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Strong systems create strong cultures.

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ELLE PERSPECTIVE / 02 · ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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Strong systems create strong cultures.

A deadline can be clear even when the process for meeting it is not.

Someone takes over a responsibility that another employee carried for years. There may be a few notes, an old checklist, or instructions that name a person who left long ago. The work still needs to be completed, so the new employee gathers what they can, asks questions, and fills in the gaps.

Then, after the work is submitted, another requirement comes to light.

The employee has to redo part of the job. The person waiting for the result is frustrated. Both may feel that the other should have known better, even though the expectation was never clearly established.

Once, this may simply be a process gap.

But when experiences like this repeat, they begin teaching people what to expect from one another. The employee learns that completing the instructions may not mean the work is complete. Leadership learns that assigning the responsibility may not produce the expected result. Questions become more cautious. Feedback becomes more frustrating. Trust begins to change on both sides.

The repeated experiences become part of the culture.

The standard has to be shared.

A process does more than tell someone which steps to follow. It helps people understand what the completed work should include, where information comes from, who is responsible for each handoff, and what happens when something does not go as expected.

Without that shared understanding, people can work hard toward different versions of “done.”

An employee may carefully review everything they were told to complete and still miss an expectation they were never given. Leadership may see the missing piece and wonder why it was overlooked. The conversation begins with “Why wasn’t this done?” when the more useful question may be “Where was this expectation established?”

That question does not remove anyone’s responsibility for the work. It helps make responsibility fairer and more useful.

If the standard was clear, accessible, and understood, accountability has something concrete to stand on. If the standard existed only in someone’s memory, was incomplete, or surfaced only after the work was finished, the organization may need to examine the process before treating the outcome solely as a people problem.

Sometimes both need attention.

Rework has a human cost.

When missing information repeatedly surfaces after a task is complete, the effect reaches beyond the time spent doing it again.

Leadership may begin to doubt whether the employee can meet the expectation. The employee may begin to doubt whether leadership’s guidance is complete. Questions that should be part of learning the work can start to feel risky. Feedback that could improve the process may instead feel like a reprimand.

Neither side has to intend that outcome.

But when expectations remain unclear, frustration too often lands on the people involved rather than on the gap between them.

An organization may genuinely value communication, trust, accountability, collaboration, and employee development. But people experience those values through the ordinary ways work happens around them.

If employees repeatedly receive what they need to do their work, understand what is expected, have their knowledge fairly considered, and see problems examined with clarity, those experiences teach them something about the organization.

The opposite is also true.

If expectations repeatedly surface after the work is done, important knowledge lives primarily in people's heads, or questions feel more likely to expose a deficiency than support learning, those experiences teach people something too.

Culture is not shaped only by what an organization says it values. It is also shaped by what people repeatedly experience while working there.

Systems are one of the primary ways an organization's intended culture becomes tangible.

A documented process must reflect the work as it is now.

Writing a process down is a start. Keeping it useful is the ongoing responsibility.

An instruction to "get the supporting report from Becky" may have made perfect sense when Becky held that role. Fifteen years later, it tells a new employee very little. The organization needs to know which role now provides the report, where it can be found, and what to do if the usual source is unavailable.

Processes can also become outdated without anyone leaving. An organization grows, reduces its services, changes technology, or shifts responsibilities. The work changes while the instructions stay the same.

A regular review gives people a chance to catch that difference. Significant changes may call for a review sooner. The point is to keep the process connected to the organization's current reality, so that the departure of one employee creates a transition rather than stopping the operation.

A documented process is only useful when it continues to reflect the work people are actually expected to perform.

The people doing the work should have a voice in improving it.

Leadership is ultimately responsible for establishing and maintaining the standard. Leaders often have the final say, and they should understand where the organization is headed.

Employees see another part of the picture.

They know which instructions leave room for guessing, which handoffs cause delays, and which steps have changed in practice. Their observations can help leadership keep a process accurate and connected to the work as it is actually being performed.

That does not mean every proposed change must be accepted. It means a gap deserves honest and fair consideration.

If leadership sees a reason to keep the current approach, explaining that reason matters. The employee can then understand the expectation and the thinking behind it. If the employee has identified a real gap, leadership has an opportunity to address it before the next person encounters it.

In either case, the conversation gives both sides a clearer way forward.

Strong systems cannot prevent every mistake or disagreement. They cannot replace good leadership, individual responsibility, sound judgment, or communication.

What they can do is give those things a clearer place to operate.

They can make expectations easier to understand, work easier to carry forward, and problems easier to examine together. They can reduce the amount of organizational knowledge that depends on memory and make it easier to distinguish between a person who did not follow the standard and a standard that was never adequately established.

When people repeatedly experience clarity, fairness, shared responsibility, and continuity in the ordinary course of doing their work, those experiences begin shaping what they expect from the organization and from one another.

The repeated experiences are the culture.

CONSIDER THIS

Where does your organization rely on a person’s memory to complete work that others are also expected to understand and carry forward?

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