



SHAPE YOUR CULTURE

You can't ignore the 800-pound gorilla of past assumptions.

BY LINDA FORD, PH.D.

Have you ever put a new procedure in place and found that no one followed it? If so, chances are you were bumping up against the 800-pound gorilla of corporate culture. Whether your CU has one branch or dozens, there is “the way things work around here.” That’s your culture.

Culture is a set of shared assumptions and unwritten rules that influence our perceptions and behavior—a force field that shapes how we do things. Your culture is essential to recruiting and retaining good employees. Since it shapes how things are done in your organization, it also can make a direct contribution to your bottom line.

Got a problem with member loyalty? Notice how your employees treat each other and you will find clues about how members feel about their interactions with your credit union. Finding it hard to get new ideas accepted quickly? Culture may dictate that decisions carry the “right of infinite appeal,” thus slowing things down at every turn.

Want solutions to these and other problems related to culture? There are four norms you can build into the culture of your CU to enhance the organization’s ability to succeed.

1. THINK OUTSIDE IN

What is “outside” and what is “inside” depends on your perspective. If you’re in fifth grade, everyone in the fourth grade is “outside.” But if you’re the principal, all the students are “inside.”

Who is “outside” your CU and needs to be brought in? Members, suppliers, community partners and anyone else who is critical to your success, that’s

who. No doubt you have mechanisms for communicating with them, gathering data from them, and solving their problems. That’s good but not good enough if you want an engaged, innovative organization.

If you’re like most leaders, your “default setting” for these folks is “outside” of processes, such as planning, designing systems and processes, and establishing metrics.

Flip it! Bring the outside, in. Make the default setting “inside” by assuming that key stakeholders play an active role in critical business processes. Instead of having to make a case for bringing them in, ask your team to make a case for leaving them out.

When your 800-pound gorilla thinks “outside-in,” the likelihood for positive member connection and innovative ideas increases many times over.

2. HAVE NO “KNOW” BOUNDARIES

You already know that you can’t be the expert at everything. The financial services world is too complex and rapidly changing to make that possible. But, there are people on your team who can add to your expertise, especially now that you know that your “team” includes external stakeholders like members and community partners.

How do you create a culture where everyone can contribute his expertise fully, an organization where gaps in



knowledge are not considered a “problem” but a routine part of exploring solutions? The most powerful single thing a leader can do to make this happen is to say “I don’t know.”

It can feel risky to acknowledge what we lack. Here’s the catch—trust is a risk game and the leader must ante up first. As a leader, it’s your job to set the norm of acknowledging what you don’t know and asking for others’ ideas, input and information. When you do that, everyone can contribute without fear of stepping on someone’s toes. Knowledge flows freely without getting stuck in the eddies of invulnerability.

3. EAT WORMS TOGETHER

As one dedicated team member said, “It sounds corny, but we live or die



together.” When your team knows how to get full commitment from each player, then each of you will be saying that, too. It may sound corny, but it gets results.

How do you get there? First, everyone on the team should be able to express his or her views. You want to encourage a healthy level of debate

and discussion. As a team, sort out the facts from the opinions. See where you are making assumptions and test those assumptions.

Second, you eat worms. Excuse me? Here’s the deal. Back in the ’70s (when psychology professors had fewer constraints on using their students as guinea pigs), some researchers

experimented with what it would take to convince students to eat earthworms.

Two factors emerged as essential: context and public commitment. When the task was framed in the context of a lofty goal (contributing to research that would help mankind), the students were much more likely to agree to eat the worms. If they expressed that commitment publicly, their willingness to follow through on the decision again increased.

The moral of the story for you? Your credit union team members need to keep the larger shared goal always in mind rather than focusing on individual agendas. And when they agree to something, they need to do it publicly.

4. PEOPLE AREN’T “HUMAN CAPITAL”; THEY’RE HUMAN BEINGS!

David Whyte (author of *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of Soul in Corporate America*) says the reason people crack the window of their car when they go into the office is that they leave their soul in the car and don’t want it to suffocate.

Do you bring your whole self to work or do you leave “the real you” in the car? Bringing one’s whole self to work is an essential element of building trust. And many leaders acknowledge that it’s hard to do.

It’s much easier to not reveal who you are and what really is important to you. With that knowledge, you become vulnerable. You can be hurt. So instead, we leave our “real self” in the car. It allows us to have the illusion of invulnerability.

But concealing your real self robs the organization of energy and blocks the development of trust. Creating an environment where people trust each other as human beings, not just as holders of organizational positions, is vital to making employees feel valued, keeping them engaged and retaining them. More than anything else, this norm gets the gorilla on your side in your efforts to create a culture that enhances your success.



THREE KEYS FOR CHANGING CULTURE

Now, here's the hard part. You can't mandate any of these. These norms are all part of the culture—the informal system that tells us how to behave. Your role as a leader in the organization is to help foster these norms in your culture. How do you do that?

Key #1: Set an example. Be the first in your team to say “I don't know.” Or show up with your real self, even when it leaves you feeling vulnerable. Your actions send a message to people. Sometimes when you are trying to set an example of a behavior that's outside your organization's current norms, you will notice that it makes you uncomfortable or even anxious. That just means that you're tangling with the gorilla.

Key #2: Share the “why.” Find opportunities to offer a brief explanation of why you did what you did. In other words, you need not only to “walk the

talk” but also to “talk the walk.”

Without some explanation from you, employees will invent their own explanations for your behavior. Some explanations might surprise or even amuse you. But your reasoning helps employees make the link between your behavior and new norms in the culture. No long speeches, no PowerPoint. Just short comments at a staff meeting or in a hallway conversation. Hearing from you about your tangles with the gorilla will help employees see the new, emerging culture.

Key #3: Leverage the rumor mill. Get positive stories about these norms circulating in the rumor mill. Catch people doing something right and get the story told. Keep your ear to the ground for stories that are harbingers of the new norms you want to create. Then get those stories told and re-told.

One executive summarizes the issue this way, “What determines our success in our market? Being the team that can execute best. It's not about making us all nice; it's about making us a highly functional team that can execute better and accomplish more than the other organizations.”

And creating that highly functional team can be challenging. Taming the gorilla takes time, persistence and HR-courage. It can be uncomfortable and personally challenging. Don't expect one new behavior to tame the gorilla. Instead, consistently maintain the new behavior over time. When your culture does shift, you have an important lever for your credit union's success. 🦍

Linda Ford, Ph.D., has been helping companies execute successfully as a consultant and professional speaker for 16 years. She is the founder and owner of Ford Business Consulting. To see more of Ford's ideas, read her blog at www.FordBusinessConsulting.com or e-mail her at Linda@FordBusinessConsulting.com.

