



Preston D. Cameron of Oculus Consulting Group: Five Things Business Leaders Can Do To Create A Fantastic Work Culture

An Interview With Authority Magazine

By Ben Ari



Enabling a Positive Climate — Experiencing positive emotions at work broadens individual momentary thought-action repertoires that build enduring personal resources. The climate can best be assessed by answering the simple question “What makes me proud that I work here”? If your team struggles to find something positive to be proud of, has difficulty verbalizing what they and the organization stand for, what is required to exceed their current duties, or even hesitate to tell people where they work, then it might be time for some climate change.

As a part of my series about how leaders can create a “fantastic work culture”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Preston D. Cameron.

Preston is a world-recognized international advisor to organizations of all shapes and sizes. He is focused on transforming an organizational vision into a measurable reality. Having circled the globe more than a dozen times working with a variety of organizations, he has been recognized for expertise and thought leadership in a variety of disciplines and he frequently serves as a keynote speaker and presenter for numerous conferences and expositions on

these and related topics. He is a member of the Harvard Business Review Advisory Council, an opt-in research community of business professionals, and an adjunct faculty member in the Strategic Leadership Program at Northern Arizona University when his schedule allows.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

Thank you so much for this opportunity. I started my career with a finance degree focused on performing systems analysis and financial planning for the #1 tourist attraction in Hawaii. My career is probably less of a smooth winding road and much more similar to the tilt-a-whirl at your local amusement park! I learned quickly that organizations were anxious to have me assist them with complex transitions and complicating business process renovations as I moved from the Tourism to the Aerospace / Defense then Automotive industries, and then back and forth again. While serving as CFO for an automotive aftermarket manufacturer, I had the opportunity to change industries again and join one of the Big 4 accounting & advisory firms. And then the ultimate change happened, 9-11 and the Enron debacle. Thankfully for me, it provided the impetus to take my knowledge on the road and form my own organization.

Today, my organization continues to ride the “tilt-a-whirl” of industries working with state governments, educational institutions, entrepreneurial tech startups, manufacturing and distribution firms, and a host of service organizations. It is safe to say that once I finish one ride, I can’t wait to get my ticket punched and go again.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?

One of my base philosophies is that everything should be interesting and fun, or I’m not doing it. Also, a willingness to try new things and “reward excellent failures” is important for successful leadership. Several years ago, I was asked to make a presentation in New York City and lead a panel of business leaders discussing important technological projects at their organizations. My session was just one of a plethora of sessions over the 2-day scheduled conference on Friday and Saturday. I had spent the first four days of that week crossing the country in meetings with multiple clients. I landed at New York’s LaGuardia airport late the night before my scheduled presentation and I headed to catch a cab to Midtown. As I stepped off the plane, my phone indicated I had the proverbial awaiting voicemail messages. One of the messages was from the conference event manager who indicated she had an important question. I returned her call and found that the Keynote Speaker for the conference had fallen ill, and the conference leaders were wondering if I would be willing to step in and substitute for her. After a couple of clarifying questions, I committed to accepting the gig scheduled to start 8 hours later. What was I thinking? Maybe it was the jetlag talking! Talk about taking a risk! Needless to say, I spent a short night prepping for the keynote, and it came off without a hitch. It reinforced a willingness to try hard things, to be flexible, and that trusted relationships are critical to an individual leader’s success.

Are you working on any exciting projects now? How do you think that will help people?

We are sharing time between large scale educational institutions who have been severely impacted by their Covid-related enrollment declines and assisting small businesses in our local communities that are struggling to maintain operations as the pandemic persists. Regardless of the size of the organization, many of the leadership challenges are the same. Helping these organization leaders to understand how to maintain and enhance their work environments during these challenging times has brought a sense of renewal and persistence to our teams.

Ok, lets jump to the main part of our interview. According to a study cited in Forbes, more than half of the US workforce is unhappy. Why do you think that number is so high?

My experience has taught me that organizations tend to focus on positive environments while neglecting the attributes of positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning that are equally if not more important. Having a first-rate coffee bar, pool table, recreational amenities, availability of free food and beverages, on-site child-care, free dry-cleaning services, and on and on and on are evidence of the problem. Many organizations perceive that these are the attributes needed to produce a satisfied workforce and the next best workplace on the planet. Successful and positive organizational cultures are not the by-product of the latest and greatest amenities, but employees are

voting that relationships, communication, and meaningfulness are more important. Repetitive studies have shown that 6 out of 8 employees who left their employment cited “lack of appreciation” as the major reason, while as many as 9 out of 10 managers and leaders believed that their reason for leaving was because of low pay. The chasm between these two perspectives should give leaders cause for pause.

