

Engaging Self-Concepts for Organizational Excellence

As competition becomes tougher, technology advances, and consumer preferences change, businesses too have to transform themselves. In this context, it would be interesting to see what kind of transformation or change is desired? Are businesses looking at becoming more skilled at handling technical issues, more adept at managing organizational complexities, or more equipped to deal with environmental uncertainties?

The sociologist, Jack Mezirow defined transformative learning as the process by which frames of reference (including mindsets, assumptions, and worldviews) change. Frames of reference are defined as structures of culture and language through which we construe meaning by attributing coherence and significance to our experience. Harvard Psychologist, Robert Kegan describes individual growth using transformative learning as a movement from a narrower definition of one's self to a broader self-definition. For example, at the lowest level, individuals define themselves (and thereby interpret reality) in terms of their personal goals and agendas. At a slightly higher level, individuals define themselves in terms of their interpersonal connections and obligations. At this level, individuals can objectively see their personal goals. At the highest level, individuals define themselves in terms of personal standards and value systems. At this level, individuals can objectively assess their personal goals as well as their relationships.

A central aspect of one's meaning-making system is an individual's self-concept. Self-concept is nothing but a cluster of identities arranged in a hierarchy. In others words, self-concept is a possible set of answers to the question- *Who am I?* Perhaps it is worthwhile to explore how individuals come to define themselves in an organizational context, and how this definition of themselves has impacts on work outcomes.

Self-concept based theory of motivation

In the early 1990s, psychologist, Boas Shamir proposed the "self-concept based theory of motivation". Shamir suggested that leaders must engage the self-concepts of their followers in powerful ways such that they can harness the forces of self-esteem and self-worth.

In the Richard Attenborough's movie *Gandhi*, there is a powerful scene in which a young Gandhi tries to "motivate" a group of Indians who are working in South Africa. The context is the Asiatic Registration Act (1908) proposed by General Smutts which required all Indians to be finger printed, carry passes at all times, and get their marriages registered with the government. While addressing the crowd, Gandhi vividly describes the implications of the law and thereby reminds them of their identity as Indians. Charged by his vivid description, some members in the crowd announce that they would kill all the British policemen before they could insult a single Indian woman. At that time, Gandhi reminds the audience of their identity as human beings (one which they share with their British oppressors) and hence urges them towards non-violence. Finally, Gandhi ends the meeting by singing the British National Anthem - "God Save the King". Individuals may have entered the hall with different identities- that of a father, a son, a brother, etc., but they all left with three identities salient- first, their identity as Indians; second, their identity as human beings; and third, their identity as loyal citizens of the British Empire. In this manner, Gandhi, circumscribes a set of desirable behaviours for his followers by carefully making desired identities salient in them.

Similarly, while preparing for the 1980 Winter Olympics, Coach Herb Brooks of the US ice-hockey team ensures that all his players are clear on who they are and why they are here. During the practice session, he keeps making them complete laps of the ice-ring until they realize that they play for US first and their schools/state's team next. Just before the US

team is about to play with the Soviet team which had won six out of the previous seven Winter Olympics, he again reminds them about who they are and why they are here. I quote from the now famous speech:

"Tonight, we are the greatest hockey team in the world. You were born to be hockey players—every one of you, and you were meant to be here tonight.

This is your time. Their time is done. This is your time. Now go out there and take it!"

Being reminded of their identity as US hockey players and the best team in the world, certain behaviours automatically follow. Each of the hockey players are then charged with a sense of purpose and go all out to fulfil their destiny.

This sense of purpose and meaning is not restricted to politics or sports, it is even seen in business. Organizations such as Google, Apple, Johnson & Johnson, and the Tata Group have been able to create strong cultures in which employees strongly identify with the company. Being a member of these organizations is an important part of the individual's identity and it automatically defines certain behaviours.

Self-concepts in action

When a group of individuals are completely convinced about who they are and why they are here, there are opportunities for exemplary behaviour. It is said that on the Titanic when the ship was sinking, a small group of eight musicians continued to play their music to calm the passengers to the very last. They were not even employees of the ship and were travelling second class, but their sense of identity as musicians was so strong, that during a crises, the course of action for them was obvious.

