You Can't Win Indy in an Edsel!

How to Develop a
High Performance Work Culture

Behaviors

Systems

Beliefs

Culture

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2006 Edition

By Kevin McManus

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You Can't Win Indy in an Edsel!

How to Develop a High Performance Work Culture

Table of Contents

Do Your Leaders Behave Badly?

HP Culture Challenge #1

Measuring leaders only by the results their people get for them

Performance Barrier

A poor leadership development process results in a lost organization

First Step

Install a process for gauging leadership behavior effectiveness

Leverage Point

Getting front line supervisors to work and act as effective leaders

Key Tools

Leadership Index, expectations list, leadership development process

If you want to begin shifting your work culture towards a high performance way of thinking and acting, you need to start with leadership. I am not just talking about the people at the top however. In fact, the front line leaders have much more influence on shaping your work culture than the people at the top do. This might be an ego blow to some, but think about it. Who spends the most time with the most people? Sure, your CEO might be a powerful public speaker, but he or she probably spends only a few hours a year with your people. Your front line managers and supervisors however see those people for thousands of hours each year.

You cannot get people to begin using high performance work practices if the person they report to does not support their use. The perception of what a company is trying to accomplish is shaped by the front line leader as well. What is important on the job, and what is acceptable on the job, is defined and enforced more by these people than by any rules, policies, or procedures that may be in print. *If you want to shift towards a high performance work culture, you have to change the way all of your leaders, and in particular, those on the front lines, spend their time each day and behave when they are on the job.*

This might sound like a tall order, but it is exactly what the high performing organizations do. They use some form of leadership index to measure leadership behavior consistency over time. They clearly define both task and behavior expectations of their leaders, and they design their performance assessment processes to gauge the degree to which these expectations are being met. Like most companies, they track departmental and site performance as one measure of leader effectiveness, but they also look specifically at the individual behavior and task contributions that are being made by each of their leaders.

These companies recognize that high performance in all areas of importance can not be attained unless essentially everyone in a leadership role is 'on board.' To what degree is EACH of your leaders behaving in a high performance manner EACH day?

Leaders Behaving Badly

- **Formal leaders send constant signals about their personal vision desires**

- **Negative emotion makes events more memorable**

- **Formal leaders are the gatekeepers for personal and team improvement efforts**

- **For the positive to work, the negative must be stopped**
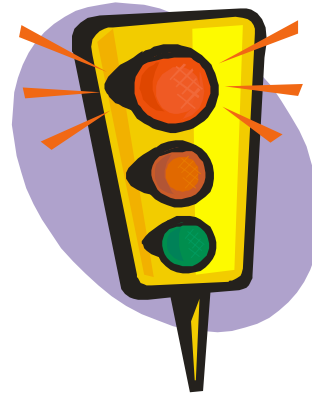
Change Systems to Shift Cultures

On average, organizations have much better systems in place for monitoring leadership tasks than they do leadership behaviors. Behaviors are what matter however. It is pretty difficult to attach a lot of emotion to a performance summary report, but it is pretty easy to destroy an employee's morale by yelling at them and criticizing them in front of their peers. A supervisor might be great at responding to e-mails on time or sitting in on all of the meetings they are supposed to go to, but what do they say about upper management, the direction the company is going, or efforts that are being made to do new things when their boss is not around?

Leadership behavior consistency is key for two reasons. First of all, daily, face-to-face interactions send a much stronger message than any e-mail, bulletin board posting, or memo. What a supervisor allows and does not allow lets people know what he or she considers to be important. Plus, because this person was placed in a leadership role by someone, people look to this person for direction on a daily basis. Ignoring something sends a message just as much as commenting on it does. Deciding to do something a certain way tells people what takes priority over other possible choices. You might say that safety is the top priority for example, but what do your people think when you spend all of your time working on efficiency numbers and you consistently make decisions that favor output over safety?

The second reason behavior is key has to do with the fact that people usually attach emotion to the actions they take. Whether this emotion is positive or negative, it accentuates the message that a leader sends to their people. Only a small percentage of a message is conveyed by the words that are used – facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language are what send the true message to people. How do your leaders react when they are asked to attend an improvement team meeting? How do your leaders react when certain performance numbers are good or bad? How do your leaders react when an employee does something good, or fails to adhere to a rule or guideline? Behavior makes the difference in a high performance workplace, but too many companies fail to even monitor the behavior of their leaders at work.

