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Middle East and North Africa Leisure & Attractions Council

LET'S TALK SAFETY - OCTOBER 2023

CREATING A LEARNING CULTURE

*Written by: Tom Keane,
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Over the years there has been much debate as to the most effective style of leadership, from autocratic to democratic, from functional leadership to transformational leadership. And there is a good argument to say that all the styles are needed depending on the situation we find ourselves.

Well, the situation we find ourselves in is a rapidly changing world, and what is needed is to learn, respond and adapt to ensure success in all aspects of our business. Not further developing our training department but developing a 'Learning Culture' that drives the organisation to be more proactive and generative. Leaders are key to developing this culture and leaders need to adopt the most appropriate style to bring about success.



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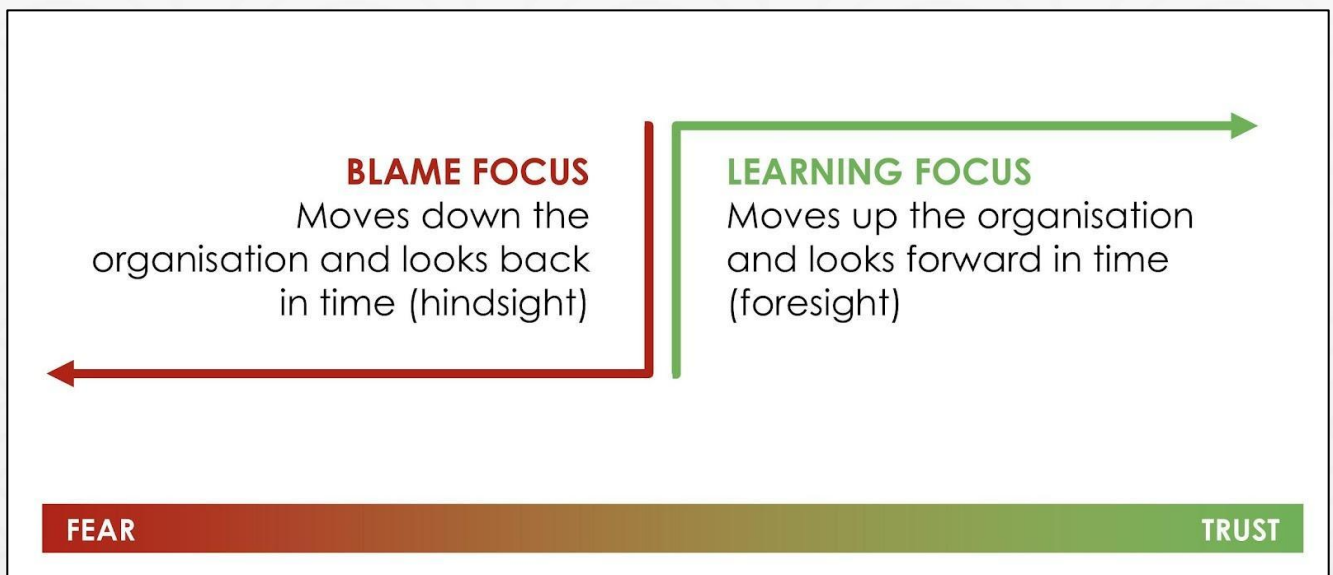
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When we explore safety culture, we recognise that it does not exist in isolation to the organisational culture, and even the best policies, management systems and procedures will fail if we do not have an organisational culture that is open and fair, where learning is expected, trust is high, and fear is low.

A blame focused organisation will give life to fear, which in turn will hinder communication and reduce learning. A blame culture will cause people to adopt strategies to protect themselves, and leaders are not immune to this. Do we want to care and protect our people? Or, do I want to care for and protect myself? Are we leading to serve ourselves or to serve others.

Blame looks at yesterday with hindsight, learning looks to the future with foresight. Blame is reactive, learning is proactive. Learning looks upward in the organisations, to Senior Leaders; Leaders are to be Learners and when leaders demonstrate the importance of learning it will be infectious throughout the organisation.