Another excellent example of culture building is the Taj Mahal Hotel. On November 26, 2008 when the Taj was attacked by terrorists, the management and staff of the hotel

responded with exemplary courage- facing the gunmen's bullets while trying to save their guests. The telephone operators who had left the hotel building, voluntarily came back and worked late into the night calling the guests and trying to save their lives. The general manager stayed in the hotel and tried to rescue the guests even while his own family was in grave danger. Later when asked why he chose to do what he did, he said, "I was the Captain of the Ship, how could I leave while the guests were still trapped inside." Those who faced the terrorists' bullets at the Taj did not consider themselves as mere employees- they were convinced that they were the "hosts" and until their guests were safe, they could not even think of leaving.

How to develop a culture of excellence

There are two processes through which organizations can help create a culture of excellence in which individual define themselves in a manner that empowers them to act in the best interests of the stakeholders. The two processes together provide answers to the two key questions - *What does the organization's vision mean to me?* and *What do I mean to the organization's vision?*

The first process is through inspirational leadership. Visionary leaders are able to provide an inspirational vision, which motivates followers to look beyond the mundane activities of their jobs. An inspiring vision not only presents a glorious future but also shows how the individual can work towards it in his/her current job. It is this connection between one's current work and a desirable future, which infuses meaning into the employees' work. A meaningful vision is one which is big and exciting enough to engage a large number of people. The vision must be something which cannot be achieved in the short run and is worth giving up one's life for. Gandhi's vision for *swaraj* was one such vision. While all other leaders in India had visions of political independence, to which there could be some disputes, Gandhi's vision of *swaraj* was all encompassing and engaged persons of different political

dispensations. By providing a meaningful vision, leaders help followers answer the question, *What does the organization's vision mean to me?*

The second process is empowerment. Through the process of empowerment, followers can answer the question, *What do I mean to the vision?* This is often more difficult to answer especially when different individuals are of different abilities. The challenge here is to be able to define the vision so powerfully and link up each individual's work with the vision so vividly that each individual has a clear idea of what he or she means to the vision of the organization. Here again Gandhi was able to do a great job of breaking up the large vision of *swaraj* into simple tasks such as joining Congress, quitting government jobs, quitting government schools, or burning British clothes. Each individual could take on whatever suited his or her ability and temperament. In this way the vision became real for everyone and everyone was a part of the freedom movement. The employees of the Taj Mahal Hotel acted in the way they did because each employee was convinced that irrespective of what role they performed and where they lay in the organizational hierarchy, they mattered to the overall vision of the organization.

To be able to make individuals believe that they really matter to the organization is a full time task for the top management. I once had the opportunity to visit a factory of Procter & Gamble where I saw an employee working on a machine filling bottles of Vicks Vaporub. On his machine there was a computer screen which had a screen saver which showed a certain value in U.S. dollars. I asked the operator, what the number on his screen saver represented and he said that it was the price of the P&G share in USA. I asked him how that was relevant to his work. The operator then started explaining to me in great details his daily work schedule. For each of his work activities, the operator was able to clearly show me the link between his work and the price of the P&G share. More importantly, he genuinely believed that his efforts mattered to achieving the overall vision of P&G. Later, I discovered

that this was not just a matter of education and training but also other HR processes and policies. P&G hires its operators from the best ITIs in the country using a selection process similar to the one used for managers. All employees are treated the same as far as their human needs are concerned. For example, when P&G employees make a long-distance flight, they are all allowed to travel first class. In other words, the company communicates to its people through its actions that they matter.

Implications for practice

In the last few years with the influx of technology learning has become highly dominated by strategy and process thereby de-emphasizing the role of culture and leadership. Excellence cannot be demanded, nor can it be negotiated. Excellence can only be an outcome of powerful inspiration and by engaging the self-concepts of individuals. Organizations must spend time defining their identity and purpose clearly - in other words, answering the questions, *Who we are?* and *Why are we here?* Each individual must be encouraged to seek out his or her own answer to these questions by providing challenging assignments, with opportunities for reflection, and support. The best form of learning is to learn about one's own nature and one's purpose in life.