A Corporate Climate of Mutual Help

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BY ART KLEINER AND

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Culture is back on the corporate agenda. As leaders deal with the demands of increased complexity — whether managing financial and environmental risk, navigating new markets, assimilating new types of technologies, or building a strategy for organic growth — many recognize the momentum that comes with a responsive, energized culture. That has led to a renewed appreciation for the work of Edgar H. Schein. Since the 1950s, when he studied the effects of Chinese brainwashing on American servicemen returning from the Korean War, he has been one of the world's leading authorities on the link between culture and behavior. For most of that time, he has been on the faculty of MIT's Sloan School of Management, where he is now a professor emeritus.

Schein's perspective, tempered by intensive work with groups, corporations, and governments, is one of deep respect for the power and legitimacy of ingrained assumptions and attitudes that people develop together gradually. (Among the organizations he has studied over time are Digital Equipment Corporation and the government of Singapore.) The Schein approach to changing a culture — and to developing better ways of helping others within organizations — is one of observation, inquiry, and leverage. This means observing the ways in which an organization's employees act; deducing (or inquiring about) the ways they think; and putting in place small behavioral changes that lead them, bit by bit, to think about things differently.

We met with Schein in his apartment in Cambridge, Mass., to talk about his two recent books for managers and corporate practitioners on this theme: *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), an updated version of an earlier book, and *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help* (Berrett-Koehler, 2009). Given Booz & Company's work on culture through the Katzenbach Center (see "Stop Blaming Your Culture," by Jon Katzenbach and Ashley Harshak, *s+b*, Spring 2011), we also thought it was timely to check in on the broadening impact of Schein's ideas as more and more companies seek to teach their old cultures new tricks.

S+B: Even the best-intentioned companies can get tripped up when trying to alter their organizational culture. Why?
SCHEIN: Because they think that to change culture, you simply introduce a new culture and tell people to follow it. That will never work. Instead, you have to conduct a business analysis around whatever is triggering your perceived need to change the culture. You solve that business problem by introducing new behaviors. Once you've solved your business problems this way, people will say to themselves, "Hey, this new way of doing things, which originally we were coerced to do, seems to be working better, so it must be right."

S+B: Issuing a new array of cultural tenets — like quality, agility, and accountability — will not work?
SCHEIN: Precisely. All you've done is stated the obvious, like "We're for motherhood." Who wouldn't be for those things? They're obvious. But what does it mean in that environment to be more agile or accountable? Someone has to say what these really mean: The next time you put a bad product out there, you get fired. It has to be concretized for real change to occur.

One electric utility company I studied, Alpha Power — I can't reveal its real name — was under pressure from regulators to improve its environmental record. Management told employees, "Every oil spill on every sidewalk must be reported immediately and cleaned up." A lot of electrical workers said, "That's not me. I'm not a janitor. I splice big, heavy cables." Alpha responded that this was an order, not an option, and that workers would be trained in cleaning up spills safely.

Some electrical workers quit, but most were retrained. After about five years, the workers were asked, "How do you feel about Alpha's environmental policies?" They answered, "It's the right thing to do.

We should be cleaning up the environment." That wasn't what they'd said five years earlier. But once they embraced the behavior, the values caught up.

S+B: Cultural change can't be as easy as just demanding that people change their behaviors. What if people only pretend to comply?
SCHEIN: That's why the role of management is so critical. Culture is multifaceted, and every company has many subcultures. At the top, there might be an executive subculture, trained in finance, which wants good numbers above all else. There's also probably an engineering subculture, which assumes that crises can be prevented only with fail-safe, redundant systems that kick in automatically. There are other subcultures for middle management, supervisors, the union, and marketing. Every company combines those subcultures in very different ways that have become ingrained over decades. In any change program, when you encounter resistance, you have to then ask, "Is this just an individual resisting, or are group norms at play, based in a particular subculture?"

For example, when a transformer exploded at Alpha, tests showed high levels of airborne PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls], a dangerous chemical to which firefighters, health workers, and others in the community were exposed. Alpha was criticized for not revealing these high PCB levels upon first discovering them.

But an engineer had tested that transformer every year for 20 years and never found PCBs. When the explosion occurred, he didn't immediately believe the data. As an engineer, he wanted to be certain that the data was accurate, since it ran counter to his decades of testing. So he waited for the samples to come back from the lab before he said anything. It turned out that there were PCBs in the transformer's sealed sound protection struts. The PCBs were released during the explosion but would have been undetectable otherwise.

