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Create Capacity through People

The second of a six-part series on developing and sustaining organizational capacity
by Bruce Weber and Charlie Smith

▶ Every month, organizations prepare financial statements reconciling their “numbers” for the accounting period. One of those line items — salaries — typically represents one of the largest expenditures for the business and is a significant investment for the firm. Behind those dollars are real people who are the lifeblood of the organization and one of the key drivers of economic growth. It is necessary for the staff to maintain high levels of productivity, engagement and focus to have a positive impact and ensure solid programmatic and financial performance. One of the best ways to accomplish high-level performance is to deeply embed a solid culture and core values within the organization. Creating this culture is a system-wide effort and takes time, but is well worth the investment.

What is culture? Culture, according to Alison T. Brill, public health and inclusion specialist with the Massachusetts Department of Health, “is the way things are done, how people are treated, the values that are upheld, and the power structures that are maintained.” Culture is the shared beliefs and values that are established by leadership and then permeated throughout the organization. These cultures and the values that support them set the stage for everything that lies ahead. Positive culture allows individuals to bring forth new ideas that challenge the norm in a productive way. Culture becomes the foundation that all good organizations rest upon. Failure to focus upon building strong culture and values can have adverse effects in leadership success and result in high turnover and poor customer service, while impacting success in achieving the organizations goals/bottom line.

Now that we know the importance of building strong culture and values, how does one go about doing it? According to the SHRM Foundation, a leading voice in sustainable HR practices, it begins with identifying the core components of a good culture. One of the best examples of a company with a solid culture is Costco, a place where many of us have spent many weekend afternoon shopping for giant-sized anything! Despite those oversized products and tasty samples, Costco

offers quality service that is consistently rated highly and their employees are among the best. Costco management began with seven powerful strategies: 1) Share information about the organization and its strategy, keeping the team current on direction and outcomes. 2) Provide decision-making discretion and autonomy by empowering people with freedom to get the job done while holding them accountable. 3) Create a civil culture with positive relationships and have zero tolerance for incivility while celebrating success and having fun. 4) Value diversity and establish an inclusive atmosphere by encouraging acceptance of those who might differ from the majority. 5) Offer performance feedback by encouraging an open dialogue of two-way communication and creating opportunities for learning. 6) Provide a sense of meaning by sharing stories and highlighting success and impact. 7) Boost employee well-being by encouraging staff to take care of themselves through flexible work schedules and breaks.

What all of these strategies have in common is, they value the employees as partners in the business and strive for inclusiveness in everything they do. This translates into a strong “who we are” and “what we do.” This becomes the barometer for gauging success and impact in an organization and deeply values the contributions of everyone in building the human capacity within the organization. Fundamentally, organizations are collectives of people, so one must invest in building the best bench possible.

The key to building organization culture and values is to get started! Some of the strategies mentioned above require minimal financial investment but reap significant returns. The impact on an organization's people is a more engaged, inclusive, and productive team that is working to a collective set of goals. Those whom the organization serves will notice the distinct difference between that organization and others like it. Building a solid culture and core values is a key ingredient in overall organizational capacity and should not be overlooked. Get started today! ■

