

Valuing success in the organisation: The tall poppy and the back slap

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Abstract

How success and milestones are acknowledged and celebrated in an organisation has significant implications for organisational social capital and culture, and therefore performance. Consider the dichotomy between tall poppy syndrome and a congratulatory back slap culture. These are two very different ways in which people react to another's success. Tall poppy syndrome is where there is a tendency to discredit or disparage those who are considered to be too successful or prominent (cutting the tall poppies down to size). It is similar to begrudging, the resentment or envy. This is effectively the opposite of congratulating someone. Instead others find fault in how they achieved success or simply believe that they don't deserve it.¹

Keywords: organisational culture, success, empowerment, celebration

The role of celebration in organisational culture and social capital improvement

Tall poppy syndrome is common in Australian culture but can also be found in the culture of groups and organisations worldwide.

The opposite is the back slap, which is likely to be familiar to everyone around the world. It is a literal or figurative slap on the back in congratulation. It involves acknowledging and sharing in the success of another. Where the tall poppy syndrome involves tearing down another's success, the back slap is about holding them up for all to see and celebrate.

How the culture of celebration impacts organisational culture

A point of clarification is needed before I continue. In this article I am discussing how the culture of celebration (eg tall poppy or back slap) impacts organisational culture. So culture impacting culture. Well that sounds confusing.

I could substitute culture for a number of different terms, and this may illuminate this concept to people from different disciplines. For example I could rephrase it as the impact of shared understandings about celebration on organisational social capital. Or the impact of celebration norms on prosocial behavior in organisations. Readers may like to substitute terminology that they are more familiar with.

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Impact of culture on the value of celebration

The culture within any organisation can be tall poppy, or back slap, or anything in between since tall poppy and back slap lie on the extremes of a continuum.

Celebrations are likely to be muted, or not even happen

If the organisational culture is towards the tall poppy end of the spectrum then celebrations are likely to be muted, or not even happen. An even bigger problem is that people may not want to be the focus of an acknowledgement or celebration for fear of being criticised or resented.

In this context, even when there are awards or other forms of prestige on offer there may be little motivation for employees to strive for them, and when celebrations do happen they tend to have limited value.

It should be noted that the culture within an organisation is generally not homogeneous but can vary from department to department and group to

1. Rationalisation for the dislike of "tall poppies" is that there is only a limited amount of prestige for members to share in and only a fixed quantity of attention, authority and material resources that its members can give to each other. Status is a relative value, so for someone to rise in status, another person must fall. A person who is more prestigious is an obstacle to another person's rise simply by being more prestigious, and a person who suddenly rises is an outright threat to the other's current status. Thus tall poppy syndrome is more likely in competitive cultures – where people believe that competition is more important relative to collaboration.

group². Each manager has significant influence over culture, especially the culture of celebration since it is largely within their control to determine when and how celebrations occur.

Why are celebrations important?

For many people modern work life tends to be something to tolerate rather than enjoy. Many people feel like “another cog in the machine” – their efforts not valued beyond the salary they receive. They are often disempowered and they tend to perform at levels of mediocrity.³

But work can be an uplifting experience and this is something that is largely within leader’s control. For managers, recognising and celebrating their employees’ contributions presents an opportunity to solidify and reinforce cultural values.

Celebration can go beyond recognition of individual performance to also include group and organisational performance, as well as the celebration of events and milestones. Examples of these types of celebrations can include when a new client is acquired, a project completed, a goal reached, a rating achieved, a target met, and any significant anniversaries.

Even events separate to the organisation, such as an individual’s important life events, can be celebrated within small groups. This can play an important role in reversing the many aspects of modern work life that can be dehumanising. These dehumanising factors can include inflexible or strict policies for pay, leave, and work hours, the design of large scale workspaces, and even the use of employee numbers that can make people feel like a line on a balance sheet.

Celebration events are symbolic and provide opportunities to develop and strengthen connections, create memories and learning that the regular workday often cannot provide.

Celebrations create community, cohesiveness, and commitment.

Celebrations create community, cohesiveness, and commitment. They generate a sense of belonging and

2. Norms can exist within groups of any size, even between two people. For example, two employees may high 5 each other whenever something positive happens. This norm may not be shared with others in the organisation, even other people in the same office or department. In this context norms, or culture, are shared understandings. These understandings can be between any two or more people, and can overlap between different groupings within the organisation.

