ACHIEVING FULL CAPACITY: ASSETS REQUIRED

TO CREATE AN HONEST COMMUNICATION SUCCESS CULTURE

By Steven Gaffney

ORGANIZATIONS THESE DAYS face limited resources and numerous external challenges, yet the demand to achieve full capacity remains constant. More than twenty years in business with employees tells me the key to achieving full capacity is to build and continuously nurture an Honest Communication Success Culture (HCSC) because such a culture makes all the difference to innovation, efficiency, and teamwork as well as the bottom line.

An Honest Communication Success Culture (HCSC) is the key differentiator between organizations that are successful and dominant in the market and those that are not. It is also the primary differentiator between organizations with employees who are fully engaged and those who are not. Considering that a recent Gallup poll revealed that 70 percent of employees are not engaged or inspired in the workplace, I would assert that it is time to consider the role of culture in facilitating engagement in order to win in the marketplace.

WHAT IS AN HONEST COMMUNICATION SUCCESS CULTURE?

An Honest Communication Success Culture has two primary characteristics—proactive sharing and taking responsibility—as illustrated on the graph on Page 3. These concepts seem simple, but their application may be a bit more complex than meets the eye. Let's take a quick look at what proactive sharing and taking responsibility really are.

Proactive Sharing
In an organization with a strong HCSC, people openly and honestly share their thoughts and opinions because they understand the biggest problem in an organization isn't what people do say, it's what they don't say. Proactive sharing is sharing without being asked, and it involves three levels of communication that we call the three *I*'s:

- *Level 1: Information*. This is the first and most basic level of sharing. Information is critical for people to make informed decisions, and one of the biggest problems in the workplace is uninformed decisions. Although any sharing is helpful, simply sharing information—or doing

a data dump—isn't enough. Some employees do share information but never draw conclusions or alert others to problems that are brewing.

- *Level 2: Issues*. You can also refer to issues as problems or challenges that must be shared to insure the health of the organization. Problems that are ignored or hidden grow and become more complicated and expensive to fix as time passes.
- *Level 3: Ideas.* Ideas directly impact innovation. You can't move forward on an idea you don't know about, and you can't develop a rough idea into a solution that will positively impact your bottom line if you've never heard about it.

In organizations with the strongest HCSC, people proactively share at all three levels: Information, Issues, and Ideas. All are necessary. It's easy to see why organizations that promote proactive sharing—up, down, and across the organization—are more effective and efficient and able to dramatically increase revenue and profits.

Taking Responsibility

Sharing is destructive rather than constructive if people don't take responsibility. When people share but play the blame game, others will get defensive, hunker down, and blame back. This behavior can actually stall organizational growth. If left unattended, destructive sharing becomes entrenched in the culture and can lead to a downward spiral for the organization. By encouraging everyone to take responsibility rather than to shift it, organizations find solutions rather than fault and create an environment that encourages people to take initiative, think out of the box, and excel with velocity.

ACHIEVING FULL CAPACITY

Because organizations consist of people, and people make up culture, understanding whether your employees are enhancing your organization's HCSC or undermining it is crucial. The grid on Page 3 identifies the four key modalities that employees operate with (usually without even knowing it) and demonstrates each modality's level of proactive sharing and taking responsibility. All employees fall into one of the four categories — Pointers, Apologists, Hiders, and Assets — and, as the grid reveals, each impacts your HCSC. These categories are not personality types; they are modes or perspectives that anyone can fall into.

The reason to identify these roles is not to place blame, but rather to create awareness and develop a plan to move people into the Asset category. Helping employees become fully engaged benefits your organization and everyone in it. As you look at these perspectives, remember to assume your employees have good intentions. Many

people want to do their best for you, but their past experiences can lead to wrong conclusions and actions in the present. Understanding these modalities will enable you to improve your culture, engage your employees, and get your organization to operate as close to full capacity as possible. Let's take a look at each one.

Pointers

Pointers are people who share a lot, which is obviously a behavior that should be encouraged. As the grid on Page 3 shows, Pointers are high on the sharing spectrum, but low on the responsibility side; that is because they often point out problems without taking any responsibility for the outcome. Instead of focusing on what they can do to fix the situation they are quick to point out what others should be doing differently or what others are doing wrong.

Pointers often think they are helping because they are "pointing" out the problem. Unfortunately, the words they choose, the way they speak, and the tone they use can cause others to get defensive and "point" back. If left untreated, the organization can become stunted as people will stop taking initiative and instead set up protective walls, which leads to working and communicating in silos.

