Creating a Culture That CONNECTS

BY MICHAEL LEE STALLARD AND KATHARINE P. STALLARD

John Young is on the road quite a bit. One particular evening found the president of Pfizer's Global Established Pharma business on the rooftop of the Mumbai office. He was surrounded by 200 colleagues, being entertained with traditional Indian dances.

The surprising twist? The dancers were colleagues, and the younger people in the office who had initiated and planned the special gathering for Young's visit had called on the Indian tradition of telling Hindu stories through dance to illustrate certain aspects of the Pfizer corporate culture. For Young, it was inspiring to see the common culture that unites some 80,000 Pfizer colleagues worldwide presented in a local flavor. These weren't words and phrases from a corporate program being parroted back. Rather, he was witnessing the culture being embraced and internalized.

REFRAMING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

A major challenge facing leaders of multinational organizations is engaging people who work in diverse business and local cultures. The Gallup Organization's research in 140 countries in 2011 and 2012 found that 87% of employees worldwide are either not engaged or are actively disengaged. Clearly there is a problem. Organizations that can learn how to engage employees worldwide can achieve a competitive advantage.

In their drive for efficiency and focus on task excellence, most multinational organizations have become machine-like to the people who work for them. This vestige of the industrial age is at the heart of the problem of disengagement. To thrive in today's fast-changing, hypercompetitive, and connected global marketplace, organizations must evolve

beyond this disengagement and think of themselves as human communities, more akin to living organisms than organizational machines. To achieve sustainable superior performance, leaders must focus on both task excellence and relationship excellence.

When we work with organizations to address relationship excellence, we use the word "connection," describing it as a bond based on shared identity, empathy, and understanding that moves self-centered individuals toward group-centered membership. Unlike the term "engagement," which people in many cultures struggle to understand, human connection is universally recognized. For example, in Japan the word *ittaikan* means "to feel as one body of people." The French phrase *esprit de corps* literally means "spirit of the body." In certain countries in Africa, *ubuntu* refers to one's connection to the community.

YOUR CULTURE, YOUR HEALTH

There are three types of culture that affect the relational health of an organization and cause it to thrive or eventually die: cultures of control, cultures of indifference, and connection cultures.

In cultures of control, people with power, control, influence, and status rule over others. This culture creates an environment in which people fear making mistakes or taking risks.

Cultures of indifference are predominant today. In this type of

culture, people are so busy with tasks that they fail to invest the time necessary to develop healthy, supportive relationships.

A connection culture, on the other hand, provides the right framework for long-term success and is marked by three elements: shared identity, empathy, and understanding. Shared identity (or "vision") is how the members of a group think of themselves. It's based on a mix of vision, mission, values, and reputation. Shared empathy (or "value") comes about when people care for others, rather than treat them as a means to an end. Shared understanding (or "voice") is enhanced when good, two-way communication gives people a voice, though not necessarily a vote, in decision making. When these three elements are present, a bond is created which overcomes the differences that historically divided people. This bond creates a sense of connection, community, and unity that is inclusive and energizing, spurring productivity and innovation.

BENEFITS FROM CONNECTING WITH EMPLOYEES

Drawing on research and our experience working with organizations, we see a number of reasons why leaders should make creating connection cultures a high priority.

Individuals who feel connected perform at the top of their game. The neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman describes connection as a superpower because it makes people happier, healthier, and more productive. Research shows that people who feel connected experience superior wellness and well-being compared with those who feel unsupported, left out, or lonely. They are more enthusiastic, energetic, and optimistic. They make better decisions and they're more creative. They also live longer.

Individuals who feel connected give their best efforts. Disconnected and disengaged employees show up for the paycheck and give the minimum level of effort required to keep their jobs. People who feel connected care about achieving results, so they exert additional effort and persevere. Organizations with greater connection, therefore, experience a higher percentage of employees pulling in the same direction.

Individuals who feel connected help improve the quality of decisions. Disconnected employees are less likely to communicate the information needed by decision makers to make optimal decisions. People who feel connected because they care about their organization's performance are willing to speak up and share information that decision makers need to hear, even if they would rather not hear it.

Individuals who feel connected actively contribute to innovation. They look for ways to improve the organization and contribute to the marketplace of ideas, which is important because innovation often occurs when ideas from different domains are combined or synthesized. This cognitive process has been described as "integrative thinking," "blending," and "connecting the dots." When a robust marketplace of ideas exists, people

have more ideas to potentially connect that will result in new products, services, processes, and businesses.

CONNECTING WITH COLLEAGUES AT PFIZER

Pfizer, the multinational pharmaceutical giant, has offices in developed and emerging markets around the world. A native of Scotland, John Young joined Pfizer in 1987 and worked in a variety of sales, marketing, and executive management roles before assuming his current position. Given his background and his responsibilities, culture matters to him.

With such a global span, Pfizer's senior leaders have been very intentional in developing the company's culture and taking steps to enhance connection among people who work throughout its businesses worldwide. Young says lan Read, Pfizer's CEO, has had a profound impact on Pfizer's culture. He praises Read's transparency. You can see all three elements of a connection culture in this section of Read's letter to stakeholders the year after he became CEO:

In 2011, we thoroughly explored what our culture is and how it needs to evolve. We engaged with leaders across the business and sought the candid input of approximately 11,000 colleagues globally. We concluded that we need a culture where colleagues behave like they are owners of the business, are not afraid to take thoughtful risks, deliver on their commitments, treat each other with trust and respect and work with integrity each and every day. Developing this ownership culture will be key to our success. I am personally proud of Pfizer's colleagues. Pfizer people care. They embody our humanity and innovative spirit, and are determined to tackle some of the most pressing health care challenges of our time. We are committed to creating an ownership culture that unleashes the creativity of our colleagues around the world.

