THREE WAYS TO ENHANCE AN INNOVATIVE CULTURE

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One feature of great innovation cultures is an abundance mindset.

Business author Steven Covey once defined an abundance mentality as a ‘win-win’ philosophy, in which everyone works together for shared success. In practical terms, this mentality relies on shared resources, shared decision-making, shared recognition, and shared profits.

Expanding on this definition today, an abundance mindset is a way of thinking expansively about future opportunities. In the work environment, people with an abundance mindset believe that there are limitless opportunities for everyone to train for, pursue, and propose.

We know—and studies show us—that what people believe shapes what they achieve. Where someone might see risk, someone else sees opportunity. An abundance mindset gives people permission to dream bigger, think that they can make an impact, and know that they join in both the effort and reward. By working together, people can do more and ultimately benefit the broader community more. An abundance mindset leads to feelings of empowerment, commitment, and generosity.

In times of change, an abundance mindset reminds people that they can build the future they want to see. A positive mindset will simply see a glass as half-full versus half-empty. An abundance mindset means people can imagine multiple potential ways to fill or empty the glass further and then find the creative resources to do so.

THE ROLE FOR LEADERSHIP

Knowing how to create an innovative culture separates good leaders from great leaders.

Great leaders know that culture matters and what elements induce a healthy and successful work environment. More than simply “how work gets done,” a corporate culture is a mix of what leadership wants to convey and how employees feel about their work experience.

A company’s culture constantly evolves through numerous small actions and decisions that gradually turn into a regular pattern and way of working. Leadership sets the tone. Managing a corporate culture requires a steady awareness and commitment by company leaders because they model and project the culture. Employees then demonstrate similar attitudes and behaviors that ultimately become the dominant mode and outlook.
Great leaders establish the broader conditions for an abundance mindset to flourish within a corporate culture. They can do this in three ways: by creating a multitude of opportunities that help teams learn, advance, and suggest new ideas. Opportunities to learn create an abundance of potential; opportunities to advance create an abundance of initiative, and opportunities to suggest create an abundance of creativity—which together reinforce the abundance mindset.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN**

Joe Musselman wanted to be in military special operations since he was 14. He began training to enter the Navy under a SEAL contract in 2007 as the sixteenth member of his family to have served active duty within the U.S. Armed Forces. Within two years of training, Musselman experienced a serious injury that led to years of physical therapy and ultimately a medical
discharge, but he was not ready to leave the military community yet. As he underwent the general transition process, which sees nearly 200 SEALs and related positions rotate out annually, he discovered a big opportunity to help others like himself.

SEALs are trained to conduct operations in any situation, and they spend 18 to 24 months in grueling training before being assigned to teams. From the outside, many people think that former SEALs can do anything. Yet when SEALs consider starting a new job in the private sector, they feel very limited in what they can do.

“The first step is to get them out of the box,” says Musselman. A mindset of scarcity narrows down options. An abundance mindset shows SEALs that they have endless options, they just need to find a way to realize them.

Musselman has organized a rigorous learning program, part of which reminds SEALs about their earlier training. The program includes a mix of online certificates from academic institutions, short courses, and other tools delivered at key SEAL milestones and, most critically, at transition time.

As SEALs see the variety of possibilities in front of them, they learn that they really can do anything again. This hope, coupled with their passion to excel, allows them to build a new future as burgeoning businessmen and community leaders.

For example, former SEAL Gabriel Gomez was a serious political contender in the Massachusetts’ U.S. Senate race. Former SEAL Ted Alexander is a managing partner of Mission Ventures, which invests in promising early-stage business ventures in Southern California.

In companies, a similar learning approach encourages employees to break limited perceptions and think in new ways—which helps instill good innovation habits. Employees can take advantage of different options in learning tools and education, thus bringing new skills to their current roles and preparing them for their next career shift.

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**OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE**

Creating opportunities to advance also matters. Most people are motivated to do more, and they want to find outlets that let them grow professionally and personally.

