What Is the Emotional Culture of Your Organization?
Part II
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In last month's column I focused on the significance of the emotional culture that exists in an organization, especially citing the article "Manage Your Emotional Culture" that appeared in the January/February 2016 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* https://hbr.org/2016/01/manage-your-emotional-culture. The article was 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.

Barsade and O'Neill report 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 the importance of understanding emotional culture given the extent to which 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."

In my January article I described factors that contribute to the emotional culture that is harnessed in an organization. This column is devoted to discussing three basic emotional cultures identified by Barsade and O'Neill, which they feel are important to identify and understood. "When managers ignore emotional culture, they're glossing over a vital part of what makes people tick. They may understand its importance in theory but can still shy away from emotions at work." They may perceive a focus on emotions "as irrelevant, not part of their job, or unprofessional."

Three Different Emotional Cultures

Barsade and O'Neill take exception to any viewpoint that minimizes the significance of emotional culture and they offer the following three illustrations of emotional cultures, recognizing that there are many more than these three that exist:

A culture of joy. As an illustration of a culture infused with joy, Barsade and O'Neill describe Vail Resorts, noting that this company "recognizes that cultivating joy among employees helps customers have fun too, which matters a lot in the hospitality business. It also gives the organization an edge in retaining top talent in an extremely competitive industry." The message "have fun" is listed as an important value of the company.

How does one translate "have fun" into actual practices so that the words are not just hollow platitudes? Barsade and O'Neill offer several examples. Managers hand out pins when they observe "employees spontaneously having fun or helping others enjoy their jobs." Employees are reinforced to make jokes and do "whatever it takes to have fun and entertain the guest while ensuring a safe experience on the slopes."

In addition, Mark Gasta, an executive with Vail Resorts, states that employees are encouraged to collaborate because "leaving people out is not fun." As I read this statement I couldn't help thinking of organizations for which I have consulted that were dominated by a sense of exclusion rather than inclusion. When exclusion rules, one does not witness joy or fun in the culture.

Barsade and O'Neill recognize that the emotion of joy may be easier to create at a ski resort than in other settings. However, they also describe the efforts of leadership at Cisco Finance to nurture joy as a top priority. A questionnaire was administered to employees, not asking how they felt at work, but interestingly, "what emotions they saw their co-workers expressing on a regular basis." This tactic of asking employees to assess the emotions of their colleagues was seen to provide "a more objective, bird's eye view of the culture." A key finding from the questionnaire: "Joy was one of the strongest drivers of employee satisfaction and commitment at the company—and more of it was needed to keep up engagement."

It is reported that the leadership at Cisco Finance pays close attention to what contributes to a culture of joy and fun. Leaders nurture this value by modeling it in various ways such as "by creating humorous videos that show them pausing for fun."

As I reflected upon the approach adopted at Cisco Finance, I thought about an example I shared in last month's article, namely, of an organization in which managers and employees not only had photos of themselves as children hanging on the wall but in addition took turns placing cartoons on a bulletin board. The principal of a school that engaged in a similar practice with cartoons and photos of staff as children in the teachers' lounge told me, "It brightens the day to see ourselves as young children. It adds a certain amount of playfulness as we deal with some of the pressures related to our job. I also notice that staff seem to relate more positively with each other."

The ways in which we interact with our colleagues are housed within the second emotional culture identified by Barsade and O'Neill.

A culture of companionate love. These authors write that they have extensively studied this emotion, "one that is common in life but rarely mentioned by name in organizations. This is the degree of affection, caring, and compassion that employees feel and express toward one another."

The impact of a culture of companionate love was found in several studies reported by Barsade and O'Neill. These studies were conducted in different kinds of organizations, including those in the following fields: biopharmaceutical, engineering, financial services, education, public utilities, real estate, and travel. Regardless of the specific profession, such a culture resulted in "lower absenteeism, less burnout, and greater teamwork and job satisfaction" compared with employees in which this culture was lacking.

Cenesco, a consulting firm headed by CEO Raj Sharma, was described as an organization that had as a major goal the creation of companionate love. "Cenesco encourages employees to cultivate genuine relationships. . . . Employees hold themselves accountable for treating one another with compassion. They'll confront colleagues—including those above them in the hierarchy—for blatantly disregarding the feelings of others or frequently blowing up at coworkers."

Sadly, not all organizations display companionate love. The practices of some leaders actually work against colleagues expressing kindness and compassion towards each other. Rather than modeling such positive behaviors these leaders create an atmosphere of favoritism, competitiveness, and secrecy. Some work environments are filled with good humor, thoughtfulness, and caring, but others are beset with tension and anger in which "raging elephants" are present but not addressed. Thus, they continue to wreak havoc, taking a psychological toll on both the individual and the group. This atmosphere of negativity is captured in the third emotional culture defined by Barsade and O'Neill.

A culture of fear. I vividly recall consulting with a corporation in which one department in particular was characterized by low morale, high absenteeism, high turnover, and low performance. The purpose of my consultation was described to staff as an effort to improve the work environment. They were informed that I would focus on both the strengths and shortcomings of the organization. It was noteworthy that the staff in the underperforming department was reluctant to say anything to me without guarantees that their responses would remain anonymous. The sense of fear and low morale was pervasive during my interviews. They described their department head as abusive, especially noting his constant putdowns and his emotional outbursts. They hesitated to bring up their concerns with Human Resources for fear of retaliation. Their intense fears reminded me of some families with whom I have worked that were dominated by an abusive parent.

