UNLOCKING THE POWER OF
Organizational Culture

Fulfilling people's needs to create a thriving workplace

BY MARGARET GRAZIANO

Dealing with troubling workplace environments can be difficult. It's not always clear what the deeper issue is and the friction and conflict it breeds can be tough to reverse.

At the heart of any organization are its people. Without a dedicated, aligned and fully engaged workforce, no progress can be made. High-performance organizations excel in creating an environment that recognizes and addresses the fundamental human needs that drive their members.

The Hierarchy of Needs

Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, once revolutionary, is now widely embraced and frequently applied to organizational psychology. Leveraging this framework to identify what individuals require for success and taking the necessary actions to fulfill these needs can support the cultivation of an emergent culture that fosters growth, success and satisfaction in your organization.

1. Physiological

The lowest level in Maslow's hierarchy is physiological needs. These are the most basic human requirements, encompassing necessities like food, water and shelter. Although it isn't the organization's responsibility to directly provide for these needs, it is crucial to ensure they are met indirectly. This involves paying a living wage so that these basic needs are met and offering a sense of certainty to employees about their job security and expectations regarding their roles.

Establishing effective lines of communication between employees and their superiors is a great way to create certainty. When integrating new hires, make sure they have clarity on what their role is and what their responsibilities are. Encourage them to ask questions. For existing employees, having occasional check-ins ensures they are aligned with their jobs and not struggling to fulfill their physiological needs or produce at work.

2. Safety

Individuals need to feel secure both psychologically and physically in the workplace. This means that constant yelling or outbursts from superiors or colleagues cannot be tolerated. There cannot be fear of physical or psychological harm. Having rules and guidelines that discourage and have consequences for this type of behavior is often necessary. Optimizing the hiring process and having the right people in the organization is also big part of promoting feelings of safety. If someone is incredibly capable but ruins the productivity of others by spreading fear and/or anger, they are a net negative to the organization. It is impossible for people to be productive or creative in a state of fear.

Boundaries need to also be respected. Treating people how they want to be treated goes a long way towards making them feel safe in their environment. An organization that provides safety for its employees earns trust, thus possessing a foundational element of a healthy, high-performance culture.

3. Love and Belonging

Love is a fundamental emotional need for people. While this is commonly thought of as something that relates to relationships with friends, family and significant others, there are also ways to fulfill this emotional requirement in the workplace. An organization that has an environment of kindness, respect and inclusivity is able to satisfy this basic human desire.

Everyone has a need to belong and be accepted for who they are. Understanding the motives of new hires for joining the organization and what they believe they will gain from their work can aid in fostering a sense of belonging.

Organizations can further support this need by asking existing employees various questions and attempting to better understand each individual. Some questions to ask are:

- Are they happy in their role and doing their work? Is it aligned with what's important?
- How do they feel they are contributing through their work?
- What matters to them? What causes do they care about?
- What do they want to be doing with their life?
- How can their job help them experience belonging?

Asking about their job satisfaction, contributions, and personal aspirations emphasizes the importance of each individual's role in the organization's success, cementing a feeling of belonging and increasing engagement and satisfaction.

4. Esteem Needs

"I feel significant," "I feel respected" and "I feel like I'm contributing," are all feelings that are necessary to meet the level of esteem. When people feel recognized and valued, they are motivated to continue being effective and valuable. Making sure every person in your organization feels they play an important role in the organization's success, no matter their job, is paramount.

However, it is crucial to distinguish between significance (feeling important and making a difference) and contribution (being a part of something bigger than you or your ego and making a difference, even without recognition or significance). The latter is the pinnacle of Maslow's Hierarchy and the highest level of effectiveness, known as self-actualization.

5. Self-Actualization

Self-actualization involves realizing one's potential, fully developing one's abilities and having a true appreciation for life. It encompasses fulfilling the spiritual needs of growth and contribution, preventing employees from feeling like mere automatons solely focused on financial gain and only going through the motions. Self-actualized people are at their most capable, productive and fulfilled selves and regularly tap into their highest level of thinking and creativity.

According to Maslow, individuals must fulfill lower needs before pursuing higher ones. To reach self-actualization, every need in Maslow's hierarchy must be addressed first. Because of this, Maslow asserts that less than 1% of the adult population ever achieves this level. Keep in mind that this was published over 50 years ago. In today's world, psychologists think it is closer to 5%, solely because there is a deep desire in humans to contribute and feel a sense of fulfillment — the more people evolve, the more they want to experience these higher feelings of satisfaction in their work.

Importance for Culture

Meeting people's needs is essential for creating an emergent culture. Consider the three fundamental elements of an emergent culture: cause, framework and energy. Cause revolves around making a difference and defining the organization's noble cause. Framework pertains to the structures in place for optimizing employees' creative potential and ability to produce, including hiring processes, delegation, team assignments and utilizing individuals' strengths. Energy is how people treat each other, the moods they bring to work and how the work that gets done within and between departments creates or mitigates the sense of belonging and unity. It is about bringing the values of the organization to life.

The fundamentals of an emergent culture are closely intertwined with the needs of individuals within the organization. Prioritizing the well-being and fulfillment of employees is key to catalyzing to Maslow's top 1%, nurturing an emergent company culture that contributes to personal and organizational success and growth. ✪

Margaret Graziano is the founder and CEO of KeenAlignment, as well as a Wall Street Journal bestselling author for her book "Ignite Culture." She has been recognized as one of Silicon Valley's Top 100 Women Leaders. Magi's groundbreaking work is driven by her power to uncover and catalyze human potential. Go to https://keenalignment.scoreapp.com to take KeenAlignment's Culture Assessment and see if you have an Emergent Culture.