

Why Leaders Today Need to Foster a Blameless Culture to Boost Workplace Productivity – And How



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We have arrived at a nexus point in the relationship between employees and employers where two shifts are reshaping the traditional hierarchical leadership model. Thanks in part to the democratization of publishing through social media, young people feel more empowered over their careers than ever before. At the same time, these generations are confronting waves of fear and self-doubt. Business leaders must find intelligent and flexible ways to respond to this emerging reality because the old ways limit individual contribution and innovation.

These two trends may appear paradoxical, but they are actually linked: As younger people increasingly realize they are more than their jobs, they are confronting an ingrained reluctance to challenge the status quo for fear of losing their job or being embarrassed in front of their peers. Yet these fears will not hold back change. In my role coaching and mentoring tech leaders, I have seen a push to create a more accessible and neutral workplace culture where everyone's opinion and participation are valued equally.

This is crucial because the traditional leadership model will stifle the very innovation that Gen Zers, especially, are showing an aptitude for as digital natives. Leaders must establish a blameless culture that gives all generations the sense of safety to communicate openly and take risks. It starts with leading through humility.

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1. Own your own mistakes for greater trust

In traditional American corporate culture, executives can appear inaccessible and maintain an image of unquestioned authority. Issues arise when leaders are emotionally driven and illogical, so they end up negating their people or treating them poorly. Then, when employees come to me, they express insecurity about communicating in groups and fear a negative review or even getting fired. As a result, they don't escalate, challenge, innovate or show up for their team.

Recent research by the London School of Economics found that around a third of Gen Z and Millennial employees described themselves as unproductive due to a lack of support from their bosses. And where there was at least a 12-year gap between manager and employee, workers were almost three times more

likely to be unsatisfied with their jobs. Results like these are symptomatic of a you-versus-me divide that has opened up between employees and leaders.

To bring workplace culture back to a place of neutrality, managers have to convince people there will be no punishment for escalation or for promoting new ideas at the risk of failure. However, employees are more likely to believe a leader when they model the humility and transparency they want to see in others. That means owning their own mistakes publicly and showing employees they are willing to walk back changes when necessary. With 88% of managers admitting to concealing their mistakes to a Harvard Business Review study, there is work to be done as the old-school ideas about hierarchy in business continue to break down.

2. Encourage people's self-worth for mutual benefit

Executives who fail to grasp the zeitgeist risk their company becoming a less desirable workplace. MIT Sloan Management Review research, for instance, found that corporate culture was the most reliable predictor of attrition. The failure to promote inclusivity and people feeling disrespected were two of the main factors contributing to a toxic work culture, which was ten times more relevant than compensation when forecasting turnover.

There are always stories behind figures like these. My brother, for instance, felt the sting of being misunderstood when he won an award as a top representative at a major pharmaceutical company. Just as he was going to collect the prize, he was intercepted by the president, who took one look at his black suit and white Doc Martens and said to him: "Those shoes are inappropriate. I never want to see you in them again."

Without missing a beat, he replied: “Well, I walked into over 150 offices in these shoes, outselling every other company rep.” My brother understood that today’s leaders should encourage individuality and confidence when they are bringing demonstrable success. McKinsey agrees, with its research showing that the culture at leading innovators is full of creativity, excitement and optimism.

The caveat is that younger generations cannot rely on a job to provide their self-worth. It is well known they want to work for companies driving social change, yet I have seen the desire for greater inclusivity create a false conflict between being direct and confident in their expertise and being kind. There is a shift happening, and I encourage employees to follow the lead of their contemporaries and own their skills and values.

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3. Align personal and organizational goals

In my role with a large social media platform, I meet many creators and influencers, as well as reps from merchants and big brands. As a result, I have witnessed how the old employee contract is changing. So many of these young entrepreneurs started from nothing, and their stories are the same. They say, “Instead of selling for you, I’m sourcing inventory and selling my stuff—I am the asset now.”

It is far from the world Boomers inherited when they were with companies for 20 to 30 years. Gen X still has the subconscious bias that if they work hard and stay loyal, the company will look after them. But in a global jobs market where people can literally work from anywhere, loyalty has become more

transactional. For instance, Gallup described Millennials as the job-hopping generation and found that 60% are open to new opportunities despite being currently employed.

So, my message to leaders is to let go of the mindset of owning employees and instead see your role as enabling their talents. Engage people in regular, constructive dialogue to align personal and organizational goals so they are seen as complementary. When employees know their value and feel safe to innovate, they are far more likely to become collaborative partners and make their personal value proposition a win-win for both parties.

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