Of all the reasons given for employee satisfaction, advancement opportunities were valued most at every level of employment from entry level to management, according to a survey by talent agency TMP Worldwide. A separate survey from Right Management, part of ManPowerGroup, found a similar result.

Some surprising shifts in job mobility and turnover have occurred lately that change the usual paths of advancement. Americans of all ages and groups are moving far less frequently than before, the quitting rate for jobs has dropped, and moves between firms are
down. The authors of a recent Federal Reserve Board study surmise that many workers are relying on internal job markets to switch positions within the same company.

For some, a sideways step is the desired option. An innovative culture allows people to create more flexible roles, while retaining an unquenchable curiosity about what is possible.

Kathy Steele had spent six years with technology consultancy Accenture, which entailed many hours of travel to client sites. “You’re not anywhere,” she says laughing. “You’re in transit all the time.” Steele eventually decided that she needed to build her life and decided to find a job that required less traveling. She soon accepted a position at procurement services provider Alliente, which was acquired by software company Ariba a few years later.

Ariba’s marketing states: “Aribians are a very close-knit family, and we try to maintain a small-company feel.” Steele has experienced this corporate culture. By 2009, she decided that she was ready to raise her own family and wished to reduce her workload. “My supervisor at the time helped me look at different options in the company,” says Steele.

Steele feels lucky since she’s seen other companies that provide less flexibility. “This is a good example of a win-win,” Steele says. She works four six-hour days at Ariba, which increases her on-call time with colleagues and also provides more time to spend with her children.

Leaders build on everyone’s natural ambitions. More than encouraging creative brainstorms, they urge employees to take on bigger roles and lead new initiatives because these actions contribute to building a great innovation culture and help develop additional leaders—which creates a self-fulfilling cycle of abundance.

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUGGEST

A third way leaders build great innovative cultures is by creating opportunities for everyone to suggest and introduce new ideas. Innovation is predicated on new ideas, which may come from anywhere within or outside an organization.

Technology giant Cisco calls this “inclusive innovation” because the goal is to involve everyone in the pursuit of innovation. In the Services organization at
Cisco, 13,000 employees in 85 countries contribute 22% to the company’s revenue. Kate O’Keeffe knew that her innovation team could create a much bigger impact in the Cisco business unit through a combination of top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. Top-down approaches include executive sponsorship and a global software platform for online idea management, while targeted idea campaigns and competitions spur bottom-up creativity.

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“We provide the enablers,” says Lisa Voss, who runs the initiatives in leadership and capability development for the Services innovation team. “It’s up to the leaders to create the conditions.”

Employees are often willing to offer their creative input and time simply if they are asked. An abundance of new ideas provides the kindling for the bigger fire of innovation. Part of the success at Cisco rests on the Service Innovation team’s principle to “follow the energy.” They work first with Cisco leaders who already believe in the value of innovation, are willing to commit resources, and lend their name and influence to the broader campaign. These leaders have then created bigger sparks in the Cisco community.

The team organized a global Innovation Summit in May 2013 to generate hundreds of new ideas across Cisco’s Services organization. With the visible support of 25 senior executives, the Innovation Summit involved 2,500 employees from 35 countries in 21 different locations.

“The energy was contagious!” says Voss. “We pulled in another 75 employees globally to help us plan and produce this big event. It helped remind everyone about the collective power our ideas can have.”

NOT A FIXED MINDSET

Creating an abundance mindset takes time. It also does not imply a fixed or excessive outlook. Depending on current business goals, a smart leader selects an appropriate mix of work values, practices, and elements to affect corporate culture and then adjusts that mix over time. Not everything has to be pushed forward or intensified all at the same time.

Corporate cultures that last over time are resilient. More than endure, these cultures reinvent and adapt to changing situations. By adopting an abundance mindset, leaders create an innovative corporate culture that allows everyone to find and increase potential future opportunities for everyone involved. An opportunity today becomes an innovation tomorrow that, in turn, leads to more opportunities in a self-generating cycle. This is the ceaseless bounty an abundance mindset produces.

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