You can often find the Pointers by listening for these lines: "not my fault"; "not my job"; "they prevent me"; and "I wanted to help but they made me…" Pointers generally have a good understanding of what the organization needs, but they need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and the results of their work.
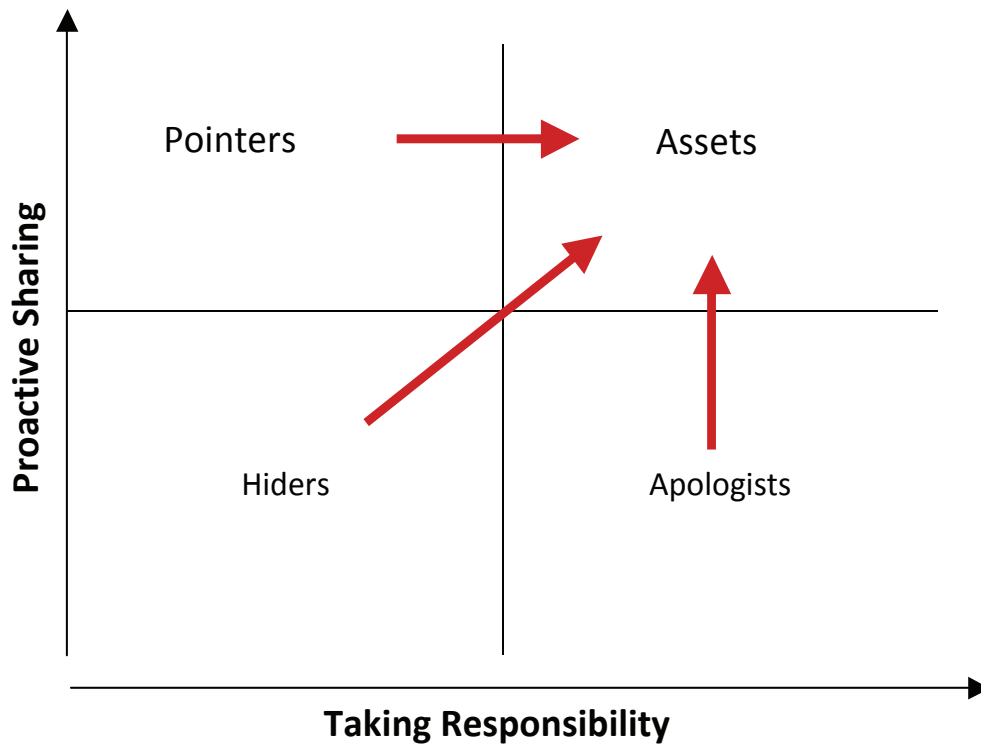
Apologists

Apologists are people who rarely speak up to share their thoughts and ideas. When they do, they take responsibility for everything that gets brought to their attention. Unfortunately, Apologists may do it to such an extreme that they internalize what is happening and beat themselves up. As the grid illustrates, this places them high on the responsibility side, but low on the sharing end of the spectrum. Apologists tend to constantly apologize even when they are not sure why they are doing so.

The good news about Apologists is that they are willing to take responsibility; the bad news is that they usually don't proactively contribute their thoughts and ideas — especially when it comes to their thoughtful recommendations about what others could be doing.

Apologists often have the best of intentions and simply don't realize the negative impact they are having on an organization by not contributing to their full potential — particularly their perspective and ingenuity. To complicate matters, because Apologists tend to beat themselves up,

Honest Communication Success Culture (HCSC) Grid

This grid displays the four modalities of people in an organization and emphasizes the way Pointers, Hiders, and Apologists can be converted into fully engaged Assets.

co-workers back off and don't provide Apologists with valuable feedback because they don't want to make the Apologists feel worse. This behavior tends to create a downward spiral because when people minimize their feedback and interaction, teamwork suffers and excellence in performance goes downhill.

Hiders

Hiders are people who neither take responsibility for their actions or situations, nor do they share problems or ideas, which explains their position on the grid above. Hiders are going along to get along. Often these individuals have just given up. Hiders are resigned that things will always be the way they are so there is no point in speaking up. Essentially, Hiders are physically showing up to work but have mentally gone on permanent vacation. Hiders are quick to rationalize that they have seen what has happened to others who speak up. They also rationalize that their job is just a job. When organizations have gone through a lot of downsizing and rightsizing, they tend to have more Hiders because people are afraid.

Hiders are organizational deadweight, and they can prove to be especially troublesome when an organization is making some major changes or adjustments to respond to the marketplace. As a client of mine put it, it is like trying to run a race while folks hold onto your ankles.

