Can This Culture Be Changed?
Our Search to Energize the Workplace, Chapter 1

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The final proof will be in the numbers; ... we will measure our growth to determine if the percentage of revenue is increasing at a greater rate than in previous years.

About a year ago, while attending yet another seminar about generating energy in the workplace by addressing generational gaps within the workforce, a moment of déjà vu washed over me and I was suddenly transported to the large family dinners of my youth. At the head of the table my uncle is lamenting, “These kids these days, they don’t know how easy they have it! When I was a kid I had to get a job at 14, and I was happy to have it even though it was back-breaking physical labor.” My cousins and I banter back that we are misunderstood. Our lives are not a proverbial bed of roses; in fact, we are the generation that will be left to fix what my uncle’s generation had bungled.

Fast forward to Monday morning in the general ophthalmology practice I manage. My office is near the staff entry. From this vantage point I am a spectator at the daily parade of Millennials, Generation “X”ers, Baby Boomers, and Traditionalists who march in for duty in the clinic, optical shop, or surgery center. Some exchange cheery hellos, many are lost in what seems like quiet resignation, some are visibly stressed, and a few are mumbling about how bad their day is already. And so another week begins with a fair amount of disengagement. How does our organization transform this apathy into energy and passion?
**Been there, done that**

For years, too many to enumerate, the goal of creating a dynamic workplace has landed squarely at the top of the annual business “to do” list, aka the Strategic Plan. To support achievement of this purpose, countless conferences have been attended and dozens of books and articles have been read. Many programs have been evaluated and some implemented. While certain improvement is initially realized, after varied honeymoon periods the zest seems to fade and the parade of ho-hum resigned staff entry returns.

The direct correlation between low morale and decreased productivity is clear. The Gallup Organization pegs the value of lost productivity annually at about $350 billion among the 22 million workers in the U.S. In real numbers this is a loss of about $15,000 per employee per year. Recapturing even a portion of this revenue would go a long way toward recouping some of the cutbacks ophthalmology loses annually to contract reductions from health and vision care companies.

In considering how to approach this paradox of continually focusing on the creation of a more dynamic workplace yet always failing to maintain momentum in the long term, we suspected we had missed something in our approach. If the generation gap was not the problem, and customer service programs only worked briefly, was it possible that there might be an alternative course?

Other businesses have been successful in increasing revenues through improving employee morale. What was their model? How did it differ from the programs we had implemented and what made the process endure?

**Following a hunch:**

**We look to other industries**

In studying companies like Nordstrom’s, Disney, and the Ritz, we see that the entire culture of these businesses is centered on not only offering the superlative customer service, but also in supporting an environment that makes coming to work enticing. Jobs in these companies are prized. Stiff competition surrounds hiring and turnover is low. Employees of companies like Ritz-Carlton and Disney go through rigorous and ongoing training programs. These programs center on their culture of treating each other and their customers (often referred to as guests) with respect. They are encouraged and rewarded for taking that extra step. Can this type of culture be recreated in healthcare?

It does seem possible. Examples of strong positive environments exist in larger healthcare systems, notably the Mayo and Cleveland Clinics. Stories of their legendary patient care have made them nationally famous. Our challenge would be to recreate this atmosphere on a much smaller scale. But to really get somewhere, we’d have to commit resources to this goal over a significant period of time, as it is obvious that our previous efforts had not been consistent over time. In tough financial times, it is a daunting risk to allocate assets to a hunch, but as my uncle always said, “When times get tough, the tough get going,” and so we began to formulate a plan. The goal is to change the culture of the organization. How will we do this? Will we succeed? And how will we measure that success?

**Our “work in progress”**

First, the practice is committed to engaging outside support for the process. Since this is a relatively new direction for a small group (Ritz-Carlton has 15,000 employees versus our 72), we contracted with a consultant from outside healthcare but in a similar service-type industry. Second, we have committed to stay continually focused on the process for one entire year. Third, we involved all of the staff in the development process for our new culture and everyone from shareholders to trainees committed to be part of the process. Fourth, everyone agreed to be tested and anonymously evaluated as they engage in our new culture. Patient surveys and other means of measuring our performance are not new to the practice but prior to this program everyone dreaded the thought of these tools. Now, we have agreed to look at these comments with a plan to learn from them so that we might do a better job making our patients and therefore our jobs happier. Thus, the plan is to use these observations to refine our processes and make our workplace more and more enjoyable.

The final proof will be in the numbers; as we move forward with our year of culture change we will measure our growth to determine if the percentage of revenue is increasing at a greater rate than in previous years.

We are at the beginning of our paradigm shift. So far the daily parade of staff members coming past my office is more excited and enthusiastic. Patient compliments have increased and staff are commenting on feeling empowered and “proud about the job they do.” As with any worthwhile venture there will be bumps and obstacles in our road, but we are confident that together we can resolve them. We will know more about such things in the next 3 months. Stay tuned for chapter two in this new adventure.

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