

# **What Is the Emotional Culture of Your Organization?**

## **Part I**

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“What words would you use to describe the emotional climate that exists in your organization or place of work?”

“What words would you use to describe the leadership in your organization or workplace?”

“If you are in a leadership position, how would your staff and colleagues describe you? How would you hope they described you?”

“Do you enjoy interacting with the people with whom you work?”

“If you could leave your job immediately, would you do so?”

“Do you believe your workplace provides a welcoming environment?”

These are more than academic questions for me. In my writings, workshops, and consultations, I have increasingly focused on examining and understanding the climate that exists in an organization. During the past few years a number of my monthly website articles have examined the mindsets and strategies that serve to reinforce a positive climate in our schools, places of work, and other organizations and the ways in which leaders in these groups can create such a climate. As examples, my June and September, 2015 columns proposed ideas about engaging students and nurturing positive emotions and purpose in schools. My January and February, 2014 articles highlighted the themes of engagement and respect in the workplace.

### **The Transparency of Emotional Climate**

The emotional climate that permeates an organization is often readily apparent. For instance, I have had the opportunity to visit hundreds of schools in the United States and other countries. In some schools I have immediately experienced signs of negativity (e.g., the absence of smiles, the ways in which staff speak with students or with each other), prompting me to wonder how much energy it would take to effectively teach or learn in such an environment. In contrast, there are other schools that are characterized by a warm and welcoming atmosphere, an atmosphere that conveys the message that staff and students enjoy being there and interacting with each other.

Similar differences in climate are evident in the business/corporate world. In conducting consultations and/or offering presentations in various business or organizational settings, I have found that some are filled with a sense of respect, humor, playfulness, and ease, while others seem burdened by what I have called “raging elephants” in the room that no one feels comfortable acknowledging or addressing.

As another example, I’m certain many of us have experienced marked differences in the emotional climate of a hotel from the moment of check-in. I travel a great deal and when arriving at some hotels I am greeted with a warm smile and such comments as: “How are you Dr. Brooks? Hope your travel was easy. Please let us know if we can be of help in anyway.” I am even more impressed when I pass the lobby an hour later, even in a large hotel, and I hear my name, “Hope you enjoy your stay with us, Dr. Brooks.” My initial thought is that these are staff who are not only well-trained, but given their genuine friendliness they themselves are treated well and enjoy working at the hotel.

I assume that many of us have had another kind of experience when checking into a hotel—fortunately, it has not occurred very often for me, but I vividly remember the times it has. These are hotels in which words of welcome, a warm greeting, and a smile are noticeably absent. Staff members do not demonstrate that they are involved in a *service* industry. I realize that we’ve all had bad days, but such an introduction leads one to wonder if negative staff emotions and behaviors are the norm for this hotel and likely to compromise service. Reading reviews of hotels on sites such as Trip Advisor or Yelp captures the positive and negative experiences of guests.

The impact of emotional climate is also evident when purchasing a product in a store. I buy most of my clothing at one particular store in the Boston area because I never feel rushed or pressured by the sales staff. They are always courteous and helpful, even to the point of offering the opinion that I look better in a less expensive sports coat. The staff are respectful towards each other and seem to enjoy working together. As my wife will report, shopping is not one of my favorite activities, but I don’t mind doing so at this clothing store.

In a similar way, one of the reasons I enjoy shopping at the Apple store near my home is that the staff are pleasant and upbeat; they are collegial towards each other and patiently answer my many questions. I recently spent almost two hours purchasing a

couple of Apple products and the saleswoman made certain that I was knowledgeable about and comfortable with the items I bought. She gave me her card before I left and said, “Please call if you have any questions.” I realize that this is the kind of experience we should have whenever we enter a store to make a purchase, but that is not always the case.

In my interventions related to schools I continue to emphasize the significance and impact of creating a positive school climate in which all members of the community thrive. I bolster this opinion by citing a body of research in the field of positive psychology, including that conducted and reported by psychologist Dr. Shawn Achor, author of the bestselling book *The Happiness Advantage*. As I wrote in my September, 2015 column, Achor’s view that it is happiness that leads to success rather than success leading to happiness and his definition of happiness as “the experience of positive emotions—pleasure combined with deeper feelings of meaning and purpose,” have major implications not only for the school setting but for any environment. This is one reason I have long advocated identifying the climate that exists in one’s school, business, or organization and initiating steps to nurture an atmosphere that promotes positive emotions with a sense of purpose.

