

DANA M. ACIMOVIC, PH.D.

BUILDING BETTER CULTURES

KEY LESSONS FOR LEADERS AND HR



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BOOK REVIEW

BUILDING BETTER CULTURES : KEY LESSONS FOR LEADERS AND HR by Dragana Mitrić - Aćimović is a comprehensibly written, clearly structured, theory-practice balanced and comprehensive handbook for organizational culture management.

It explains, in a simple and appropriate manner, the concept and importance of organizational culture, expounds upon the factors in play in its creation and development,

demonstrates ways of measuring it, and describes the approaches and procedures of implementing desired change. At the same time, it stresses both the specialty of roles, and the necessity of experts and leaders taking responsibility in the process of systematically monitoring and managing organizational culture. This handbook is grounded in scientific and popular literature, but also in the abundant professional experience of the author. It is precisely this personal perspective, woven through the book from foreword to the last chapter, that has “colored” the entire book and made the writing feel like a unique, fluently told story, a story that simply calls the reader to stop and consider what they have just read, while simultaneously “pulling” them to continue reading and “pushing” them to apply what they have read in practice. In short, judging by how the book is written, one can rightfully say that the author knows what she is talking about. And this is not only because she knows what she is talking about within the realm of culture management, but because, much more importantly, she truly loves what she does, and firmly believes that creating a desired culture is possible. It is precisely for this reason that I believe she has succeeded in achieving her original idea: to produce a not only informative, but predominantly inspiring “handbook for creating better cultures”, which will be of use to both managers and experts alike in the field of human resources.

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D. M. Acimovic, Ph.D.

BUILDING BETTER CULTURES:

KEY LESSONS FOR LEADERS AND HR

CULTURE IMPACT

To my children, Maksima and Grigor.

And the generations to come.

FOREWORD

I'm no more than five years old when I find myself alone, with a broken arm, waiting on the stairs for my parents to come home from work. It must have been painful, but I don't remember that part. All I know is that it was a warm day, that I had tripped over a puppy, and that I was wearing my house key on a ribbon around my neck. I looked after myself, like some kids had to in those days. I grew up in a family of uneducated and poor manual laborers who were, at the time I broke my arm, working standard shifts starting in the early morning hours. They would cheerlessly return from work to a child who was equally cheerlessly waiting for them. As they got older, those shifts grew longer and longer, and the cheerlessness grew into bitterness. In my mother's case, in the years before her retirement, this would turn into weeklong, exhausting labor without a single day of holiday or sick leave. It's probably needless to say that this work brought them no joy. At the workplace, my parents could only laugh at the occasional joke from a colleague whose spirit was yet to be killed by the lifestyle. So, before I grew up, I could see in those people the meaning of job-related dissatisfaction and powerlessness. It's important to note that the root of this was not the nature of the work itself. Much more difficult than carrying loads or bending over were bad bosses, exploitative attitudes and practices, poor interpersonal relationships, and the like. Their organizational cultures were simply no good.

This would, in short, become the reason for my choosing to become an organizational psychologist, and this at a time when I/O psychology was not an awfully popular orientation among students. This was also what later drove me to rush into repairing bad practices and inhumane companies. The idea that I carried into my career from my studies was that companies could be made better not only for the workers, but also for those who founded them. If we built a good culture, people would be content, they would return smiling to their families, and the owners would still find their pockets full of money. This was, truth be told, the thinking of a child within me that, in contact with literature and university studies, gleaned the outlines of something that seemed realistic.

At first, it seemed that the profile of organizations – candidates for change – was certainly that of my parents' story. However, the years and working in practice after graduation brought me one important insight and surprise: change was not needed only in the companies that employed people like my folks, but also in modern companies staffed by educated people. Essentially, I was quickly disillusioned of my mother's talk of "Focus on

your studies, so you can work in better conditions than we do". With the exception of the print and radio newsrooms where I worked for several years during my studies, and perhaps an organization here and there with which I collaborated externally, my employers had, by my criteria, inadequate or even terrible cultures. I remember, upon my very first encounter with the corporate world, receiving a request from my superior to conceal findings about the causes of employee dissatisfaction from central management, findings that I had naively assumed would be used as our guide to changing things for the better. I then proceeded to witness concealment of environmental violations, nepotism etc., all the while working under such conditions on things like the meaningless delivery of birthday cards to employees.

Sometime later in my career, I experienced being stalked, having my correspondences read without authorization, having coworkers turned against me through the construction of baseless stories, and other things that I had neither expected nor looked forward to. As a result, despite my liking to say that I made the decision to start my own consulting firm in 2019 after having matured and gathered enough experience, the real truth is that it was the escape from corrupt and toxic cultures that finally led me into the position of an independent consultant.

And what happened to the organizations I am describing and that I wanted to change?

