Learning to C.O.P.E. with Culture

By Julius E. Rhodes, SPHR

N BUSINESS TODAY AND IN SOCIETY IN GENERAL, we are bombarded with the notion of culture. In our organizations it is widely believed that if you don't get culture right, nothing else matters. We also hear that culture eats strategy for lunch.

Why do so many organizations and leaders get culture so horribly wrong?

Being from Illinois, I vividly remember what University of Illinois basketball coach Bruce Weber said after he was fired. He concluded that he focused too much on wins and losses and not enough on culture. Now head men's basketball coach at Kansas State University, he has built a program in which culture is the hallmark of his efforts, and the results are paying off in a grand manner.

With all of this emphasis on culture, I only have one question: Why do so many organizations and leaders get culture so horribly wrong? Here's my take:

Confusing Climate and Culture

First, I contend that many organizations confuse climate with culture. Think of an iceberg. There is much more to the iceberg beneath the surface of the water than there is above the water. Climate is what's above the water level and is easily seen. However, we all know the saying "all that glitters isn't gold."

As it relates to culture, the vast majority of the work that needs to be done is beneath the surface. Foolishly, many people and organizations believe that if an issue isn't being discussed, it doesn't exist. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I strongly believe that if issues are not being discussed or have been driven underground, that suppression will eventually lead to an explosion. If we did the hard work of bringing those issues to the surface, the situation could be handled in a much more effective manner.

C.O.P.E.

This is where learning to C.O.P.E. with culture comes into play. When this acronym is properly implemented, it can support a well-functioning, welcoming, and inclusive culture where our organizational stakeholders feel valued and supported for their efforts.

- **C**: We must strive to improve communication and civility among all stakeholders. When we do this, it provides the springboard for increased contributions on the part of all stakeholders.
- **O**: We need to be open to opportunities that will allow ourselves and others to get better. This will take commitment and courage; culture isn't a popularity contest, but its establishment is critical to our success.
- **P**: This represents the need for stakeholders to understand the process and to actively practice and participate in sharing as a tool to increase organization dynamics.
- **E**: This means we have to effectively engage everyone and execute with excellence. No single part of the organization is more important than the other, and we have to meet people where they are and bring them along to where we need them to be.

Culture is critical to our continued development and creates conditions for personal and professional growth. ◆

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