### **Identifying and Managing One’s Emotional Culture**

In light of my interest in the climate that dominates an organization, I was drawn to several articles subsumed under the heading “The Emotional Organization” that appeared in the January/February 2016 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. One article, “Manage Your Emotional Culture,” co-authored by Drs. Sigal Barsade, professor of Management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and Olivia O’Neill, assistant professor at George Mason University School of Business, directly addressed the theme of the emotional atmosphere that impacts on an organization.

I believe that leaders in any school, business, or organization would be wise to consider the points raised by Barsade and O’Neill. The subheading of their article suggests a major premise of their article: “Most leaders focus on how employees think and behave—but feelings matter just as much.” In reading this sentence I was immediately reminded of Achor’s emphasis on “the experience of positive emotions” and “deeper feelings of meaning and purpose.”

Barsade and O’Neill begin by describing what employees at Ubiquity Retirement + Savings are asked to do at the end of each work day. They press a button in the lobby to indicate their emotions. “They have five buttons to choose from: a smiley face if they felt happy at work that day, a frowny face if they felt sad, and so on.”

I must admit that when I first read about this practice, I had mixed feelings—pleased that a company was actually interested in the emotions of its employees but questioning the use of a smiley or frowny face that seemed a more appropriate assessment instrument in an elementary school than a corporate setting. However, my skepticism quickly dissipated with Barsade and O’Neill’s observation, “This may sound like an HR gimmick (‘See? Management cares how you feel!’) or an instrument of forced satisfaction (‘The team with the most smiley faces wins!’). But it’s neither.”

These authors continue, “Ubiquity is using the data it collects to understand what motivates employees—to learn what makes them feel a sense of belonging and excitement at work. . . . Most organizations pay little attention to how employees are—or should be—feeling. They don’t realize how central emotions are to the right culture. When people talk about corporate culture, they’re typically referring to *cognitive* culture: the shared intellectual values, norms, artifacts, and assumptions that serve as a guide for the group to thrive.”

Barsade and O’Neill acknowledge the importance of cognitive culture in contributing to the success of an organization. However, they observe that even with an increased interest in what has been termed “the affective revolution” or the ways in which emotions impact on behavior in any environment, “emotional culture is rarely managed as deliberately as cognitive culture—and often it’s not managed at all.” They emphasize that emotions that would enrich the workings of an organization such as compassion, joy, and pride are often overshadowed by an atmosphere of anger, fear, and mistrust.

How important is the emotional culture of an organization? Barsade and O’Neill contend that it “influences employee satisfaction, burnout, teamwork, and even hard measures such as financial performance and absenteeism. . . . Positive emotions are consistently associated with better performance, quality, and customer service—this holds true across roles and industries and at various organizational levels. On the flip side (with certain short-term exceptions) negative emotions such as group anger, sadness,

fear, and the like usually lead to negative outcomes, including poor performance and high turnover.”

### **The Significance of “Micromoments”**

In light of the impact of emotional culture on the health of an organization, Barsade and O’Neill advocate that leaders strive to ensure that the culture of their group is infused with positivity rather than negativity. They report that some companies have explicitly incorporated the emotional components of culture in their management guidelines. However, they add that to identify and appreciate this culture, one has to go beyond mission statements and examine the “micromoments” that transpire on a daily basis within the organization.

They offer examples of micromoments that remind me of research I conducted years ago, particularly about school climate. I asked people to complete a questionnaire anonymously about their most positive and negative memories of school as students, and I also asked educators to note their most positive and negative experiences in their current roles as teachers and school administrators. I was struck by the powerful impact that seemingly small actions had on their lives as children and professionals, prompting me to include a section in one of my writings titled “the importance of the seemingly small gestures.”

Barsade and O’Neill view micromoments as consisting of “small gestures rather than bold declarations of feeling. For example, little acts of kindness and support can add up to an emotional culture characterized by caring and compassion. Facial expressions and body language are equally powerful. If a manager consistently comes to work looking angry (whether he means to or not), he may cultivate a culture of anger.”