When Pfizer acquired Warner-Lambert in 2000, it adopted Warner-Lambert's practice of referring to employees as "colleagues." The word "colleagues" conveys a greater level of respect for people. In comparison, the word "employees" makes people sound more like a means to the end of achieving business results than unique individuals worthy of respect in and of themselves.

Pfizer explicitly uses the provocative phrase "no jerks" when it comes to behavior. This language clearly communicates that disrespectful, patronizing, condescending, or passive-aggressive behavior is not welcome. People who consistently treat others in this way are agents of disconnection. To make the cultural value of "no jerks" real, several years ago Pfizer launched and trained up to 80,000 colleagues worldwide on "Straight Talk," an approach to giving and receiving feedback and holding potentially difficult conversations that safeguards relational connection and brings information forward. Pfizer colleagues were given Straight Talk coins they can pull out and place on a table during a discussion when speaking up is necessary. The simple object is a tangible reminder to all present of the "why" and "how" behind the initiative.

Although the coins are not used as much these days, Young hears colleagues around the world use the phrase "in the spirit of Straight Talk" before they speak up. He has noted that the Asian region has wrestled the most with what Straight Talk looks like there, given the culture's deeply embedded value of respect for elders and people in authority. Straight Talk gives them a common language to use and reinforces that it is OK, and actually encouraged, to speak up for the good of the organization.

People feel more connected to an organization that is ethical. Pfizer leaders cite "winning the right way" and "performance with integrity" as the "shared responsibility" of all Pfizer colleagues. They encourage people to take responsibility, hold each other accountable, raise concerns, and ask

Organizations that are not intentional about developing culture tend to have a mix of subcultures. Your company can use annual employee engagement and connection surveys as a systematic way to assess connection and hold leaders responsible for creating connection cultures. The survey should ask all employees how their team, department, and organization are doing when it comes to acting in ways that are consistent with the organization's values. It can be designed to pinpoint where the organization's values are being met and where connection cultures, cultures of control, and cultures of indifference are found within an organization.

Most managers hire and promote for competence but are not as intentional about assessing connection skills. Involve many individuals in your organization's hiring and promotion

"People who feel connected because they care about their organization's performance are willing to speak up and share information."

questions, along with "saying no when it is the right thing to do, regardless of the business impact," and "maintaining Pfizer's high standards in everything we do and everywhere we operate." The leaders in a global business must manage operations in nations where meeting high ethical standards is a challenge due to corruption in the local culture. In some countries, Young spends as much or more time thinking about compliance issues as he does strategy issues.

One way Pfizer seeks the opinions of its colleagues is through the annual PfizerVoice survey. Pfizer colleagues rate various aspects of the organization, including Pfizer's strategy, the division/business unit's strategy, organization system and structure, and the CEO and executive leadership team. Feedback from the survey helps hold managers and leaders accountable.

GETTING STARTED

In our book Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy, and Understanding at Work (Association for Talent Development, 2015), we describe 15 building blocks to get started in creating a connection culture. Here are three of those blocks:

• Hire, develop, and promote for competence and connection skills. Creating a connection culture requires developing a certain mindset in leaders. Education is essential. For an organization to gain the support of its leaders, they must understand what a connection culture is, why it's important, and how they can create and sustain it. This information must be communicated to all current leaders during leadership training sessions and incorporated into new leader orientation.

processes. Have them compare notes, considering both the values of your organization and the character strengths that increase connection. These include passion for excellence, fairness, honesty, and humility.

• Help people develop connection skills. Everyone in your organization needs to develop connection skills. This is especially true for leaders. Managers lead from authority, whereas leaders lead from a combination of authority and connection. It is not unusual for managers who are good at organizing tasks to require help in developing the personal leadership skills needed to better connect with people and maintain that connection.

Develop the habit of emphasizing positives. Psychologist John Gottman first observed that marriages were less likely to survive when the positive-to-negative ratio of interactions dipped below 5-to-1. More recently, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson found that a positivity ratio also applied in the workplace. People need affirmation and recognition, so get in the habit of looking for ways to affirm and serve others. Do this by looking for task strengths and character strengths, which reflect the excellence of a person's work and the way that person goes about her work, respectively.

• Establish knowledge-flow sessions for decision input and idea development. Holding knowledge-flow sessions is a practice that promotes connection through open communications. Begin meetings with positive comments to boost energy and creativity. Share your vision—your thoughts about what actions need to be done, by whom, and when each action needs to be completed. After leading with vision, say something like, "I don't have a monopoly on good ideas, and we will be our best only when we all share our ideas and opinions."

Encourage dialogue by asking "what's right," "what's wrong," and "what's missing" from your thinking. Everyone's opinions and ideas should be considered, so be sure to ask people who are quiet to share what they think. Listen and consider the ideas put forth and implement good ideas, giving credit where it's due.

People will often have differences of opinion, and leaders should assure those in the knowledge-flow session that creative friction is healthy and actually desirable. With this understanding, employees can hold and voice opposing views without having them grow into combat. The key to maintaining healthy creative friction is to make sure you are trying to "get it right" to promote task excellence, rather than "be right" for the purpose of personal pride.

As you consider the culture of your team and overall organization, keep in mind that culture is "local" in nature. While you personally may be operating within a connection

culture, are there other leaders in your organization whose colleagues would say they are allowing or even promoting cultures of control or indifference?

The average organization engages a mere 13% of its employees. Like Pfizer, create a connection culture and watch what happens. Employee engagement levels will rise, helping to boost your organization's performance and provide a competitive advantage.

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