Changing our Team Culture – Part One

Over the next month I am going to help you understand how to change your own 'team culture' – if it's not working for you as well as you would like.

I'm using the common definition of culture – 'the way things are done around here' – which encompasses how people in the team act, dress, carry out their work and behave.

Whilst organisations are often involved in large 'culture change' initiatives across the board (many of which are unsuccessful for a variety of reasons) I've sometimes been asked if it is possible to change the culture of one particular team within an organisation – when it's not the top team.

The answer to that question is, I believe, 'yes' but with the following caveats:

- The culture change in your own team has to complement what the organisation overall is trying to achieve;
- The 'level above' your team has to be supportive of the initiative (so if you are a leader trying to change your team's culture, your boss has to be explicitly and actively supportive);
- You need to explain to other individuals, teams or stakeholders what you are doing and why – and enlist their support – bearing in mind the 'bigger picture'.

Culture change can be hard and slow. It is difficult to 'unlearn' something that has been a habit for years but it can be done. So you need to be in it for the long haul and not try to change everything at once.

Remember that organisational or team cultures that were successful previously often need to adapt and change to succeed in the current environment. They are no longer 'fit for purpose'. Alternatively, a previous team leader may have created a culture (because leaders do, as a rule, create the team culture!) that has not helped your team to achieve as quickly or easily as it needs to – or it worked 'then' but it's not working now because the world has moved on.

How to Change your Team's Culture

There are three things you need to focus on as follows:

- Step One - Clarity about the team's current culture. Respect and recognise its history;
- Step Two - Clarity about what you want to change and why (make this explicit, not woolly);
- Step Three - Clarity about the first steps to change (again, explicit and measurable not vague platitudes).

You can't 'do this' to your team. They have to be involved at all stages if you want their emotional buy-in.

Next time – What's your team culture right now?