A Coach's Guide to Company Culture

from the Executive Coaching Roundtable

EXECUTIVE
COACHING
ROUNDTABLE

While the primary focus for executive coaching work is the immediate performance of an individual leader, the larger organizational culture must also be constantly considered. "Culture" is not easily defined or measured but it is clearly experienced by employees and is often the subject of much conversation. Executive performance is often judged by expectations hidden in the company's culture. When helping an executive introduce company-wide changes, knowing the profile of an organization's culture can help a coach and leader anticipate resistance and determine successful navigation routes.

As both an insider and outsider for the company, coaches may be uniquely positioned to decipher a company's culture and to keep a leader focused on this "invisible" component of the operating environment. By bringing the culture repeatedly into plain sight, a coach can also work with the executive to shape the culture into an asset that regularly contributes to successful business performance.

Listed below are several strategies for sizing up company culture:

• Pay careful attention to your first visit to the executive's work site. Do the building and surrounding grounds draw you in, overwhelm you, change your mood or suggest any particular values? Are the messages you receive from the physical environment consistent or inconsistent with other stated company priorities?

• As you walk around the offices and hallways, notice what information is posted on bulletin boards and break areas. What seem to be the important messages being sent?

• Ask for the information packet provided to new employees (and any special packet provided when recruiting executives or senior technical staff). What messages are contained in those packets which speak to "what it is like to work here." If you were being hired or recruited, what would be your impression of the materials? Is there any information missing or over-emphasized?

• Ask your client what they might say to you about the company's culture if they were trying to recruit you to work there. What might they NOT say or have to think about "spinning"? What seem to be the biggest surprises of new employees about the company?

• Spend time on the company's cafeteria(s). What do you notice there? How is the area decorated? What company messages are provided in and around the cafeteria? Is there anything suggested by which people sit together and those that do not? When employees talk about the company, what seem to be their attitudes toward senior leadership? What seem to be their underlying concerns?

- Find out what draws people together. What rituals occur? When do they occur? What gets celebrated and what does not get celebrated? Who attends? Who gets included and excluded? Who gets served at these gatherings? What organizational values get highlighted through the rituals/gatherings?

- Pay special attention to the working conditions for employees at the lowest levels of the company. Do the parking attendant and security guard have the information they need? Is equipment current? Are working spaces respectful? What is the tenor of relations between senior leadership and frontline employees?

- Think like an investor and ask basic questions about the company and its performance. What information seems readily available? What information is not in general circulation? What does this suggest about which information is bearing on the minds of executives when making decisions under uncertainty?

- Ask for an information packet from Investor Relations and get multiple years of the Annual Report. How does the performance picture of the company get portrayed? Look at the photos in the Annual Reports, what images or messages get reinforced from one year to the next?

- Visit the public website for the company. What key information is placed "up front" or gets repeated as you move from one page to the next? How is the corporate image on the website the same or different from other media about the company?

- Ask your client: "What are stories everyone has heard related to the history of the organization?"

- Do a basic internet search on the company. What has been in the news about the company and your client? How is the news different than what you have learned from others directly? Use a news posting service (e.g., Google Alerts or Yahoo Finance) to sign up for regular updates about your client and the company. On the company's website, you may also be able to sign up to receive press releases.

- Consider investing in one public share of the company. What information do you receive and what messages does it send about the company's culture?

- Ask your client to describe the top management team and the CEO (if not your client). Are there any special stories that get told about members of the top group (e.g., how they got the job, who wanted them to get the job, what job they want next)? What would employees say are the two or three most valued attributes of the company's successful leaders?

• Learn from your client how people get promoted in the company. What do they have to do? Who do they have to know? Give an example of a colleague who has done it successfully.

• What can your client tell you about why prior senior executives have been fired or forced out of their positions? What led up to their failure? When have people "gotten in trouble" but not fired. Are there particular behaviors or activities that are frowned upon?

• Find out from your client what he/she thinks the business model is for his/her company. How do they make a profit? How does their business model differ from competitors? How would your client describe his/her company's culture compared to a competitor's culture?

• Ask your client to describe what gets in the way of his/her own effectiveness? What gets in the way of the effectiveness of other key players?

• Ask your client if there was one thing that the client could change about the company's culture, what would it be?

• As you learn about your client and observe others in the company, ask what can be learned about the company culture from: (a) how people communicate (e.g., email, face to face, phone, text), (b) how people construct their messages (e.g., slang, special vocabulary, acronyms, metaphors such as sports, military or technical), (c) what people wear and the messages or status conveyed by clothing choices.

Readings About Organizational Culture

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