Assessing Leader Effectiveness

	1 2	3 4	5 6
Is leadership effectiveness measured and trended?	Only by a leader's monthly results	Some leaders some of the time	All leaders at least annually
To what degree is improvement support a performance expectation?	They have been asked to do this	Included in job description	Support is measured
Do leaders consistently model HP behaviors?	Only if someone is watching	Some are really consistent	All leaders are role models

You can begin to gauge how well your leaders support and encourage a high performance work culture by looking at these three areas. If you want to accelerate your culture change effort, you need to look at measuring and trending the effectiveness of each leader, improving the process that is used to measure improvement initiative support efforts, and better evaluate the degree to which each of your leaders consistently model high performance workplace behaviors.

Each of these three spectrums is explored in more detail on the following pages. In summary however, if you want to shift your existing work culture towards one that is high performance focused, you need to look more closely at the approaches you are currently using to measure the effectiveness of your leaders. That is where the primary leadership culture challenge lies.

Most organizations measure leader effectiveness by looking at a set of general performance measures for a given leader's area of responsibility. There is nothing wrong with looking at these measures as one gauge of effectiveness – unfortunately however, they are not the only measures that should be used, or even the best measures. I have seen a lot of leaders look successful on paper because of the efforts of their people, even when they themselves were not really doing that much to help obtain these results.

Most people want to do a good job, and most people want to keep their job. It is a rare case that people will intentionally perform poorly in order to expose a bad leader. It is more often the case that people will tolerate a lot of problems in the workplace, while also performing at an average level at least, in order to keep getting a paycheck and to stay out of trouble. Besides, most people have not really worked for a truly good leader because of the cultural norms we have as a society about what a good workplace leader should be like.

You have to do more than look at general performance results if you want to have a high performance organization and work culture. You have to look at the personal contributions each leader makes towards your high performance goals, and you have to really look at how their 'on the job' behavior consistently enforces and promotes those goals each day.

How Effective are Your Leaders?

Is leadership effectiveness measured and trended?

1 ——— 2 ——— 3 ——— 4 ——— 5 ——— 6

Only by a leader's
monthly results

Some of the leaders
some of the time

All leaders at
least annually
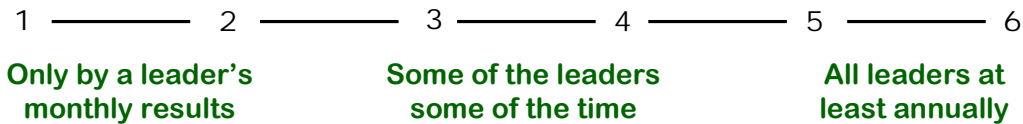
How do you measure leadership effectiveness?

Most organizations measure leadership effectiveness by looking at the performance of those processes that a leader is responsible for. For example, a plant manager's effectiveness is measured by looking at the plant's output efficiencies, its performance versus budget, and its quality and safety records. While there is nothing wrong with using these comparisons and measures to evaluate this person, they do not provide the best assessment of the manager's true value. Bad leaders can appear to be successful if their people allow them to.

If the plant manager has great people working for her, good numbers can be realized, at least in the short term, as long as the plant manager is not too much of a jerk. If the performance goals that have been set are not that challenging, an average manager can appear to be doing a good job, even though all they may be doing each day is showing up for work, responding to the requisite e-mails, and keeping tabs on any crisis that might emerge. If you really want to evaluate the contributions that a manager or supervisor is making, you need to look at two things – the tasks they perform each day and the types of behaviors they exhibit on the job.

To what degree do you measure leadership behavior consistency?

Measuring the degree to which a person in a leadership role behaves in a manner that is consistent with the mission, vision, values, and goals of the organization is not done in most organizations. Internal customer surveys (attitude surveys) are sometimes used to do this in a general sense across a management team, and 360 degree reviews have gained popularity for looking at the perceptions people have of individual leaders, but few companies actually look at the degree to which leadership behaviors are consistent with the aspirations of the organization.

How do you measure leadership development progress?

Even fewer organizations measure leadership development progress, even though they invest thousands, if not millions, of dollars on leadership development activities. Leadership development progress can be gauged however by looking at improvements in behavioral consistency and the rates at which a leader has been able to develop those people that report to him, improve the systems he or she is responsible for, and in general, create a work environment that is conducive to, and promotes, high performance.

High performance organizations measure leadership behavior consistency on a regular basis. They also trend both individual and aggregate behavior consistency scores to see if progress is being made or not – they want all of their leaders to develop into better leaders.

Do Your Leaders Walk the Talk?

Do your leaders consistently model high performance behaviors?