Alpha may have looked malfeasant — failing to rapidly report an environmentally dangerous situation that the company clearly knew about — but in reality the delay was a consequence of a strong engineering subculture. It could have pun-

Edgar H. Schein

ished the engineer, but that wouldn't have changed the culture. If Alpha wanted to be safe and environmentally responsible, it had to demand behavioral change. So the company sent out a strong, coercive message that spoke to the heart of the engineering subculture: "You are required to report any observed environmental event or unsafe situation immediately, before analyzing it. Sound the alarm the minute you think there is a dangerous situation. Don't wait until you've figured it out." Alpha's leaders got very spe-

cific about what environmental responsibility and safety meant in terms of the behavior they expected from their employees.

Resistance might also come from other cultures, including that of the top executives. In some crises, like the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster in 1986, I've heard people argue that the engineers weren't competent. In fact, they raised concerns in advance about the O-ring at least twice, but they were overruled, and stopped squawking. Should they have held their ground? Marc Gerstein, who wrote *Flirting with Disaster: Why Accidents Are Rarely Accidental* [with Michael Ellsberg; Union Square Press, 2008], argues that the fault was not with the engineers, but with the NASA culture. People need to be able to raise concerns, and persist in raising them, in a way that cultures like NASA, aimed at results, can accept.

S+B: Are most managers capable of this?
SCHEIN: Probably not. They would need a culture that rewards them for raising concerns, and in most organizations the norms are to punish it. It's the very nature of authority to say, "Don't be a squeaky wheel. You made your point, but we're going to go ahead anyway. I don't want to hear any more."

So let's say you want a company to be genuinely safe. It's not enough to have an empowering process. The supervisors, middle managers, and senior executives all have to actively work to create behaviors that encourage a climate of safety. Alpha, for example, now has a "time-out program." An employee is obligated, if he or she sees something unsafe, to pull out and display a time-out card located near each sta-

tion. That stops the job until somebody with expertise comes in and looks it over.

But some employees say, "If I pull the card too often, my supervisor will give me lousier jobs." To make a company genuinely safe, behavior needs to change at all levels. The entire hierarchy has to feel good about the card being pulled, instead of regarding it as a nuisance

tend to act as authority figures who are there only to help subordinates, not to listen to and be helped by others. So what happens, for example, if a nurse sees a doctor picking up the wrong instrument? You might expect her to say, "Stop, doctor" and offer help and advice. But in many organizational cultures, the nurse won't say anything. She's going to take a chance on the operation fail-

panies train their teams in the helping process. Most team training that I've seen is focused on making people feel good about one another. But what I'm talking about is something much more profound and essential: knowing how to work with one another as equal partners in an operational setting. ✚

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"Better teamwork requires perpetual mutual helping, within and across hierarchical boundaries."

triggered by a few employees.

Meanwhile — and this is important — work in many companies is getting more complex, and subordinates have more relative power by virtue of their specialized expertise. If they choose to not tell the boss about problems, the company will never know that there's an issue until it's too late. The answer is to create a climate in which superiors and subordinates have a mutual helping relationship.

S+B: In your book *Helping,* you talk about learning to give and receive assistance more effectively. Why does this matter?
SCHEIN: It's pivotal to the future of organizations. The types of teams that we need in organizations today are like cardiac surgical units. The surgeon, the anesthesiologist, the perfusionist, and the nurse are in immediate, here-and-now interdependence. In that kind of team, subordinates have to help superiors regularly; everyone has to act as if they all have a stake in the outcome.

In most team cultures, bosses

ing, because she once tried to help a doctor that way and got blasted.

Better teamwork requires perpetual mutual helping, within and across hierarchical boundaries. I don't see how we're going to get there unless we create cultural "islands" — situations in which people can go outside the organization's norms and practices and explicitly create this mutual helping relationship. In the cardiac unit, this means the surgeon saying to the nurse, "First of all, let's get on a first-name basis, and then I'm going to try very hard to listen to you." The people with the most authority and established knowledge must make the others feel psychologically safe, so that when they're back in the heat of operations, everyone will speak up freely when something is wrong. The surgeon must know what questions to ask in order to be more helpful. In any helping situation, "humble inquiry" is a key intervention to equilibrate the relationship between the vulnerable person asking for help and the powerful helper.

All this will demand that com-

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