



COACHING LEADERSHIP HABITS FOR CULTURE CHANGE

THE UNIVERSAL KEY TO SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

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Smart businesses have figured out that the key to improving business performance is to focus on their culture. Whether the aim is to have best in class safety in a construction site, great customer experience in a contact centre or engagement levels that drive innovation, the most effective way to deliver sustainable improvement is always through cultural change.

Having been a Group HR Director in a FTSE 100 company, the idea of shaping the culture with tens of thousands of colleagues seems at best daunting, at worst impossible. However, by sticking to a few simple (and proven) concepts culture change can be sustainably achieved and performance transformed. Having worked for the last five years coaching CEOs and Senior Leaders in large corporations, all seeking cultural change in one form or another, the same issues manifest themselves. Industrial leaders look for habitualised problem solving and safety practices; Product leaders look for collaboration and rapid learning; Service focused businesses look for customer intimacy, empathy and listening – all have a clear idea of **WHAT** they want to see through their business, but not **HOW** to achieve that change.

The start point is to understand that culture is not an intangible concept – it is just a **collection of habits**. The latest studies from neurobiologists show that up to 95% of human behaviour is habitual i.e., we carry out the activity in an automatic and routine way (what many describe as ‘autopilot’). In the best service companies, high levels of customer engagement are not achieved by accident, they are achieved through certain behaviour being consistent, routine, and habitual. When we make a conscious choice to shop at one store over another because of the service, we would probably describe the culture. In reality, the reason we make that choice is the effect of thousands of employees of that store carrying out unconscious, but carefully thought-out, habits.

As in the example of our favourite store, the good news is that **habits can be engineered**. All habits, when analysed are made up of specific routines. Anyone that has read ‘The Power of Habit’ by Charles Duhigg will be familiar with ‘The Habit Loop’. Duhigg describes how behavioural routines are made up of a Cue (a trigger that signals the starting point of your habit and tells your brain to move into automatic mode to execute a specific routine), a Routine (a physical, mental, or emotional sequence of behaviour that your brain has stored) and a Reward (a positive emotion that encourages this brain to repeat the routine the next time the cue is triggered). By understanding this loop, dysfunctional behaviour can be re-engineered into desirable habits – coaching is the key to this - more of that later.

If you accept those two concepts, you will understand how it is possible to engineer the habits of individual colleagues, but how can this be done at scale? This is where the third key concept comes into play, the **Shadow of the Leader**. Put simply, leaders role-model certain habits, and through genetic and social conditioning these become the norm (i.e. their teams copy them). In my experience it takes around three months for leadership teams to start to mirror the habits of the team leader (importantly what they do, not what they say!). This pattern then repeats down through the hierarchy, meaning that over time the leader has a significant influence on the culture of the organisation.

Coaching is key to the focus on habits. Because of the 'Shadow of the Leader' concept, the most senior leader will always have the greatest role-model impact. He or she will need help first to design new habits (both understanding the current dysfunctional habit and the new cue, routine, and reward that they need to put in place). Most importantly, they will benefit from coaching to practice the new habit. To embed a new routine (i.e. to move it from being an awkward new approach to being something that happens on autopilot) requires **Intensity and Frequency**. This means that it needs to be practiced with genuine commitment and on many occasions in a short timeframe. Just like a golfer learning a new swing, or a tennis player learning a new backhand, coaching is instrumental in both the design and supported practice of the new habit. When practiced with intensity and frequency I have worked with many leaders who are astounded at the behaviour change that they start to role-model, and even more astounded as those in their teams begin to copy this. Through my coaching practice I have learnt that 'people protect what their build', in other words if it is something they have created they are more likely to continue to carry it out when the coaching support is in the rear-view mirror.

Defining and practicing habits embedded through coaching support spread through an organisation via the leadership shadow - these are the 'power tools' when delivering cultural change. Because this is about small changes delivered with intensity and frequency it is not a quick fix. However, with the right coaching support I have witnessed dramatic improvements in safety, productivity, programme delivery, service, and engagement which is why I firmly believe that focusing on coaching leadership habits is really the universal key to sustainable and continuous performance improvement.

QUICK CASE STUDY:

Earlier this year I worked with a large multinational engineering company who were struggling to deliver a complex delivery programme. Despite trying several 'silver bullet' solutions (multiple re-organisations, leadership changes and incentive schemes) they were months behind in the programme and incurring liabilities and potential reputational damage. The Managing Director rightly identified that what they were experiencing was a 'culture of lateness' where programme slippage was believed to be inevitable. We worked on a new habit where any time he focused on a potential action he would simply ask 'who is responsible, by when will it be delivered, and do you need any support?'. By focusing on this for small commitments (I saw him practice this phrase many times in each conversation) and then following up to check on the completion of the action, plus recognising success, he aimed to build a culture underpinned by colleagues making and delivering commitments. In the weeks that followed I saw his team starting to practice the same habit loop, and the three questions routinely appeared in daily progress meetings, on trackers and in briefings. Within a few months programme performance started to recover, and the business started to regain a belief that success was possible. The MD describes how he now sees real teamwork as the conversation is less about delivering the programme to the customer, and more about team members delivering commitments to each other. As always, performance comes down to thousands of small habits, not one or two silver bullets. sustainable and continuous performance improvement.



Contact us to discuss how coaching can support you and your team to embrace positive change.
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