

It's the Leader's Job to Create the Most Useful Context or Environment

Early in my consulting career I helped facilitate an experiential team building retreat for a Pitney Bowes leadership team. The retreat was a two-day event and included a number of physical activities (such as ropes course climbing) that attempted to simulate the workplace issues. The purpose of the experiential activities was to create a context, observe behavior, and relate it back to the workplace so the good behavior could be repeated and the poor behavior discarded. In theory, the insights could be carried back to the work place and the teamwork and improved relationships would become habit.

The event was fun and insightful and certainly seemed to make a measurable difference in the relationships on the team. The petty conflicts and poor communications that pervaded the team prior to the retreat were certainly mitigated (or at least seemed less critical).

The challenge with most of these types of trainings is the lack of long-term sustainability of results and behavior change. Without a lasting change in the work context, the poor behavior often returns because the context influences the behavior.

Changing the context is the key. The experiential retreat, rarely if ever, can change the context within which the team works in their organization. The retreat creates its own unique context which creates new behaviors and those are supposed to be transferred immediately to their workplace. The facilitators of the retreat control the context. The leaders of the organization control the workplace context. Leaders must recognize their responsibility of changing the environment (or context).



If you still think behavior of individuals can be evaluated separate from the context within which they work, read on. At rush hour (7AM) in January 2007 a 39 year old violinist began playing at a Metro Station in Washington DC. Not a unique event you might say. Well, you would be wrong because this violinist was Joshua Bell unquestionably one of the top musicians in the world. The Washington Post and Mr. Bell had teamed up to conduct a social behavior experiment¹. Would people notice the exceptional music? Would they gather, wait and listen interrupting their busy commutes? Would they also donate money?

Joshua played one of the most challenging and intricate classical pieces ever written (Bach) for 45 minutes on a \$3.5 Million instrument. Two days earlier Joshua had sold out a theater in Boston with seats costing an average of \$100/each.

In the 45 minutes of exquisite music, only a handful of people actually slowed to listen briefly. A handful contributed. And a few, mostly children stopped completely to spend a few moments taking it in. He collected \$32.

What does this experiment prove? Probably many conclusions can be drawn about the nature of human beings and our current priorities and/or cultural characteristics. One conclusion may be: one cannot separate the individual's performance from the context. Did the dingy, damp, dark subway environment with poor acoustics and poor lighting impact the perception of the quality of the of Joshua's work? If you answer yes, then isn't it true that leaders influence the work environment most and that an improvement in context will change the meaning of events?

The environment of an organization is created by the assumptions, beliefs (theory) of management (the certain way of thinking) about people and problems.

This is best illustrated with The Iceberg Model (based on the work of Donella Meadows). The Iceberg model demonstrates how events such as problems or issues overwhelm our focus, time and efforts at work. We all tend to put out fires that are caused by specific behaviors. The behaviors come from the policies, procedures, structure put in place by management. The policies, procedures and structures are formulated from management beliefs about people. For example: the less managers trust employees the

¹ Weingarten, G., 2007, Pearls Before Breakfast, Washington Post, www.washingtonpost.com, Washington DC, April 8, 2007, Page W10

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more policies and structure (bureaucracy) there needs to be to control behavior.

Iceberg Model



Often management acts like a flea on an elephant. The flea barks out commands and sometimes the flea guesses correctly when it shouts, “left, right, or stop”. Sometimes it doesn’t. The flea is either happy or upset based on the outcomes. The elephant is indifferent and unaware.

Anonymous

If one is to evaluate the behavior of an individual, isn’t it more meaningful to do so in the context in which the behavior occurred? For example, an employee throws a temper tantrum during their workday. It is the fifth time in a month that they screamed at a co-worker during the course of a day. Is it useful to just report that employee to Human Resources for discipline or is it more useful, at the same time, to understand the context

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within which he or she works to determine what can be done to avoid that behavior in the future?

The February 1, 2003 disintegration of the Columbia Space Shuttle was investigated by the independent Columbia Accident Investigation Board who issued its findings in August. The physical cause of the 1 of the Columbia was the flaw in the thermal protection tiles of the left wing. However, there is never just one cause in a complex system. The organizational causes were rooted in the history and the culture that allowed compromises, bowed to bureaucratic decision making, and prevented open and honest debate without fear of criticism.²

This offers a major insight to management and leaders. One cannot separate behavior from the context. If managers see behavior they don't appreciate, unless managers are willing to change the context (environment) of the organization, any efforts to get employees to change behavior first will create additional waste in the form of lower morale, reduced productivity, reduced quality etc. Often management blames only those few employees closest to where the behavior emerges first.



A family member was on a business trip and needed a few pieces of laundry cleaned. He placed a few critical pieces, needed for a business meeting the following day, into the hotel laundry bag and left it in the appropriate place for pick-up.

Expecting one-day service, when the garments did not arrive he called to inquire. He was assured they would be found and delivered by the very end of the day. Hours went by and he became angry with the service. He called to complain loudly to the service manager and to the hotel general manager. After a thorough search, the laundry manager found the bag of cleaned laundry in an unmarked bag. Apparently my friend had forgotten to write his name and room number on the bag. It had gotten lost because of his mistake. He had inadvertently created a dysfunctional context by forgetting to fulfill his responsibility. Many leaders inadvertently create a

² Columbia Accident Investigation Board, August 2002, Final Report

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context of dysfunction and then blame employees for the mistakes that eventually occur.