Trust versus Fear model Tom Keane (adapted from Culpability/Accountability, Learning From Normal Work IOGP publication)

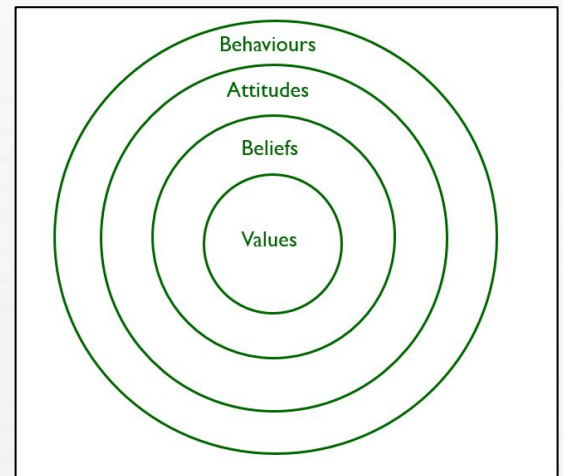
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“A set of understandings or meanings shared by a group of people”

‘The way we do things around here’ is an apt description of culture. Louis (1980) described an organisation’s culture as “A set of understandings or meanings shared by a group of people”

Edgar Schein compared organisational culture to an onion, and like an onion the culture has layers, at the core exist our values, we then have a layer of beliefs that we share with one another, many, if not most, are unwritten. These meanings or beliefs shape individual attitude and ultimately these become visible as the top layer of behaviours.

At our core do we value safety? What beliefs do leaders in your organisation have about safety? Is safety a paper exercise or a core value within the organisation?
Do we want to learn how to improve safety or does that belong to the Safety Department?



Edgar Schein adapted “Onion Model”

Ultimately, what safe behaviours do you see demonstrated throughout the organisation by leaders and the people they lead? People’s behaviour is a mirror of a leader’s values.



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People Do What Leaders Want

I personally hold a strong belief that: "People do what leaders want". Although many leaders correct me, they tell me that "people do what they perceive leaders want". But I ask them, where did that perception come from? And if the behaviours and perceptions are not what leaders want, what do we need to do to change this? Perceived attitudes and beliefs are to an individual, reality. That 'reality' will determine the individual and groups behaviours.

So how do we move forward?

Ask yourself and other leaders: What are our core values? Have we given a cursory nod to the values on our company's website or are these values deeply rooted in who we are as people and as an organisation?

What behaviours come to the surface a result of the values, and if no behaviours demonstrate the values, are they truly valuable to us?

People will know, we leak information, not just in our words but in our tone and body language. I am sure we have all been in meetings when "Safety is first on the agenda". That, after all, is what is said at the start of the meeting, or we may have a 'safety moment', but around the room people see it for what it has become, a ritual to appease the gods of safety.

A risk assessment or a procedure becomes a piece of paper to comply with the letter of the law rather than an important process to care for and protect our people from harm.

Authentic Leadership

We need to get real with ourselves. Is it just talk? Or, do we genuinely have safety as a deep-rooted value? If you don't know, others won't either. Once a leader has established safety as a deep-rooted core value, everyone will know, and it will be transformational.

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“People would rather follow a leader who is always real rather than one who is always right.”

- Craig Groeschel

Transformational leaders are authentic, they don't fear what others think, they know their values and they live out from those values. They lead by example and can envision a future where all share their values, they dare to be different and challenge existing systems. These Leaders empower and unlock potential in others. They recognise and reward people who demonstrate their values through their behaviours. These leaders have a desire to learn, they seek to understand themselves and others. All this to say, these leaders rid organisations of fear and grow trust, looking to the future with foresight in a genuinely proactive way.



(Kouzes and Posner Leadership Challenge adapted and extended by Tom Keane)

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Authentic leaders are self aware, they understand that to lead people they need to adopt a style that unlocks potential, a style of leadership that helps people move away from being dependant, to a culture that is independent, where people take responsibility for their own safety, creating a 'want to' culture. It does not need to stop there, by empowering others, leaders can develop an interdependent culture where everyone in the organisation has the responsibility of caring and protecting each other.

Tips for a Learning Leader

Harvard Business School's Amy Edmondson spent over a decade researching psychological safety and provides the following advice on how leaders can create it:

- Replace criticism with curiosity
- Admit when you make a mistake and get your Team to learn from it
- Ask for feedback from employees and thank them for it
- Be open to learn from your employees, they know their Job better than you.
- Thank people for speaking up, bringing up bad news or challenging issues
- Commend when a person admits making mistake; emphasise the potential for learning

("Learning From Normal Work" IOGP Publication)

"Want to" or "Have to"?

What type of culture do you want? If your preference is low engagement and low performance, use a style of leadership that is directive and creates a 'have to culture". It will be an autocratic culture where people are told exactly what to do. This type of culture will comply with the letter of the law but people will still be injured and performance acceptable.

