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[Q: How do you change the culture of an organization with multiple entrenched and dysfunctional sub-cultures?](#)

A: Different departments or teams (including sports teams with head coach leaders) within all types of organizations may have long-standing traditions or behaviors that don't match the organizational leader's vision for the organization's culture. Incorporating these sub-groups into a cohesive “whole” is a difficult leadership challenge.

Such a situation requires thinking through strategies that might produce the healthiest outcome. But, if you already think you've tried them all, you might have to consider a more drastic option. Such situations always require strong leadership and maybe even new leadership – namely a person ready to, if necessary, “enforce” performance measures, ethical and behavioral standards, and a positive “team” culture for the greater good. In other words, the organization's leader cannot be afraid to terminate employment of a manager or engineer the separation of a volunteer leading a dysfunctional sub-group. Oftentimes, engineering such change does not require multiple staff terminations. Rather, one good example may do the trick. Certainly it is a strategy that should be seriously considered.

Identify the leader of the sub-group with the most dysfunctional attitude or behaviors as the “tipping point” change mechanism. One or two key personnel moves involving this group that demonstrates the organization leader's seriousness regarding positive attitudes towards others, commitment to department wide strategies, lack of tolerance for withholding information, and/or insistence on helping others prevent errors and achieve success are essential. Allowing dysfunctional behaviors to continue is simply unacceptable and actually enables such behaviors.

Employment terminations do not have to be aggressive confrontations. Such personnel actions should always be prefaced and supported by honest and straightforward performance evaluations that detail the presence of unacceptable behaviors and failures of the sub-group leader to make requested corrections. If minimum conflict is a goal, the employee to be terminated may be given an opportunity to “save face” by allowing that person time to find another position, permitting an announcement that enables the person to be perceived as leaving on his or her own terms, or maybe even offering an incentive package to leave. If none of these options are successful or inappropriate for the situation, formal termination procedures may be the only recourse.

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It is always helpful if the organization leader implementing the termination is someone charismatic, has the power of impeccable professional reputation, and/or commands the undisputed respect and support of most of the salvageable members of the dysfunctional sub-group. The situation is most difficult when the dysfunctional leader of the sub-group is more popular, charismatic or powerful (or all three!) than the organization's leader.

Termination of employment is never easy. Complex personnel and organizational culture issues like these are among the most serious issues that management must face. Consult with experienced HR personnel in all termination situations to avoid mistakes that may lead to litigation.

--Donna A. Lopiano, President, Sports Management Resources

Topics

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