In all these years, they have not gone through many changes in the sphere of culture. They noted, perhaps, lower employee dedication, fluctuation, and low innovation, but none of them, unfortunately, experienced a threat to their survival significant enough to shake them to the core. Some, in fact, increased the wealth of their owners several times over using what one might call modern slavery and exploitation of workers who were born without privilege in a country in transition. In some of the organizations described, the notion popped up here and there that things could be better and that they could achieve more. Someone in the company would ask themselves why the competition was ahead of them in some ways, and why some people left them at the peak of their knowledge and experience. Still, significant change was never enacted, and the real question is "Why?". Can we build better cultures in place of existing ones? And which lessons should we acknowledge here?

If you look at the writings of leaders, HR professionals and consultants, you will come across many discouraging stories. They talk of failed attempts at reform and poor maintenance of changes for the better. It is no secret that company culture is indeed super self-preserving and self-renewing. As a rule, each of them efficiently "removed" from its ranks those who would try to reform it "without a blessing". Even in those cases where a "blessing" for change was granted by new management, many challenges were recorded.

The culture of those organizations was like a client on the couch of a psychotherapist – formed early, layered, with plenty of history, and all of this was to be handled carefully. In fact, the couch in this instance seats the entire family, the client is accompanied by their parents – the founders and leaders who have the greatest say. And there is always more than enough resistance to change despite the awakened impulse to go in a different direction. The situation here was and is complex and has always been difficult to navigate. The process of therapy is highly uncertain for both the client and the person assisting the therapy. Nevertheless, that does not mean that moving forward is impossible. Therapy of organizational personality is possible and certainly necessary. Managing culture development, directing it, and nurturing what we wish to see therein is possible. It is just necessary to approach this challenge adequately, avoiding the mistakes that we have all noted in that field in the past. These mistakes are varied, and some of the most common ones include the absence of continued care for culture, insufficient time invested in the process, an absence of partnership between the carriers of change, and neglecting psychological variables in the process of culture management. Namely, there is no serious undertaking involving culture that does not require allocated resources – more hours, people and, finally, finances. And this is a field in which there has been a lot of stinginess. It has been proven that culture can't be just an occasional subject on the leaders' or HR agenda, nor a task comprising several months of effort by an external consultant. It is not enough to say "Our culture matters" for it to start taking the shape of what we want it to be. Taking care of culture seeks to be in the job descriptions of multiple people working as a team on creating the kinds of views and values in the organization that would take the team the furthest. Additionally, this teamwork will only yield results if we know the subject we are dealing with, and if we have a system of continual care, dedication, and taking responsibility for what we are creating.

This book was written specifically to be a guide on that journey of creation. It is intended to lend support to the building of better cultures in place of those characterized by unhealthy competition, distrust in people, lack of transparency, lack of ethics, bureaucracy, and everything else that makes people unhappy and businesses insufficiently successful. The idea behind this book is that change is possible and that those that want it do not have to burn out while enacting it.

In chapter one, the book addresses the question of whose job culture is and illuminates the phenomenon of the rising number of positions with the word "culture" in them. Here, the reader is introduced to what it means to manage culture and encourages questioning about how much is invested in that field. Chapter two contains an explanation of the notion of culture itself, as well as arguments for understanding why it is powerful, with the

suggestion to view it as the personality of an organization which is of crucial importance to its performance. Chapter three talks about factors that function externally or have to do with the phase or manner in which an organization develops, and that move us to manage culture. The prerequisites of embarking on that management path are covered in chapter four. Special emphasis is placed on the leaders' and collective's level of consciousness about what a culture generates and how they contribute to it. Chapter five explains why it is important to get familiar with organizational personality and what we can use to that end. With some qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as well-known models, we are also presented with the concept of cultures shaped by drivers. Chapter six sketches out the course of changing a culture and the significance of setting up "beacons of culture". It presents some of the ways to establish purpose and company values, as well as what it means to set goals for culture and to make contracts about changing culture. Special attention is given to building the infrastructure for the desired culture by coordinating HR practices and procedures. At the very end, chapter seven talks about what sorts of cultures have a chance to prosper in the future, placing the greatest emphasis on a culture of trust and its construction.

The main motivation for writing this book is a need to help establish a system of looking after culture, as well as partnership between leaders and HR/People departments in engaging with culture. Its purpose is to facilitate solving painful issues in an organization and creating work environments that are not only more humane, but that will also prosper in the days to come. The book systematizes existing knowledge from the field of culture management, as well as offering a new perspective. It is inspired most heavily by concepts from Transactional Analysis – a framework for understanding personality and organizational goings-on – and a little by coaching too. The book is conceived as a practical guide, but also as a source of inspiration for management and HR, stemming mainly from examples of good practice. This publication is intended primarily for people in companies, but it should also offer students of psychology, human resources, and management an insight into what lies ahead for them. It may even give researchers of organizational culture a basis for potentially new subjects in their research.

Finally, this book was written to aid in the popularization of the term "culture management" and in creating a space for this career path. If, because of this book, some people choose to focus on dealing with culture and find happiness in that – its mission will have been truly fulfilled.

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