Regardless of the work environment, people are living systems and they tend toward positive energy and away from negative energy, much like plants lean toward the sunlight. Employees will gravitate toward positive information, positive words, and positive relationships. The problem is many of these same leaders see this emphasis on positivity as soft, unscientific, unverifiable, and expensive. They fail to understand how it enables positive employee performance and in turn, positive results within their organization.

Based on your experience or research, how do you think an unhappy workforce will impact a) company productivity b) company profitability c) and employee health and wellbeing?

It may sound obvious that creating the “organization of your dreams” is more than just impressive office environments. Higher and faster levels of employee turnover resulting in declining productivity, an overloaded workforce, increasing customer dissatisfaction, and hence declining revenues and profits are the natural consequences of focusing on the physical amenities over relationships, communication, and meaning. An unhappy workforce translates into a loss of enthusiasm for not only full employee engagement, but that attitude seems to creep into their personal lives and follow them home as well.

We have helped several organizations with their downsizing efforts. While generally perceived as a negative activity, our experience has been that what really concerned affected employees the most was ensuring that they felt they were treated fairly and accurately through the process. In our projects where performance improvement and cost reduction were critical components of the business need, innovative work environments played less of a role in employee satisfaction than did positive relationships, honest communications, and recognition of meaningful positive contributions.

Can you share 5 things that managers and executives should be doing to improve their company work culture? Can you give a personal story or example for each?

Well, narrowing the list to 5 might be a little challenging.

1 — Let People Be Themselves

An organization with a fantastic work environment is aware of dominant currents in its own culture, its work habits, trends in dress code, traditions, and governing assumptions but makes explicit efforts to transcend them. It's not about the organization that embraces the IT guys in shorts and sandals, or the hipster organization that doesn't freak out when someone wears a suit. Or the place where nearly everyone comes in at odd hours but that accommodates the one or two people who prefer a 9-to-5 schedule. It's about selecting the right folks from the outset in the hiring process and then recognizing their individuality in work and performance. It's about clear incentive systems and career paths.

We were working with several cabinet-level agencies under the direction of a State Governor. Our favorite example of this was the two cubicle mates, one a “Roll Tide” alum, and the other a “War Eagle” alum. They got along great, even when they had to come in on Monday after rivalry weekend when one had bragging rights. There was a clear demarcation of individuality in the workplace, and the ability to be themselves transcended any rivalry in the work they accomplished. They recognized that at work, they were on the same team.

2 — Enabling a Positive Climate

Experiencing positive emotions at work broadens individual momentary thought-action repertoires that build enduring personal resources. The climate can best be assessed by answering the simple question “What makes me proud that I work here”? If your team struggles to find something positive to be proud of, has difficulty verbalizing what they and the organization stand for, what is required to exceed their current duties, or even hesitate to tell people where they work, then it might be time for some climate change.

We were assisting an educational institution with a culture assessment. The IT department seemed to be the envy of the campus with every wall in their office area painted to resemble a beach somewhere in the world. The results from our proprietary survey found that 16 of the 18 employees in the department were generally dissatisfied with their department and the institution. “Oh, the environment is fun, and we get to wear shorts and sandals a lot”, they said, but the consensus was they felt underappreciated, lacked motivation, and were generally discouraged with their performance. Repeatedly these employees told us that this constraint was a common cause and major roadblock to feeling their work was worthwhile. “They hired me for my cybersecurity skills, and the work environment is cool, but I don’t get energy and pleasure from my job”, said one of the IT managers.

3 — Enabling Positive Relationships

While it seems intuitive that friendship groups at work will significantly outperform acquaintance groups, often leaders are quick to force the team or group formation process without taking into account the actual membership of the group. Most leaders will readily tell you that team or group performance has produced desirable outcomes within their organization, but if you press them as to why their explanations often miss the target. In our experience, it is what people give to the relationship rather than what they receive from the relationship. The demonstration of compassion, forgiveness (which implies an ability to make mistakes), and kindness all were found to be necessary for positive relationships and preferred work environments.

My firsthand experience with this came while working for a previous consulting firm. While at a client’s facility in Europe, my daughter had an auto accident in the United States on a Thursday evening. Friday morning the project team handed me a ticket home to check on her. I had been scheduled to be onsite for 4 weeks, but the consensus from the team was “family first” and the project came second. It’s safe to say that relationships with those teammates transcended the quick trip home. We still stay in touch and share concerns for each other’s families.

4 — Enabling Positive Communication

Positive language is affirmative and supportive that replaces negative and critical language. It’s not just about 360 evaluations that have their place in performance appraisal, but the single most important factor in predicting organizational performance is the ratio of positive statements to negative statements in a typical day. Because most people react more strongly to bad than to good, and because most organizations are constantly battling problems and challenges, prescribing positive communication is easier said than done. Make no mistake, too much positivity that is easily discernable as lacking sincerity or not being genuine can foster complacency and mediocrity, and too much negativity can lead to constant defensiveness and withdrawal. In our conversations with leaders seeking an improved organizational culture and work environment, this is the attribute that we hear that has been tried frequently but without success. “You want me to be more positive and supportive, well I’ve tried it and it didn’t produce a favorable impact” is the most common response. During observations of meetings and actual conversations, a lack of sincerity is often staring the recipient in the face.

