

Building Bridges: Empowering leaders to forge strong work cultures through connectedness

Work is an important part of who we are, we may differ in how much it shapes our identity, but most people need to feel they are contributing, or that what they do and where they spend their time means something.

As leaders, we need to get past some of the rhetoric around building employee engagement, managing workplace wellbeing and creating job satisfaction, and dive into human connectedness. Once we start to look at what human beings need to feel well, safe, and part of something it becomes easier to translate that into healthy workplace cultures.

As a leader, you can't control culture, it's created by the people within it. The strongest influences on how you experience culture will always come from the people you interact with the most, those you work next to and spend your time with – this is often peer-to-peer, not leader-driven.

What you can, and must do, if you want a healthy workplace culture is set the tone, your expectations, and boundaries for behaviour. The biggest impact you will make is through the things that you model – the way you behave, your attitude, and how you treat people.

You are responsible for how you communicate, for treating people with respect

and equity, and for ensuring the work environment fulfils basic human needs. This goes beyond health and safety and beyond contractual obligation. Whether or not someone's human needs are met makes a significant difference to their wellbeing, their motivation, and their level of engagement.

There are many theories around human needs and one that works well for workplaces is *Revich's model*. He describes security, social, and stimulation as the fundamental needs all humans have. The interplay between these needs and the importance of one over another continually varies, but strong workplace cultures provide all three.

Connectedness helps to satisfy these needs and to build healthy culture. Here are some of the ways you can influence culture by focusing on these three key needs.

Security

Uncertainty erodes people's sense of security – and it's not just the big stuff that creates a problem, changeable behaviour, differing reactions – not knowing where they stand or what response they might get from you, is just as harmful.

The human brain hates uncertainty, its job is to keep you alive, in part by predicting and prioritising your physiological needs based on information received. Pattern recognition and repetitive behaviour, enable your brain to process the enormous amount of information it receives, and when that information is incomplete or contradictory it makes a best guess.

This is how people can share the same experience and have wildly different interpretations, emotional reactions, and recollections. In the workplace this is how rumours, gossip and perceived wisdom can create great or harmful cultures.

Most leaders massively under communicate, not just because you can't always share what you know, it's often because they assume that once they've shared their information people have processed it.

To help people feel safe, and to meet security needs, communicate in multiple ways and multiple times, and when you can't share information, acknowledge it – people will likely have worked out something's going on and will be making up their own version of events.

Consistency is your friend, manage your own behaviour and emotion, and make sure your people know what to expect from you.

Social needs

Humans are connected creatures by default. Our physiology is regulated by how we are feeling. Very simply put, our emotions determine what neurochemicals we produce which in turn influence how we function. We are naturally compassionate, we produce oxytocin, endorphins, and dopamine in response to feeling connected, this reduces stress, fear and makes us more productive. This is our natural rest and restore state – we are designed to operate from here most of the time.

Unfortunately, many people live an ‘always on’ life, we are accessible 24 /7, bombarded by information, ‘news’, and other media, and that’s before we start to think about the noise in our own heads. All of this means we are often existing in a low-level fight /flight mode. This is fear-driven, and reduces connectedness, logical processing, and productivity.

When it comes to social needs, start with what you can impact, get to know your people, not just their work roles, but a bit about them as humans, and share some things about yourself too where you can. This might sound basic, but leaders are often conditioned to be ‘professional’, be in control, and not too vulnerable – all of this is bad for connection and ultimately culture.

Being vulnerable doesn’t mean you need to share your innermost secrets, it means you use your stories and experiences to help others and to connect, as well as to seek support if you need it.

Ensure people have space for the social aspects of work, prioritise conversation and catching up even in online meetings. Again, this is where you set the tone and expectations, and then let your people do this their own way.

Stimulation

In many ways this is the easiest thing for leaders to influence, make sure your people know how their work contributes to the wider mission or project. Most of us want to be part of something that makes a difference, we want to feel that the time we contribute, and the effort we put in matters.

Feeling valued is important, feeling challenged, stimulated, and that you have contributed all help to make this happen. Often, it’s those tough moments when you feel you need to have all the answers, that you need to let go and let your people contribute, and often they will have different and sometimes better solutions – especially if they are closer to the problem.

Connectedness is our natural human state, it stands to reason that

connectedness at work is good for culture, for people's wellbeing, and their productivity. If you want to build a strong, healthy workplace culture, think about how you connect and what you have influence over and start there.

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