a **clear purpose** or goal and each person had their assigned role in fulfilling that purpose. If the goal moved, it was readily communicated to everyone and they all re-focused on the new goal.

The second was that he **knew every member** of the crew personally and was able to provide the kind of coaching they needed to perform at their best. He cared about their welfare, had done their jobs in the past and was in the best possible position to provide each of them with the support they needed.

And finally, he gave out **regular feedback**. A naturally personable man, he had the confidence needed to hand out praise when it was earned.

As he described it from a crew member's perspective: "All I really want is a leader who knows where we are all going and who cares enough about me to give me the coaching I need and the feedback I deserve."

Not a bad leadership philosophy and really quite simple. His challenge now was to find a way to apply these principles to a new and more challenging situation. I await the results with interest.

So what can we learn from the captain?

Whilst I believe that large, sophisticated



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organisations need a more data driven approach to management of culture, I also believe that we can take away some valuable leadership principles from a less sophisticated environment.

Purpose – There's much talk of purpose at the moment. Too many organisations are unclear about their fundamental purpose, beyond making money. Many organisations have forgotten or become confused about what their original purpose was.

Each person in the organisation needs to understand the overall purpose and also be clear about their own role in delivering that purpose, which will vary according to their function and their particular skills and interests.

Coaching – Given the challenges of different personality types, different

values and different stages of psychological development, it would seem clear that a coaching style of leadership is the most appropriate and effective style to adopt, in order to maximise people's engagement and fulfilment.

Coaching focuses on goals and ensures that the coachee is clear about what their goals are. Coaching gives leaders the opportunity to probe people's feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs. Coaching places responsibility for action firmly on the shoulders of the coachee, not the coach.

Praise – Everyone needs positive feedback. In my own career, the bosses who have inspired me to go the extra mile have been those with the confidence to praise their people.

In Britain, praise doesn't come naturally. We need more practice!

In summary

As both consultant and coach, I have become increasingly concerned at the parlous state of many firms' cultures. This clearly has an impact on the people who work there. It also has an impact on those firms' brands.

Creating a strong, supportive culture can seem challenging. But there are some great measurement tools that can provide the data to make culture more manageable. At the same time, there are some very simple and effective leadership principles that can help.

The starting point is an acceptance that brands are built from the inside, a willingness to measure and face up to the realities of the existing culture and a commitment to creating the kind of positive and cohesive culture that will support a coherent and inspirational brand.

Because, when all's said and done, happy people make happy brands.

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