We saw examples of this while working with an organization considered one of the fathers of the new workplace environment. The project focused on performance measurement at their shared services center. One large wall was dedicated to displaying performance metrics. Over six months, the various teams got to select the metrics that were important to them instead of their bosses, and then present their performance metrics to the rest of the organization. What had been perceived previously as insincere comments such as “good job”, became sincere questions about the cause for the improvements. The public descriptive communication that resulted was more readily accepted by the teams and translated into a greater focus on performance improvement.

5 — Enabling Positive Meaning

When people feel that they are pursuing a profound purpose or engaging in personally important work, significant positive effects are produced, including reductions in stress, absenteeism, cynicism, and dissatisfaction, as well as increases in commitment, effort, engagement, and satisfaction. We can most easily categorize positive meaning when looking at the goals in individual leader performance assessments. Personal achievement or self-interest goals are often focused on obtaining the desired outcome, a preferred reward, or something that builds individual self-esteem or a positive self-image in the eyes of their colleagues and themselves. We’ve noticed a correlation between leader

satisfaction, organizational performance, and the preferred work environment when these goals dominate the performance appraisal, and it's not good. On the contrary, appraisals that contained a prominence of contribution goals had a more positive impact on organizational performance. These goals focused on contributing to others, providing opportunities for learning and development, more trust, and supportive relationships. In short, employees felt like the work environment was "exceptional" because their boss was being evaluated on how well they facilitated contribution by the team instead of the metric of hitting a personal bonus target.

It's very nice to suggest ideas, but it seems like we have to "change the culture regarding work culture". What can we do as a society to make a broader change in the US workforce's work culture?

As organizations become more secure in the correlation between practicing these positive attributes and success accomplishment, society will be more accepting of the sustainable nature of these organizations. We're seeing a generational shift to an increased focus on employee personal development more than ever before. As these employees climb the ranks of their organizations or assume the entrepreneurial risk of starting their own businesses, we expect to see a change in the US workforce culture from traditional financial performance to a more holistic accomplishment by the organization.

How would you describe your leadership or management style? Can you give us a few examples?

I would like to believe that I practice the attributes of positivity and a fantastic work environment I espouse in this interview. But I will also be the first to admit that I can do better. Improvement is about practice, whether it's a musical instrument, a favorite sport, that 30-foot putt on the green, or having a meaningful personal relationship with a partner. I am constantly practicing.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

When I started my consulting career with one of the Big 4 accounting firms, I was fortunate to have two terrific managers, partners, mentors, and friends. Linda Imonti and Steve Finkelstein were great role models of the positivity that created two fantastic work environments and spawned the success of some world-class accomplishments. I am deeply indebted to them for their guidance and positive relationships.

How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?

I try to give back by participating in educating the next generation of positive leaders. My teaching experiences have been sharing best practices of organizational experience as opposed to the research-based theory. The world seems to be hungry for goodness and it recognizes when it sees it. Like the plant leaning toward sunlight, we lean toward those who give back with positivity and genuine concern for others. I would hope that at the end of my career, it would be said that I practiced the attributes of leadership that I believe bring goodness to the world.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I started my career as the financial planning and systems analysis guru for a tourist attraction in Hawaii. After a few short months, I found myself making a presentation to the Board of Directors which included the Chairman of the Marriott Corporation and also the Chairman of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. I was a little more than intimidated, to say the least! About 10 minutes into my presentation, the board began to divert the discussion to focus on two of the scenarios I had included in my information. The discussions centered on evaluating two key attributes of the scenarios, including projecting visitor traffic to the islands and the resulting traffic to our attraction. Concerns were expressed that economic variables may have a negative impact on travel. The projections for a worst-case scenario received a lot of attention. It was then that one of the Board members said, "Listen, we can't operate in fear. Life happens and we can deal with it". That phrase has become a personal motto for myself and many of my teams. "Life happens and we can deal with it" means we may need to make some adjustments, we may need to make some refinements, or we may need to make some dramatic changes, but we can do it.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

The “Go For It” Movement. Excellence is a much better teacher than mediocrity and it is only achieved when groups, teams, and leaders are willing to lean to the sunlight, to seek the heliotropic power of taking risks and recognizing small wins. Failure is an excellent teacher and should be rewarded not punished. The perfect answer doesn’t exist, so try what you can and go with what you know.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We wish you continued success!



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Authority Magazine

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