

The Dirty Dozen: Finding And Fixing Company Culture

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As we grow up, we often get wonderful gifts from mom and dad. Gifts such as intelligence, passion, communication and leadership skills. We also get gifts from different mentors, which can complement the ones from our parents.

As adults, business leaders bring these childhood gifts — or lack thereof — to the companies they lead. And sometimes, a company stops growing when its leader's gifts are no longer enough to effectively manage the business.

It's no surprise then that one of the biggest impediments to a healthy business is poor organizational health, which stems from poor leadership. When a culture of blame and excuses permeates a company, it can paralyze it.

In one case, the spouse of a plant manager often asked her husband what he was going to accomplish at work each day. He told her he couldn't possibly plan because he "had no idea what he was walking into each day." This uncertainty is almost always a direct result of a lack of leadership.

Poor leadership is a common problem in business today, including in manufacturing. But it can be improved, and a company can thrive if deep-rooted behavioral changes are made. Changing company culture is a huge challenge, partly because it must start at the top. The leadership team must modify its behavior first if they want their employees to follow.

That means moving leaders from their "stress-self" to their "leadership self." Stress-Self exists when blame and excuses for why things don't get done permeate a company. Leadership-Self occurs when people are on their game, where good decision-making and measurable achievements are the norm.

Moving from stress-self to leadership-self can be accomplished in four key steps in this leadership model:

Does your company have the right culture to get things done and thrive? Take the "Dirty Dozen" test to find out. If you answer "yes" to two or more of these questions, you probably need to change your culture.

1. Is there a sign in the kitchen reminding employees to clean up after themselves?

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2. Are there unclean dishes in the kitchen sink?
3. Is there blame and excuses for why things are not getting done?
4. Is the office/shop unclean?
5. Is toilet paper sometimes missing in the bathroom?
6. Are the trash cans overflowing?
7. Do people frequently show up late to meetings?
8. Are people more focused on their cell phones in meetings?
9. Do projects tend to run late and over budget?
10. Are you constantly being surprised by problems that crop up daily/weekly?
11. Do employees sometimes panic when things need to get done?
12. Are Performance Reviews (if you have them) ineffective in shaping employee behaviors?

Step 1 — Recognize when you are in your stress-self. Realize that negative outcomes often result from blame and excuses for why things can't get done — and are causing the stress. It is a place where the same things happen over and over but you still expect a different result (the definition of insanity). The ability to identify the behaviors that are leading to poor results is crucial to getting out of your stress-self.

Step 2 — Own the situation and ask these questions:

- What role did I play in the event(s) that led to the negative outcome (self-recognition)?
- What permission or empowerment did I give the other person(s) to do this to me?

Step 3 — Explore all options or choices to solve the problem. If you continue to make the same poor choices as in Step 1, you will continue to get the same results.

Step 4 — Make the choice and make it happen! If you don't follow through, you will remain in your "Stress Self."

Here's a simple analogy:

Step 1 — Jon goes to a restaurant and orders a steak medium-rare. When the server brings the steak, it's medium. Jon mumbles to himself, "I'll never come back here again because they can't make a steak right."

Jon goes to another restaurant and orders the steak medium-rare and again gets a medium steak. Jon says again: "I'll never come back here again because they can't make a steak right."

The first step is for Jon to recognize that he is doing the same thing over and over and getting the same result.

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Step 2 — While Jon did not make the steak, Jon needs to recognize that he is granting permission to the server to give him the improperly prepared steaks by not telling the server that it's not what he ordered.

Step 3 — Jon has to create a new choice. For example: Tell the server that the steak was not made to his liking. Chances are high that they will remake the steak according to his preferences — and it may even be “on the house.” Or, he can continue to keep quiet and blame the restaurant for not being able to get it right and ignore his role in the process.

Step 4 — It's not enough for Jon to decide to make a different choice; he has to do it. Lots of people think about making good choices but never follow through. By speaking up, Jon will change his circumstance and transform into his Leadership-Self.

Identifying helpless behavior, such as blaming others, can help create a path to personal and team accountability.

Which brings up the next critical pieces to changing a company's culture: Changing the leadership team's behavior and improving communication among themselves and employees.

Some key points:

- Praise, coach and challenge employees instead of blaming, rescuing or persecuting them
- Never tell someone what to do if you can ask them how to do it
- Never tell someone what to do if you can show them how to do it
- Seek to understand before being understood
- Encourage employees to bring solutions along with their problems

A company cannot empower employees or continue to grow if its leaders are busy solving everyone's problems.

Next, it's critical to develop a communication plan. It's common for silos to form between departments and communication to break down between them. When that happens, departments are tempted to point fingers at each other and blame one another for why things go wrong. Then, nothing gets done. This is often due to poor leadership and ineffective communication.

Here's a real-life example:

At a structural steel manufacturing company, the forms that the sales department

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had to fill out for estimating, engineering and scheduling jobs only asked for part of the information each department needed to do its job. So, each department was left without all of the information it needed to complete their work. As a result, they had to continuously ask questions to understand the actual scope of work - which led to the creation of silos between departments and a blame and excuse game for why things were not getting done.

After redoing the forms to ask for all the needed information the first time — which the departments previously said was impossible — the silos started to break down. Stress levels also were reduced.

Daily “stand up” Meetings also are critical for developing a communication plan throughout the company. The meeting should be short and simple: five to 15 minutes. Each team shares, briefly, what they will accomplish that day, including any key metrics or numbers, and where potential constraints, roadblocks or bottlenecks might be.

This meeting should take the pulse of the company and begin to align all parties. A daily understanding of where the roadblocks are allows management to head-off potential problems before they blow up.

All of this should be spelled out in a formal communication plan, which is critical to eliminating the silos that creep up in any culture where there is blame and excuses for why things don't get done. A formal communication plan should include the standards and expectations each department has for itself as well as a structure for daily stand-up meetings.

Steven Shaffer is the president of Shaffer Consulting. More information can be found at www.shafferconsult.com [1].

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