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Thinking Outside the Excel Spreadsheet: *Healing the Workplace Culture*

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The large hospital conference room was quiet when I walked in, but the emotional temperature in the room of highly trained healthcare employees was high. Their faces revealed stress, anxiety, frustration, and for some, resignation. When I asked about the workplace culture, people squirmed, shifted their gaze and then, after a few moments, their responses began spilling out. Their complaints included: lack of trust, ineffective leaders, poor communication, lack of teamwork, blame, gossip, constant changes, and, most of all, the underlying fear. Alarmingly, they described how this affects patient safety, the teamwork needed to care for patients, and their own emotional security. They shared that they love their profession, like their co-workers, care about their patients, but they are exhausted, discouraged and feel disenfranchised. Unfortunately, I hear these scenarios at many hospitals and healthcare clinics. The results are high turnover, lack of loyalty, disengagement, incivility, absenteeism, accidents and safety issues.

What Happens When the Drive for Profits Supersedes the Core Mission?

Simon Sinek, organizational consultant and best-selling author says that hospitals have created workplace cultures where the people who are doing the care, don't feel cared about by the leadership. The reason, he describes, is hospitals are run by number-crunchers, are driven by the numbers and are businesses focused on profits. Sinek says, "The problem is not the people giving the care, they are highly trained. The problem is the way employees are cared for." Employees wonder, "Why aren't the people who are managing us from the top caring about us?" In other words, no one has their back. I believe the profitability is negatively affected by the very pressure to improve profits and cut costs—and it's not even recognized.

A Johns Hopkins study estimates that more than 250,000 Americans die each year from medical errors and preventable mistakes - making it the third leading cause of death. Workplace culture has a direct effect on these numbers. The AHRQ (Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality) recommends changes in organizational culture to eliminate blame and shame for reporting errors, near misses, and other safety issues. Common causes for errors are communication problems, human problems, inadequate information flow, lack of transfer of knowledge, and staffing.

Of course, hospitals must be run with data, reports and budgets, but when the numbers supersede the core reason for being a healthcare organization - the very vision of compassion, employees become objectified. When we see others as objects, we can dismiss our feelings and forget our common humanity. But employees are not machines who can be plugged in and treated as means to make a profit. Managers and leaders who are untrained in people skills and Emotional Intelligence, unknowingly create a culture of pain, suffering, blame and fear. This directly affects patient care and, ultimately, profitability!

Relationships with Co-workers--Top Driver

When the workplace is filled with dysfunction it causes relationships to break down and people to become disengaged. In SHRM's 2016 Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement Report, relationships with coworkers were identified as the top driver of employee engagement, with 77% of participants listing these connections as a priority. In addition to engagement, the quality of these connections can have a major effect on company loyalty, job satisfaction, productivity, and more. Rebuilding trusting open relationships in the workplace is essential to an organization's success.

Real comprehensive change in workplace culture must come from authentic leaders who are well-trained in relationship skills. At each level in an organization, the managers are responsible for leading their team and building trust. When leaders want to fix the team or even blame team members, without seeing their role and responsibility, they clearly don't understand that they are accountable for their team. I have heard leaders express annoyance at the "people issues", not recognizing they are the source of the problems. Cultural transformation starts with leaders who honor the spirit in everyone. Respect must flow throughout the organization or the dysfunction and dissension will continue and even escalate.

Who Inspired You?

It can be helpful to understand the power of leaders and mentors by looking back in your own life. Who had a powerful impact on you when you were growing up or in your career? It could have been a teacher, a former boss, a parent or significant adult when you were a child. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How did they make me feel?
2. What did they do that gave me courage, confidence, faith, or inspiration?
3. How did they influence my life in a positive way?
4. What qualities or traits did they have?
5. How would my life be different if I hadn't known them?
6. What can I do as a leader to help others in a similar way?

Guidelines for Transforming Your Workplace Culture:

Use your own experiences to consider these guidelines for transforming your workplace culture:

1. Create an emotionally safe environment.
 - a. Create a team culture where people can ask questions, make mistakes, present issues, admit when they don't know something and can take risks.
 - b. Build trust by caring about employees and "having their back".
2. Own your responsibility for guiding your team to accomplish the goals.
 - a. Inspire team members with a vision—not just an action plan.
 - b. Ask questions and gain feedback on projects, problems, and solutions.

- c. Tap the energy of “group will”—the synergistic power of two or more.
 - d. Develop clear, understandable goals and steps that support team goals.
 - e. Use open, clear and transparent communication.
 - f. Accept full responsibility for decisions and outcomes.
3. Demonstrate respect.
 - a. Operate from my **BE LOVE** model of leadership—inclusive, heartfelt leadership.
 - b. Give recognition and appreciation freely and frequently.
 - c. Look at people in their eyes—see your human connection.
 - d. Listen with focus, full attention and presence.
 - e. Be willing to address conflict and rebuild when blocks or barriers occur.
 4. Be vulnerable and willing to give up your own ego.
 - a. Practice mindfulness and self-reflection.
 - b. Admit when you don’t know the answer or made a mistake.
 - c. Hold the vision and continue to encourage those you lead, even in times of uncertainty.
 5. Be a mentor for employees.
 - a. Find out their goals, visions and aspirations for their own career.
 - b. Ask how you can be of support.
 - c. Assist correcting mistakes without shame and blame.
 - d. Celebrate their accomplishments.

Without well-trained, caring leaders, healthcare organizations cannot provide caring service to patients and families. As leaders commit to rebuilding relationships, they can replace fear and dysfunction with trust and compassion. Everyone benefits.

Danna Beal, M.Ed., lives in the Seattle, WA area where she is an international speaker, author, retreat/workshop leader, and executive coach. She has spoken to thousands of businesses and conferences and has been on countless radio shows, podcasts, and webinars discussing “Enlightened Leadership” and “Workplace Culture” based on her book, “The Extraordinary Workplace: Replacing Fear with Trust and Compassion.” Her audiences and clients have included: Seattle Science Foundation--Spine Surgeons Grand Rounds, Kaiser Permanente Grand Rounds, Oakland, CA, AHRA, Orlando, FL, Federal Aviation Administration, Overlake Hospital Perioperative Conference, Radia, numerous physician practices and hospitals. Her website is www.dannabeal.com.