Besides being deadweight, Hiders have numerous other negative effects on an organization. One effect is that leaders can be deceived into thinking that things are moving along — that there are no problems — because they are not hearing about any issues. This lack of information allows small problems to become big problems that eventually require huge resources to fix. In addition, other employees may observe the Hiders' behavior and wrongly conclude that this is the way to work in an organization. Another negative effect is that because Hiders do not speak up or accept ownership of their actions, one never knows where they stand with such individuals. This can be very scary for co-workers and cause them to react in kind, which of course, can have a negative impact on initiative and productivity. Hiders generally don't realize that they are robbing the organization of their contributions and having a negative impact in so many areas.

Assets

Not surprisingly, Assets are fully engaged and they are the people you want in your organization. Assets fall on the high end of sharing and responsibility on our grid;

they share problems and issues as well as ideas and recommendations while taking responsibility for their perspectives. These people are easy to identify because you feel good when you are around them. You trust them.

Assets are efficient and effective, and they inspire others to be the same. Because Assets don't play the blame game, others want to hear what they have to say and take action accordingly. When an organization is filled with Assets, the organization is vibrant, energetic, and moving forward with velocity. People are quick to have the necessary open, honest conversations, even when they're tough to have. Assets realize conflict is healthy and good and that not resolving conflict is bad. Because Assets are willing to look at what they did – or did not do – to contribute to the problem, it is easy to focus on resolution.

Assets are role models for open, honest communication. They share information, issues, and ideas and take responsibility for what they are sharing. The bottom line is the more Assets your organization has, the stronger your Honest Communication Success Culture will be. The greater your HCSC, the more efficient and effective your organization is and the higher your revenue and profits.

ACHIEVING FULL CAPACITY

Think about it this way. If your organization consists of 20 percent Pointers, 20 percent Apologists, and 30 percent Hiders, then only 30 percent of the people in your organization are fully engaged and operating as Assets. If a full 70 percent of your organization is not proactively sharing and taking responsibility, then your organization is clearly not operating at full capacity. Think back to the recent Gallup poll that revealed that 70 percent of employees are not engaged or inspired in the workplace. In this business climate of limited resources and time, no organization can afford to work at 30 percent capacity.

The good news is that people can shift quickly into being Assets with the right coaching and motivation. People are often unaware that they fall into these categories and they don't realize the negative impact of their "contributions" to the organization. In fact, anyone can be in any one of those quadrants displayed on the grid at certain times and in certain situations. What is important is converting everyone from their dominant tendency to acting as Assets more and more of the time. This is a continuous process. Pointers, Apologists, Hiders, and Assets don't just affect the culture, they are affected by the culture. The feedback loop is ongoing, which provides endless opportunities for conversion and improvement. After all, there is no such thing as the status quo — if we are not progressing, we are regressing. You can always work at improving HCSC.

WHAT TO DO

Because open, honest communication is critical to moving people toward becoming Assets, share this article with your team and then lead a conversation to figure out next steps. Use the following six questions to get people talking:

1. Where do you fall predominantly? Pointer, Apologist, Hider, or Asset?
2. Where would people place you predominantly? (Not what you wish, but what they would actually say)
3. Where do the people around you fall predominantly? Are there more Pointers, Apologists, and Hiders than Assets in the organization? How is this affecting the organization's effectiveness?
4. Think of a situation where you were a Pointer, Apologist, or Hider. How would the outcome have been different if you had stepped into an Asset role?
5. What, if anything, prevents you – or your teammates – from being an Asset more consistently? What obstacles, if any, do you – or the team – need to overcome?
6. What can you do to help yourself and others operate predominantly in the Assets category?

Use your discussion to begin to identify the issues you are facing and to formulate a plan to help everyone move into the Assets category. Now that you can identify who is working in your organization and their effect on your HCSC, what is your action plan to create, build, and sustain an Honest Communication Success Culture?

A strong HCSC will enable your employees to achieve at full capacity. It impacts revenues, profits, and relationships. In the government sector, a strong HCSC results in higher productivity, greater efficiency, and better use of taxpayer dollars. The degree to which your employees are operating predominantly in the Assets category will determine your organization's ability to be innovative and beat the competition. No organization can afford Pointers, Hiders, and Apologists. To lead robust and growth-oriented organizations, Assets are required.

How can Steven Gaffney Company help?
We are the top experts in creating an Honest Communication Success Culture. We can help convert employees into Assets so that they are fully engaged, moving with velocity, and excelling in performance beyond the competition. Want to know more? Call us at (703) 241-7796 or email us at info@stevengaffney.com.