

BLACKMORE FOUR

Stronger Performance through Partnership



Getting change management traction at times of internal stress and hostility

Overview and context

There has been a western trend to more progressive and less directive cultures in certain companies. In theory, employees have greater autonomy and influence over their respective scopes of work. This has been driven by a change in management practices, the belief in the value of employee engagement, and a drive to self-actualisation and the current trends for 'mindfulness'.

However, I believe there have been some recent regressive factors moving away from this, in part driven by a competitive marketplace and the need to be more agile. This may seem paradoxical as conventional theory/practice has shown that a more engaged and content workforce will perform better, and deal with the need for agility and rapid delivery. I have tried to postulate the drivers for this regression.

There has been a recent rise of factionalism and tribalism, and the need for people to identify with certain factions or groups. Some commentators are also concerned around the dangers of political correctness, in terms of its potential lack of transparency and the potential consequence of limiting open debate. This has been exemplified by the recent rhetoric on social media and in the press, post the 'Brexit' vote in 2016. We have also witnessed lower levels of actual teamwork and more individualism. This 'selfishness' is driven by the need to survive, especially as the economy gets tighter.

Understanding the culture

The first step to delivering impact in a hostile culture is to recognise that you are in one.

That statement may sound trite, but it is not as easy as it looks. What defines a hostile culture or environment? My definition is relatively simple. It is one in which it is difficult to execute your work or perform consistently without thinking about what could come next, and negative distractions, i.e., 'watching your back' continually. It is noteworthy that people do not have to shout or raise their voice for the atmosphere to be hostile.

A key element for success is to understand the difference between 'active hostility' and 'constructive pressure'. The former will be intense, repetitive, inauthentic and likely to be less rational. The latter will be effectively the opposite of those characteristics, but will still maintain the required accountability and will have a level of mutual trust between parties.

Typical behaviours and activities that are common for active hostility include totally unrealistic targets, minimal information, poor explanation, no context, shifting deadlines or targets, and changes in scope. In more severe cases, there can be a mob-style approach where a manager enlists others to aid the hostility.

There are many other behaviours that one may witness, but another useful reference point is the work done by Geert Hofstede, the eminent psychologist, and his associates on macro cultures. Hofstede categorises and

describes six different cultures. There will be traits mentioned above that are pertinent in a significant number of the dimensions, but probably the most relevant are Power Distance and Masculinity vs Femininity. Cultures that are likely to be hostile will have large power distance and show the characteristics of hierarchy, leading to existential inequality, expected subordination, autocracy, the belief that power is absolute and that its legitimacy cannot be challenged. Cultures with small power distance tend to be more collegiate.

One other trait of active hostility which I have witnessed is that of Compliance. In this case, compliance can be interpreted not of defined rules, but of dictates and edicts. Here, the end justifies the means and defined rules can be bent or ignored to meet the edict.

We must remember that none of these characteristics can be taken in isolation, and on their own will not determine active hostility, but in combination could lead to one.

Finding the balance point

What do I mean about finding the balance point and why is it relevant? If you are a new leader in a large organisation, to have impact you will have to be different without either alienating yourself or acquiescing to inappropriate cultural norms.

It is critical that you resonate with your team and conform to the rules initially. This does not stop you being a 'change agent', but you should do it without being too much of an 'initial' maverick.

If you are established in the organisation this will be easier, but for you to effect any internal change may be more difficult as there could be a reticence to your challenge. You need to be accepted by your own team to have future impact. This does not mean you do not question or challenge paradigms. It means you must effect change from the inside and gather momentum.

A coaching background, or understanding the concept of mindfulness and particularly self-awareness, can help. Understanding the impact of your approach and behaviour you elicit on the people around you will enable a greater chance of success. This will give you key insights into how your approach will impact the team as you start to challenge them. You need to find the critical balance point between listening, challenging and conforming.

Delivering the impact

In the previous section I mentioned about the importance of finding the balance point and understanding your environs. This will be the platform for work you are going to do and help determine the impact you will have on your team.

So, in more detail, what are the key things you need to do to have impact in a hostile environment?

- **Appropriate behaviour** – This builds off the last point, but do not let your behaviour become aggressive or inappropriate even if some of your colleagues are being so. Do not get sucked in or acquiesce to a lower level. Inappropriate behaviour does not have to be a raised voice; it can be manipulation or passive aggression.
- **Be authentic** – In a hostile environment, the chances are that some of the people around you will be less authentic. Being authentic demonstrates two things. Not only will it resonate with your team and build trust, but it will show people that you dare to be different whilst being true to yourself and unique.
- **Focus on value rather than fear** – Here, value is more than just your personal values, but an approach. If we value what we are doing or are being instructed to do, we are far more likely to deliver on it as opposed to approaching it from a position of fear. One of the examples I use regularly is that of personal protective

equipment in a manufacturing environment, e.g., safety spectacles. One can either 'value' your eyes or have the 'fear' of being punished for not wearing glasses.

- **Do not be afraid to be different** – In a hostile environment it can take courage to do this, but you will reap the rewards. Some of the key and less obvious traits of change agents include being on the edge continually, impatient and frustrated, and moving in an opposite direction to the herd. This requires not only inner belief, but in a hostile environment both patience and resolve. As a change agent you will be challenging the local paradigms. The key point is to be respected, but not necessarily liked.
- **Confident humility** – This approach might be more difficult in a hostile environment. As a leader you need to be confident and humble. The hostility may sap your energy and the confidence that goes with it. Staff will always respect a confident leader, so this is where you will have to rely on your inner strength. The humility element will show the staff team that you are truly different and will start to create some subliminal messages. Some people may not be able to cope with your humility and even become more hostile, but hopefully this will fade over time.
- **'Losing it'** - Remember you are human, and although you need to maintain the utmost control of your emotions and behaviours, it is OK to 'lose it' occasionally. It shows the team that you are genuine. Behaviour is the 'tune' played by and listened by others, because of the very dynamic and circular relationship between feelings and thoughts. Maintaining perfect outward behaviour is important, but impossible sometimes.
- **Compassion and gravitas** - It is possible to speak with both. This links to other points, but if you show compassion you will earn respect, especially in a hostile environment. When you are demonstrating compassion, it is also possible to do it with gravitas. This will also earn you respect and show that you are serious.
- **Cognitive biases** – Daniel Kahneman has done some considerable work in this area, and these biases are real. It is critical that you do not let these get the better of you as, again, it increases the probability that you will make the wrong assumptions and lose clarity of purpose. A few examples of the biases that are relevant are the Bandwagon Effect, Status-Quo Bias, Anchoring Effect and Negativity Bias. The titles should be self-explanatory, but for more information and explanation please research Daniel Kahneman and his work on biases.

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