I could also relate to their example of facial expressions. When I interviewed students about what actions on the part of teachers or administrators helped them to feel welcome at school, one of the most frequent responses was “a smile.” It’s interesting that years ago many new teachers were advised not to smile during the first few months of school since that might be interpreted by students as a sign of weakness, possibly leading to misbehavior. Sadly, I recently gave a workshop where several teachers reported that this kind of advice is not as archaic as I thought. If only we appreciated that a genuine smile serves to bring people together and contributes to a sense of belonging. I believe

students will be more cooperative and motivated when they experience this sense of belonging and connection with their teachers.

I was fascinated by another variable that Barsade and O'Neill identify as contributing to a positive work culture, namely, "office décor and furnishings." In some of my earliest publications and presentations, I discussed the importance of turning a *physical* space into a *psychological* space. I witnessed firsthand the importance of creating a psychological space as principal of a school in a locked door unit in a psychiatric hospital. As one example, vandalism dropped markedly when the students were invited to give input about how to arrange and place furniture and what work to display. Students even became members of a "space committee" to ensure that the rooms and hallways were clean (free of graffiti) and comfortable.

Barsade and O'Neill observe, "Photos of employees laughing at social events or action figures perched on cubicle walls can signal a culture of joy. Signs with lists of rules and consequences for breaking them can reflect a culture of fear. Comfy chairs and tissues in small conference rooms convey that it's OK to bare your soul or cry if you need to." This comment triggered memories of school and organizations I have visited in which the walls of the lobby contained photos of employees both as toddlers and as adults. In one organization, visitors were asked to guess which toddler photo belonged to which employee. In viewing these photos I immediately felt a sense of playfulness and ease.

I have seen similar displays in staff rooms, including one in which managers and employees not only had their photos on the wall, but in addition they took turns bringing in a cartoon each week to hang on a bulletin board. I enjoy visiting the website of flyte new media, the web design and internet marketing company founded by our son Rich, who serves as its president (full disclosure: I am also a flyte client). I especially love viewing the page describing the staff or "crew" as they are called. Not only are the descriptions of the crew members playful but accompanying each description is a photo of that staff member as a young child. If you would like to view the page, here is the link: <http://www.takeflyte.com/about/staff>. Rich's photo was taken a few months prior to his second birthday when we lived in Denver.

I recognize that playfulness and playful décor are more appropriate for certain companies or workplaces than others (internet companies such as Google pride themselves on the fun décor and furniture that distinguish their working space). However, I believe an inviting atmosphere can be created tastefully within any organization or corporation even when the professional expectation is that staff be photographed in business attire. Our younger son Doug is a managing partner in a law firm. He is wearing a tie and suit jacket on his firm's website. However, I experienced that the use of his first name Doug rather than Mr. Brooks throughout his bio provided a more personal touch or connection.

At a number of my presentations I have provided examples similar to the ones used in this article to illustrate the ways in which simple gestures can reinforce a positive emotional climate. Some members of the audience have questioned whether these gestures represent nothing more than window dressing or a façade in an attempt to distract attention from more serious problems within the organization. I acknowledge that indeed such actions can be applied to gloss over problems, but I believe in most instances they are not used for such a purpose. Rather, I emphasize that one must never underestimate the power of the seemingly simple gestures to change the cultural tone of an organization. Since I subscribe to the belief that we are the “authors of our own lives,” I often challenge individuals to reflect upon several questions, including:

“What is one step I can take to create a more positive climate in a group in which I work or belong?”

“Is there anything I am currently doing that may contribute to negative emotions in my organization and, if so, what can I do change my actions?”

“How do I support the positive actions of co-workers or discourage their negative actions?”

Barsade and O'Neill emphasize, “Every organization has an emotional culture, even if it's one of suppression. By not only allowing emotions into the workplace, but also understanding and consciously shaping them, leaders can better motivate their employees.”

**To Be Continued Next Month**

In next month's article I plan to discuss several different kinds of emotional climates described by Barsade and O'Neill as well as specific actions for cultivating those climates that promote positive emotions and purpose in an organization. Barsade and O'Neill remind us, "Emotional culture is shaped by how all employees—from the highest echelons to the front lines—comport themselves day in and day out."

While asserting that each employee plays a role in shaping the emotional climate in his or her group, they also believe as I do that those in leadership positions have the responsibility to articulate and model the emotional atmosphere that will determine the overall success of the organization. I will examine this responsibility in greater detail in my next article.

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