It's Time to Build a Courageous Culture

Your team may be holding back their best ideas. Find out why.

By Karin Hurt & David Dye

You don't want people withholding creative ideas that can improve your organization's productivity. Yet, without knowing it, you may be stifling innovation.

To be sure your workplace doesn't squelch good ideas, what if you encouraged a courageous culture? A courageous culture is an environment where:

- **Leaders have the courage to ask** what's not working – and truly listen.
- **Employees at all levels are confident to raise their hands** on behalf of the organization's best interests and put purpose above politics.
- **All team members have the training and tools they need** to think critically, solve problems, and communicate ideas.
- **Speaking up** is the norm.
- **Leaders share clearly defined processes** for soliciting ideas.
- **There's a feedback loop** that lets people know what happened to the ideas they shared.
- **Teams at every level continually ask,** "How can we make this better?"

To uncover the real story about courageous cultures, we conducted research in collaboration with the University of Northern Colorado's Social Research Lab. The results:

What Keeps You from Hearing from Them?

The employees who participated in the survey described a range of things that kept them from sharing their ideas:

Employees said leaders dismissed their suggestions and told them to continue doing things "the old way."

No one asked for their thoughts. An astonishing 49% of employees surveyed said they aren't regularly asked for their ideas, and 35% said they weren't asked for their ideas when initially trained for their role.

It feels safer to be silent than to offer new ideas. Employees get the message, either implicitly or explicitly, to just keep their heads down and do their work.

Employees lack the skills to share their ideas. They simply don't know how to speak up in a productive way. For instance, one person responding to the survey said, "I think I came into my new role a bit too gung-ho. I had so many ideas I think they thought I was cocky and critical."

Nothing seems to happen with the ideas they share, so they don't bother. Many leaders forget to let employees know what they did with the ideas – even when they've made the suggested changes. One executive noted: "Sometimes when I do focus groups, I realize we've made the changes employees suggested, but somehow that never got back to them." This shows a systemic and disturbing gap in communication.

What's the Solution?

The solution is to build teams of innovators and problem-solvers. In such a culture, there's a focus on two Cs:

1. CLARITY

When there's clarity, you'll find alignment, focus, and a commitment to doing what works. Clarity means that everyone in the organization understands shared definitions of what success looks like. Clarity ensures that your promise is kept in every interaction. People know where you're headed and why.

The three critical leadership behaviors to establish clarity are:

- **KNOW: Clearly articulate** what success looks like and the fundamental behaviors that make it happen.
- **FLOW: Translate vision** to behaviors and ensure everyone understands what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how their work fits into the big picture.
- **SHOW: Demonstrate** that leaders and team members know what to do and that they do it well.

2. CURIOSITY

A culture of curiosity is focused on questioning, exploring, and trying what's new. Curiosity means that everyone explores how to improve. Team members ask great questions and actively listen to one another.

Curiosity ensures that your organization becomes the best version of itself. In organizations with a strong commitment to curiosity, leaders do the following:

- **MINE: Actively seek out** best practices, micro-innovations, and frontline perspectives. Solicit ideas, and act on what you learn.
- **SHINE: Respond to ideas** in ways that build momentum, improve employees' strategic thinking, and generate more useful ideas.
- **REFINE: Find the scalable principles** within useful practices, and help teams use them.

Where to Begin?

Examine your organization's focus on the two Cs: clarity and curiosity. Which one gets more attention? Focus your initial efforts in the area that currently has the least momentum. For example:

If your organization is a free-for-all of ideas where employees all do their own thing, start by establishing clarity about what success looks like.

In contrast, if you have incredibly clear definitions, goals, and behaviors, begin with a curiosity tour where you

ask people throughout the organization for their thoughts on how to improve the organization.

Fostering a courageous culture requires integrated work in three key areas:

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Equip your leaders with tools and techniques to communicate with clarity and show up with curiosity.

Develop strategies to cultivate and reinforce clarity and curiosity throughout the organization.

MANAGEMENT

Build management and leadership fundamentals as prerequisites for a courageous culture.

Train leaders at every level in the clarity/curiosity cycle to cultivate a courageous culture.

Create an environment where leaders experience accountability and celebration to reinforce courageous culture practices.

Provide leaders with career development opportunities that build confidence, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Develop systems for capturing ideas.

Cultivate communication strategies to connect employees to the results of their ideas.

HR SYSTEMS

Set expectations during the onboarding experience to capture the influx of good ideas coming through the door.

Ensure those expectations continue through every phase of the employee life cycle.

Recognize and reward people for their good ideas.

Let people know how brilliantly their ideas have been put to use.

Conduct regular employee surveys and exit interviews.

A workplace lacking open communication has devastating consequences. The key to surviving and thriving in today's competitive landscape is recognizing that your employees have knowledge that you need. Your team members can identify problems before they escalate, and you can innovate with their ideas.

Ultimately, your employees are your greatest asset – when they share their ideas and you listen to what they have to say. Fostering a courageous culture helps people overcome their fear of speaking up at work, transforms your culture from "safe silence" to energized engagement, uncovers the day-to-day innovations and great ideas that employees already have, inspires courage in the people you lead, and moves everyone on the road to more productive dialogue. By providing your employees with practical approaches and tools to turn your team's frustrations into micro-innovations that add up, you'll reap enormous benefits.

How to Recruit for Innovation

Here are a few interview questions that will help you uncover skills in innovation, problem-solving, and courage:

What's the best idea you've ever had to improve an organization? What did you do with it and what happened as a result?

Tell me about a time that you strongly disagreed with your manager. What was the issue? How did you work to resolve the conflict?

Describe the most difficult problem you've ever faced at work. How did you work to overcome it? What are you most proud of about your approach? What would you do differently the next time?

What's the biggest mistake you've ever made at work? What did you learn?

How do you encourage people to share their ideas to improve the organization?

What's your biggest success in helping others build problem-solving and critical-thinking skills?

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Looking Ahead

Building a courageous culture requires an elegant dance with a whole host of leadership characteristics. Find a wealth of innovative ways to strengthen your courageous-leadership skills in these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success (Vol. 35, No. 3)

Organizational Culture: It's in the Walk, Not Just the Talk (Vol. 29, No. 6)

A Different Kind of Assessment: Test Your Leadership (Vol. 34, No. 4)

A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, *and* Less Burnout? (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener (Vol. 37, No. 1)

When Should You Conduct Surveys? (Vol. 28, No. 1)

What Your Best Supporters Won't Tell You (Vol. 31, No. 1)

Creating a Climate for Innovation (Vol. 29, No. 4)

How to Change the World by Changing Your Culture (Vol. 31, No. 2)