

REBUILDING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

An Ancient Story with a Modern Meaning What the Phoenix can teach us about workplace renewal

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The Phoenix of ancient Egyptian and Greek mythology lived a life of about 500 years. It seemed to know when it was dying. It would build a nest (or pyre) of fine aromatic wood and, by clapping its majestic wings, set itself alight. Then, from the ashes, a new Phoenix would rise, young again and more powerful.

Today, many of us feel like we too are starting to rise from the ashes of adversity. Many organisations that have survived the global pandemic know full well that their new post-pandemic life is just beginning. We also know that adversity gives rise to opportunity, to think and behave differently. Maybe we too can discover youth and power again.

Just as the new Phoenix is not the old one, our new workplace is not the old one either. While the new workplace presents challenges it is also loaded with potential.

But how to realise that potential? First and foremost, developing a new positive, affirming and productive workplace requires leadership. Culture is cultivated. It doesn't just happen.

We can't be what we can't see

Another ancient lesson we can take to heart is that without a vision people perish. A more modern expression perhaps is that we can't be what we can't see. It is the responsibility of the leadership team to develop and articulate the vision they have for the organisation and the new workplace.

Equally, it is vital that the leadership team actively engage others in decisions about how they want to work, and how they want to share in the renewal process. This level of openness is not something to be afraid of, as it is invariably appreciated and respected.

And the pandemic proved beyond doubt that productivity is not only achieved by being in an office or other traditional workplace. In fact, recent research shows that people feel more connected to an organisation's culture through performance, celebratory events, and the organisation's values than they do via their physical workplace. That old Phoenix just ain't coming back.

Leaders need to learn too

So, others should be engaged in developing new practices for managing relationships and ensuring team building continues. The leadership team needs to learn the skills required to engage effectively across the organisation and create mechanisms that foster a new culture, one that matches the new ways of working. This is not peripheral stuff, as more and more leaders are recognising that culture is equal to, if not more important than, strategy.

Moreover, best practice and the expectations of employees, require the development of structures that support wellbeing and mental health. People need to feel safe and know they are encouraged to call out issues that might be detrimental to individuals or teams, as well as factors that influence the broader culture and values of an organisation. If there is any doubt about the upsides or downsides of doing this witness PWC.

Another dimension that is increasingly recognised as a positive force in organisational culture is concerned with the fact that each of us ultimately seeks meaning and purpose in our lives. While our workplace won't fully answer that striving, it ought to contribute to it and never detract from it.

Similarly, our interest in social justice causes and a wider sense of being part of a community and society should not be suspended or put on hold simply because we are at work. Rather, there are huge opportunities to have these values form part of the organisation's own culture.

Renewal should be exciting

From an executive coaching perspective, this is about developing leadership skills and practical know-how. It is hardly surprising that the effort required to renew an organisation often starts with the leadership team doing some renewal itself, to find that youthful, more powerful spirit.

The biggest mistake we can make is trying to return to the old model. Everything has shifted, the workplace included. Our adaptive ability defines humankind. We excel at it. And right now, the environment calls for adaptation.

While all these pandemic-inspired challenges must be addressed, the war for talent is still raging with no sign of losing its intensity. In this environment, renewal offers a competitive advantage. The upside of renewal, of rebirth, is enormous and organisations should seize the day. Maybe that's how the Phoenix became an eternal creature.

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