My interview with the department head was memorable. Before I could say anything, he asserted that he guessed that some staff had described him as overly angry and critical. However, rather than displaying any insight about his staff's perception, he immediately dismissed their observations by placing the responsibility for all of the department's problems on them. He reported that his staff was inherently lazy and unmotivated. He rationalized, "I wouldn't have to yell at them if they did the job they were supposed to do."

This department head had created a culture of fear that resulted in low morale and poor performance. Yet he was seemingly oblivious to the reality that his behavior was a major factor in contributing to the negative climate and poor performance that existed.

The eventual outcome of my consultation was his termination from the company, a move that he initially threatened to challenge legally but never did. Within a short time of his departure and the elevation of a well-respected colleague to his position, the culture of the department improved noticeably.

Barsade and O'Neill highlight the intervention of retired Navy Captain L. David Marquet to eliminate a fear-based culture on the USS Santa Fe, a nuclear submarine. Marquet assumed command at a time the crew "suffered under extreme command and control leadership." There was a constant fear of being yelled at for not knowing things, a situation that made it increasingly difficult for "sailors to think well and act quickly." Fear impaired executive functioning such as judgment, problem solving, and impulse control.

Marquet altered the emotional culture by "empowering crew members to make decisions and not punishing them for every misstep." The result was to enhance confidence and accountability among the crew and to have them become more proactive and involved. This approach contributed to the USS Santa Fe moving from a designation of a low-performing submarine to an award-winning one. Very tellingly, 10 of the top 20 officers who served under Marquet went on to become submarine captains.

A message in most of my writings and presentations is that individuals will be more motivated, creative, and cooperative when they do not fear making mistakes and when they feel their voice is being heard and respected.

Takeaway Messages

I believe the following are some takeaway messages from the insights expressed by Barsade and O'Neill about emotional culture. As you reflect upon the following points, it may also be helpful to review the questions I raised at the end of last month's article.

1. Every organization has an emotional culture that plays an essential role in the daily functioning of that organization. Identify the emotion that dominates your work/group environment and the impact it has.

2. If the dominant emotion is one that enriches the environment, ask yourself, "What is it I can do to further reinforce this emotion?" If the dominant emotion is negative such as fear, ask yourself, "What are the actions, even small ones, that I can

initiate to change the negative climate into a positive one?" Be cautious not to fall into the trap of waiting for others to change first. Recognize that even if you are not in a leadership position, there are small steps you can assume that may lead to major changes. I witnessed this in the school mentioned earlier where teachers placed cartoons and photos of themselves as children in the staff lounge.

3. Whether you are in a leadership role or not, model the behaviors you would like to see in your organization. Although one is likely to have more of an impact as a leader in modeling behaviors, one must never underestimate that regardless of our role, we all contribute to the emotional culture that is created and maintained in our group.

4. Creating a culture of joy or companionate love should not be interpreted to imply that negative emotions or thoughts are not welcome. Barsade and O'Neill capture this point by asking, "But what can you do about emotions that are toxic to the culture you're striving for? How can you discourage them when they already exist?"

They advise, "Expecting people to 'put a lid' on those feelings is both ineffective and destructive; the emotions will just come out later in counterproductive ways. It's important to listen when employees express their concerns so that they feel they are being heard. That's not to say you should encourage venting, or just let the emotions flow with no attempt at solving the root problems."

5. Barsade and O'Neill offer a recommendation that some may perceive as asking employees to be dishonest with their emotions. However, as they explain, it actually provides an opportunity to learn about and appreciate the benefits of a new perspective that can lead to a more positive workplace. They label their suggestion: "get people to fake it till they feel it." They note that some employees may not immediately subscribe to changing their behaviors. They may question the benefits of doing so. However, they cite research in the field of social psychology indicating that individuals in an organization tend to subscribe to the norms of the group (of course, one has to careful since these norms can be either positive or negative).

Supported by this research, Barsade and O'Neill conclude, "So employees in a strong emotional culture who would not otherwise feel and express the valued emotion will begin to demonstrate it—even if their initial motivation is to be compliant rather than internalize the culture."

This position parallels a view advanced by psychologist Dr. Shawn Achor in his books *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*. In the latter book, Achor describes his consultation with Ochsner Health System based in Louisiana. Ochsner adopted the 10/5 Way, originally implemented by the Ritz-Carlton Hotel chain. All hospital staff were trained to smile when they were within 10 feet of another person and to say hello when they were within five feet of that person—whether it was a patient or another employee. This plan significantly improved patient satisfaction and care and medical outcomes at the hospital.

Achor reports that some staff found adhering to the 10/5 Way relatively easy to do, while others were more skeptical. Some had a difficult time believing that "something so seemingly trivial as saying hello or smiling could possibly have any real impact on health outcomes." Achor notes that we should realize that such gestures help patients feel more connected to their doctors and as a result they "are more likely to follow the treatment regimen and return for vital checkups."

What eventually transpired at Ochsner? Even the most skeptical doctors began to adopt more positive behaviors as "people were saying hello and smiling at *them*. Not just employees but patients as well. You've probably noticed how when someone says hello and smiles at you, your automatic reaction is to say hello or smile back. Well that's exactly what those doctors started doing. . . . In short, the behavior became contagious." In this instance, it was a very positive contagion.

I want to end with another insight from Achor that emphasizes a position I have advanced in this article as well as in other writings about the impact each one of us can have in creating positive emotional cultures. It is predicated on my belief that "we are the authors of our own lives" and while we may not have control over a number of situations that transpire in our lives, we have more control than we may realize over our attitude and reactions towards these situations.

Achor writes, "The main point I want to highlight here is that you have the power to franchise positive habits in your home or workplace."

I believe we should all strive to adopt this empowering view.