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LOL: Your Behavior Drives Culture

All of our culture work involves behavior change. A firm debates and decides upon a set of core values, then the work becomes living into those values. The benefits, according to clients, are retaining top talent, serving clients better, and improving decisions. Culture improves “workability” (the ability to work well).

But there’s a sizeable misunderstanding about culture and behavior change. Staff members look at the list of core values—things like Integrity, Respect, Trust, and so on—and think, “Yes, it would be nice if **others** did these things.” There are two major problems with this reaction:

1. It overlooks the obvious fact, that you only have control over yourself. So, expecting others to change is not useful. But it’s what most people do. (*If my spouse would just change...*)
2. And if everyone adopts this way of thinking—that others should change--then no one has accepted responsibility for changing their OWN behavior. They are waiting for others to get with the program. So, nothing changes.

The simple truth is: no one in your firm has perfect integrity, or shows perfect respect, or is completely trustworthy. Including you. So, look in the mirror and do an honest assessment regarding your behavior. Here are the key mental shifts that each person must understand if they are serious about changing their behavior to improve culture:

1. **A genuine desire to take the values seriously and commit to them.** Here’s the catch. Most people agree with the value of Wellness/Good health. But how many exercise regularly and eat healthy? (Hint: go to the mall and look around to see the answer.) Likewise, living the values of your firm requires the same discipline and vigilance as staying in good shape.
2. **A realistic WIIFM.** Given that aligning and living the values requires work, you must ask yourself honestly, “What’s-in-it-for-me?” (WIIFM) Some people are very principled and will live the values because it’s right. Others want to fit in and be accepted, so they’ll conform due to social standards. Still others see that being a good corporate citizen is the path to success and promotions. For me personally, I just feel better when I live in accordance with my values and our firm’s. (My personal values are wisdom and compassion. FCG’s are curiosity, accountability, candor, and appreciation. Or “caca” for short...)
3. **A significant amount of humility.** You must accept the premise that you could improve your behavior regarding any of the values. No one is perfect. Most of us aren’t even *nearly* perfect. Don’t kid yourself. Where are you weak?
4. **An openness to feedback.** You will NOT improve if you have walled yourself off. I coach leaders who tell me that they show respect to all their team members. (When challenged, they say indignantly: “Of course I do!”) But when I interview the team members they say, “No, he is very disrespectful at times.” The problem is that some leaders have sufficiently intimidated the team members, so that no one provides candid feedback. No one keeps the leader honest. (All leaders should have such a person.) You won’t see your blindspots, if no one points them out. Eyes wide open, please.



5. **A healthy dose of vulnerability.** Because we all take two steps forward and one step back on the values journey, we must learn to make amends. Put a little sign on your mirror, “I will screw up, so I will make amends.” Because it will happen. How do I know? Because we are all human. Get past your Ego telling you not to apologize—because it’s weak or embarrassing or unprofessional—and learn to do it as soon as you realize that you’ve violated a value. (When you snipe a colleague— “some of us get our work done on time”—clean it up right after the meeting. A simple, “Sorry, I shouldn’t have taken that shot at you” will do.)
6. **A realistic attitude.** Lose your perfectionism. As stated above, behavior change is NOT about being perfect. It’s about gradual progress in the right direction. Progress is a strong motivator. Your mantra: Progress over Perfection. (You can put that on your mirror, too...)
7. **A habit of appreciation.** When you or a colleague do make a bit of progress, appreciate yourself or them. The investment industry is horrible at this simple practice. (We call it ADD: Appreciation Deficit Disorder.) People need to be appreciated and recognized for their progress. But instead of looking for what a colleague does right—their progress—we focus on their mistakes. Shift from fault-finding to success-spotting. When I hear staff members say, “So-and-so was making progress during his coaching, but now he’s fallen back to his old behavior,” I ask, “Have you given him encouragement? Have you success-spotted?” Invariably the answer is, no. Cause and effect. Reinforcement matters.
8. **A willingness to forgive.** Because no one in the firm will do behavior change perfectly, you must develop an ability to forgive. It’s important to give your colleagues the benefit of the doubt and assume good intentions. Personally, I tell myself frequently, “People are doing the best that they can.” Remember, no one wakes up and sets an intention to break as many cultural norms as possible at work. Instead of negatively judging your colleague and holding tightly to your story, forgive them. Then have the courage to provide useful feedback.
9. **An understanding of “drift and shift.”** You will drift off your commitment to live the values, so recognize when you have, then—instead of chastising yourself—just recommit. You drift off your commitment, then shift back to it. Punishing yourself—or others—doesn’t help. (But feedback does.)

All of these mental shifts point back to #1: have you considered the values and made a serious commitment to them? When we do real-time voting with staff members, we invariably get a unanimous—or nearly unanimous—response to the question, “Are you committed to the firm’s values?” But the follow-up behavior does not align with this response. Many people do not change at all, even if they accept the premise that we all could do better. A common excuse for not changing is: “Well, the leaders are not following the values, so why should I?” This response implies the logic: “the leaders are taking the low road, so I will too.” How does that response improve your life? Better to ignore what the leaders are doing—although providing feedback is useful—and focus on yourself. Don’t you want to be more respectful, more trustworthy, more accountable? Doesn’t that improve the quality of your life? And your value as an employee? (Note: if leadership behavior is truly toxic, then you may be facing a career decision. But most leaders we work with are not toxic, merely unconscious about their behavior.) Part of FCG’s role is to provide coaching and feedback to leaders who mean well but aren’t getting constructive feedback. We’ll focus on helping the leaders, while you focus on yourself!

In summary, culture change depends on behavior change. And behavior change requires a deep commitment to the mental shifts outlined above. The two main levers that you can pull are:

1. A clear understanding that your number one goal is changing yourself, not your colleagues.
2. A willingness to help your colleagues with step #1 by providing useful feedback and encouragement. You can't change them, but you can improve the odds that they will succeed in changing themselves.

A final word. Even from a purely selfish perspective, the values journey described above pays huge dividends. I become a better spouse, father, leader, team mate, and friend as I progress on this journey. Yes, it takes work, but it's well worth it. Here's wishing you every success on your journey.

Curiously,

JW