1 ——— 2 ——— 3 ——— 4 ——— 5 ——— 6

Only if someone is watching   **Some are really consistent**   **All leaders are role models**
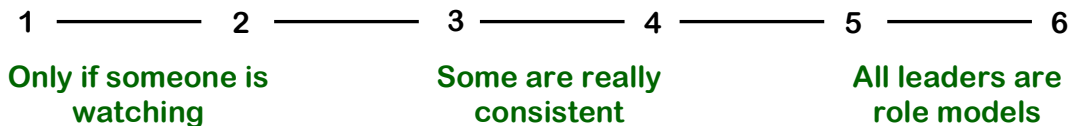
How do you define high performance behaviors?

If you really want to make a shift towards having a high performance work culture, you need to have each leader 'walk the talk' essentially all of the time, not just when people are watching. Before you can even expect them to do this however, you need to clearly define what types of behaviors you are expecting. Also, defining these behaviors is the first step in creating your own leadership index.

On page 30 of this book, you will find a sample list of high performance behaviors to help get you started. I am also giving you an exercise that is similar to one that I used for this purpose at a trucking company several years ago. You may also want to refer to the core values of the Baldrige National Quality award as you create your own list.

How do your leaders receive feedback on their work behaviors?

Ideally, problem (or inconsistent) behaviors are addressed as soon as they are witnessed. The organizational norm however often involves waiting until the annual performance review to give this type of feedback. If you choose that course of action, you will be allowing a lot of damage in the form of countercultural behavior display to occur until the review time rolls around.

There are two types of feedback that can be provided. The first type involves a one-on-one conversation with the person, away from the workplace. Describe what was witnessed, ask them if they were aware of how they were behaving, and ask them if this type of behavior is consistent with what we are trying to accomplish as an organization. You can also allow your leaders to use the leadership index on a more frequent basis than the company norm with their people to get a more representative, measurable type of behavior feedback.

What actions do you take to help them improve their behaviors?

Coaching is difficult to do well, but it is necessary to help people make the shift to a set of behaviors that are different than those they 'grew up' with. Sending people to offsite or internal training for this purpose is often tried, but my experience has shown a relatively low rate of return in terms of the degree of improvement realized. I have experienced much more success with simply helping a leader conduct leadership surveys with their people, giving them frank performance feedback on the spot, and giving them tips on ways they can improve in a given index area. In many cases, simply receiving the index scores from their people is enough to make someone more self aware and willing to change. Most people want to do a good job.

Defining Leadership Expectations

Key High Performance Leadership TASKS				

Key High Performance Leadership BEHAVIORS				

Defining Leadership Expectations and Changes
Total Time: 45 minutes

Objective: Reinforce the need to change leadership expectations and daily roles in order to help make the shift to a high performance work culture.

Key Questions:
1. What daily behaviors would a high performance leader practice?
2. What daily tasks would a high performance leader perform?
3. What changes are needed to make high performance leadership a reality?

Group Tasks:

1 minute	1. Select roles for the table: scribe / facilitator, timekeeper, reporter.
9 minutes	2. Create a list of 3-5 leadership behaviors and 3-5 leadership tasks that would be performed on a daily basis in a workplace that was focused on high performance and the use of improvement tools.
10 minutes	3. Identify up to three key changes that would have to be made in order to help ensure that all of your leaders practice these behaviors and perform these tasks on a day-to-day basis.

Team Report: 3 minutes per team for doing your report out and 10 minutes for the follow-up large group discussion.   *25 total minutes*

As part of the report out, your team should share the high performance leadership (1) behaviors, (2) tasks, and (3) changes that would need to be made in order to reinforce the use of these behaviors and tasks on a daily basis.

Leadership Behaviors	Leadership Tasks

Key Systems Changes Required to Reinforce Daily Behavior and Task Use:

1. _____

2. _____

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About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.

As a contract trainer for the TapRooT® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025.

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at **kevin@greatsystems.com.**

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- Over 25 examples of 'best practice' assessment tools that leaders can use to encourage and support high performance work
- 12 team exercises that you can use to begin applying each concept as it is learned

Mistake Proofing and Corrective Action Writing

- 156 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of mistake proofing and corrective action writing
- 14 exercises you can use to practice the five key mistake proofing tactics and identify tasks and processes to target for improvement
- Over 100 proven techniques to help minimize the risk and error potential associated with daily job completion

Error Proof

- 162 pages of examples, strategies and dialogue questions to help you stop daily goofs for good
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Lean Tool Use Basics

- 150 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of lean thinking
- 13 exercises you can practice to learn more about using the five key lean tools, creating a lean culture, and planning for lean success
- Two assessments to help you gauge the degree of support your lean efforts require and how much progress you make

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