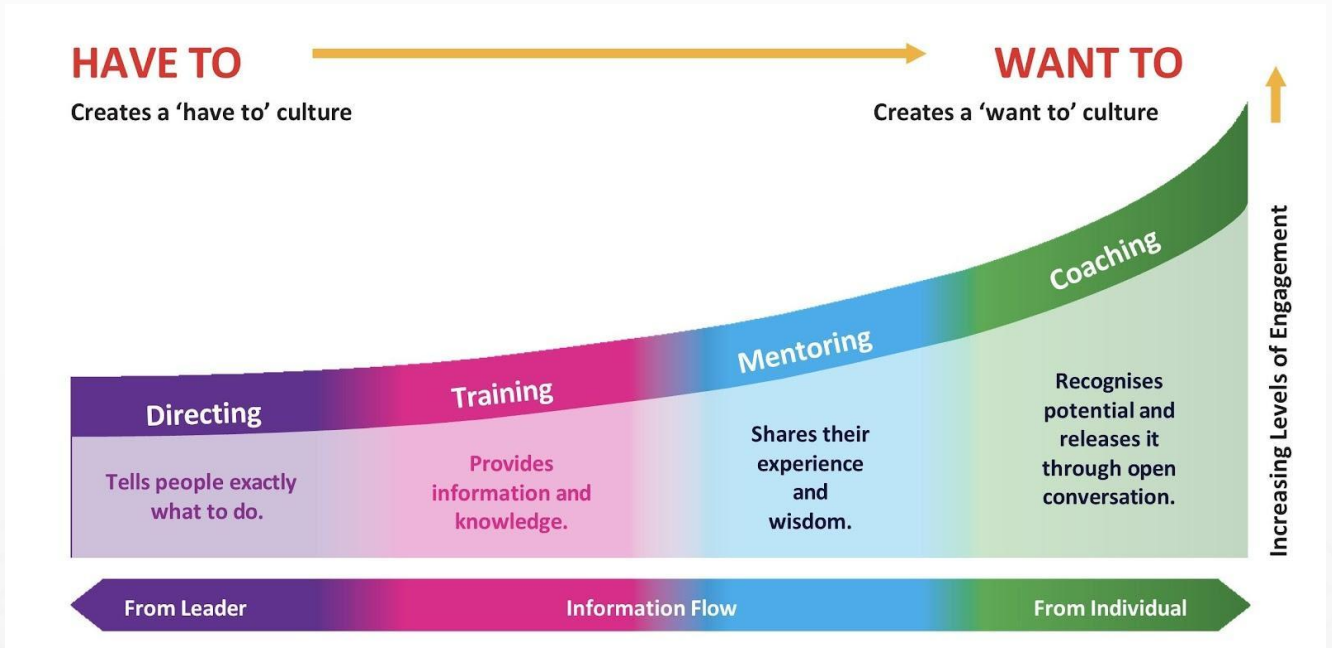
But, if you want an organisation that is empowered and 'wants to' learn, choose a coaching style of leadership, asking powerful questions that create responsibility, honours a person's intelligence and unlocks the full potential of the individual.



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(Tom Keane 2018)

Choice

Leaders have a choice, we can maintain the status quo, deliver acceptable performance, with injuries and harm along the way, but peoples full potential never realised. Over the years, I have seen leaders make this choice, it is easier, but it rarely ends well or satisfying, not for the leader or the people they lead.

Or we can choose to challenge ourselves and others, to establish deep rooted values, that grow in to strong beliefs, that produces positive attitudes and result with exemplary behaviours. I have seen leaders choose this option, it is harder, but they have led their organisations away from a culture of blame and fear to a culture that is high in trust and learning. Those leaders are to be admired for choosing the harder way, the one less travelled by.

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.”

- Robert Frost



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Tom is the founder of ETHOS Empowerment specialising in safety leadership, human factors, Incident Investigation, Behavioural Safety and Safety Culture Assessment and development

Tom's career started in the Fire Service (UK) in 1977 he served in several posts including Operational Fire fighter, Recruit and Officer Trainer, Operational Watch Commander.

Tom moved into the energy industry in 1990 as an Offshore Safety Advisor, 1996 he the managed a Team to improve the safety culture in the Forties Offshore Platforms. Since 1998 Tom has provided consultancy services to the Energy and Utilities sectors. He is Director for Ethos Empowerment (www.Ethos-empowerment.com) and an Associate Consultant with Procyon Group in the Middle-East (www.Procyon-group.com)

'What stands out at the seminars Tom and his team facilitate is the passion and contagious enthusiasm to improve safety.'