

INSIDE HR

Driving return on investment through people

[HOME](#)
[NEWS](#)
[COLUMNS](#)
[TOPICS](#)
[E-MAGAZINE](#)
[LIFE & STYLE](#)



MOST POPULAR 3 weeks ago **WHS, performance management and termination considerations for long-term remote workin**

The 7 biggest mistakes make when trying to change culture

Written by Fiona Robertson on June 29, 2020

More in Culture:



Gender diversity programs: Friend or Foe?

July 2, 2020



Humanising measures of success in a new world of work

June 9, 2020



How masculine norms exclude women from



Feel-good values statements are solving the wrong problem. They are trying to change behaviour on the surface, rather than looking at what lies underneath it. Culture is what happens beneath the level of individual behaviours and values. It hides in plain sight, if you know where to look, in the underlying rules of 'what it takes to earn belonging in this place', writes **Fiona Robertson.**

Creating a compelling culture that leads to results is always a crucial challenge for leaders, but never more so than at a time when so many organisations are re-thinking the way they work and leading remotely has become the norm. Organisational culture is changing all the time and faster now than ever, the only question is whether or not it's happening by accident or deliberately. I've seen decades of confusion about what culture is and how to change it. Here are the most common mistakes:

1. **Confusing culture with employee engagement**

Culture and employee engagement are not the same thing. Measuring culture is measuring the system, measuring engagement is measuring an employees' experience of that system. Think about the difference between window-dressing like gym memberships and pool tables (which often improve engagement) and the way people actually interact with each other (which can be toxic despite all the perks in the world). So if culture is not employee engagement, what is it then? Culture is the rules of belonging.

2. Forgetting we're monkeys in shoes

The brain you and I were born with looks pretty much identical to the brain our ancient ancestors were born with about 80,000 years ago. Our genetic evolution has not kept pace with our cultural evolution in any way. Our brains are not designed for the world we have created for ourselves.

The latest neuroscience suggests that Maslow's celebrated hierarchy of needs is wrong. Belonging is actually more important to human beings than food, water or shelter. How? Because 80,000 years ago we couldn't get access to those things unless we were a member of a group. Our brains are silently screaming at us "if you don't belong you will die". And most of us have no idea this is happening.

3. Using surface devices like values

In the early days of culture change efforts, things like printing values on mugs and mouse mats were all the rage. It was the equivalent of hanging inspirational cat posters everywhere. The problems arise when what is written on the poster bears little or no resemblance to what is happening in real life.

Feel-good values statements are solving the wrong problem. They are trying to change behaviour on the surface, rather than looking at what lies underneath it. Culture is what happens beneath the level of individual behaviours and values. It hides in plain sight, if you know where to look, in the underlying rules of 'what it takes to earn belonging in this place'.

4. Developing a purpose statement that everyone ignores

An organisational purpose can be a fantastic catalyst for change in an organisation that lacks focus and needs a way to align and inspire its people, but only if, and it's a very big if, that purpose is something you're prepared to actively use to shape your decisions and craft your future strategy, most particularly when that is inconvenient. But for goodness sake don't say it unless you're prepared to actually do it. With apologies to Oscar Wilde, the only thing worse than not having a purpose, is having one that isn't real.

5. Focusing on behaviour instead of the interpretation of behaviour

The rules of belonging are based on the behaviours that increase a person's status and acceptance in a particular group at a particular time. So the rules hide in the interpretation of behaviour, not in the behaviour itself. Identical behaviour is interpreted differently in different organisations. Behaviour that increases belonging in one organisation will lose it in another. That difference is the difference in their culture.

6. Trying to recruit their way to a new culture

I've frequently heard the argument: if we just recruit ethical people, we'll stop unethical behaviour. It all sounds so logical and plausible. Trouble is it doesn't work, because it fundamentally misunderstands how culture operates.

If the culture of the group rewards a particular behaviour with greater belonging, the people we recruit will do one of two things – they will either ‘go native’ and start to adopt that behaviour as their own, or they will leave. Their departure might be the result of their own decision, or by being rejected by the ‘immune system’ of the culture. The result is the same. If we don’t change the rules of belonging, no amount of recruitment will help.

7. Ignoring the rules of belonging

So much has been written and spoken about how we humans are bad at change. It’s garbage. There are millions of ways we all turn on a dime when it matters. So why do we struggle so much when we’re trying to get other people to change the way they think, feel or behave? It’s because we don’t know why they fight some changes and embrace others.

When people have earned their belonging through behaviours you now want to discourage, the key is working with them to help them believe they can protect and increase their existing belonging by adopting the new behaviours. We’re spectacularly good at change in the service of our own belonging.

Image Source: Pexels

Share this:



What lies beneath: how changing culture can boost employee engagement

November 28, 2018



How can culture support your business strategy? Follow these 3 steps

June 18, 2018



Why is culture such a hot issue for business and HR leaders?

July 24, 2015

change

Culture change

culture strategy

hr culture

human resources

mistakes

Fiona Robertson

Fiona Robertson is the former Head of Culture for the National Australia Bank and a sought-after culture change and leadership speaker, facilitator, coach and author who helps leaders create cultures people really want to belong to. Her first book, 'Rules of Belonging - change your organisational culture, delight your people and turbo-charge your results', is published by Major Street Publishing. More articles are available on www.fionarobertson.com