3. Workers of the 20th century have a new hierarchical level of needs that differ substantially from Maslow (1943). Glasser’s hierarchy list includes: survival, love and belonging, power, and freedom. Glasser emphasised that employees want to experience satisfaction at the lower levels, but the need to have fun is a predominant driving force in one’s life.

pride, and these can increase loyalty. They infuse people with purpose, reconnect shared values, and create shared purpose. Corporate celebrations have a huge impact on organisation culture with flow on benefits for productivity, efficiency, creativity, innovation, and resilience.

Celebrations build social capital

Organisational celebrations can have several benefits for social capital. Most obviously, the act of celebrating brings people together and this interaction helps to develop and deepen relationships.

Structural elements of social capital involve people knowing each other, often described as a social tie. It is not just how many ties, but also how well people know each other – the strength or depth of their relationship. This is often described as the quality of social ties.

Celebrations bring people together in a social environment that is generally positive and allows for people to get to know each other outside of typical work contexts. This provides opportunities to discuss non-work related issues and find out about each others lives and interests beyond work.

Celebrations generate a sense of belonging and pride, and these can increase loyalty.

The actions that are celebrated can be powerful creators of organisational culture by encouraging desirable actions from employees. For example an award for collaboration, or helping others, or honesty⁴. These awards send strong messages to employees that these actions are valued. The award may be trivial, and the award ceremony may be symbolic, but the influence on culture can be very strong.

But of course if the organisation suffers from tall poppy syndrome then these awards may have limited value, and in some cases may have a negative effect by increasing discontent and reinforcing the norms associated with the tall poppy syndrome.

Culture is the shared understandings of a group about how things are or are meant to be. Individuals observe their social environment for evidence of how things are or are meant to be, and this forms their perspective of organisational culture. These observations can be what people do, what they say, and written documentation such as policies, procedures, rules, etc. It also includes how people interpret these observations.

When a large change in culture is needed sometimes a new beginning must be defined, a new era. This will shake people’s confidence in how things are, and force them to look again for evidence of how things are or are

4. Awards for positive contribution to organisational culture, CSR, corporate image, etc: Sense of humour award, Good neighbour award, Community relations award, Creativity and guts award, Heart and soul award, Tell it like it is award, Problem solver award, Extra mile award, Responsibility award

meant to be.

More than celebrating the individual

Many people think that individuals are motivated by self interest. Employees are paid a salary for their labour, offered a bonus for higher performance, and the possibility of awards for excellence. But few people are motivated by these things alone.

People go to work because they're paid a salary. Why else would they work? They work hard so they don't lose their salary, or at least hard enough to not get fired. They may work harder if they could gain some perks or bonuses. But we know other factors are also important, perhaps more important.

Consider someone who works for a large organisation where they are well paid. They may hate going to work. The culture is professional and respectful, but lacks fun, excitement, and celebrations. They may be demotivated and disempowered. They may even receive bonuses, but in this context I'm sure they would be performing well short of their potential.

They may not be collaborating with others. They may not be sharing information or helping others, or asking for help when they need it. They may be simply going through the motions and as a result they may be missing opportunities to improve, innovate, and solve problems.

So what is wrong with this organisational culture in the example above?

The main problem is that work should be **social not competitive**. As we can easily understand from the example above competitive environments focus on the individual often at the expense of a positive and supportive social environment.

The social environment matters greatly to most people. They want to feel belonging and a sense of shared purpose. Celebrations of group and organisational achievements, as well as milestones, can help to provide this collective meaning and purpose.

I believe it is the responsibility of managers at all levels to create a culture where there is fun in the workplace.

Any success for the organisation is a good opportunity to celebrate. Celebrations can be planned in advance, but spontaneous celebrations can add excitement that intermingles with everyday work life.

Is it possible for businesses of the 21st century to recognise the importance of fun, play, and celebrations within the workplace? I believe it is the responsibility of managers at all levels to create a culture where there is fun in the workplace.

More than celebrating performance

As suggested earlier in this article celebrating individual milestones related to work and personal life can be very positive for organisational culture. This is

typically only appropriate within small organisations or in small groups within an organisation.

Individual life events could include engagements, weddings, births, graduations, and promotions. Generally events that are important to the individual could be celebrated in some way within the organisation.

Celebrating these events shows that the organisation and coworkers care about the employee. It helps to include the organisation in the employee's lifeworld. It helps to foster shared outcomes and a sense of togetherness that employees will rise to any challenge together, and fight together if required.

Don't allow celebrations to become routine

Be creative. If celebrations are always the same they can become mundane and boring. For example if all events are marked by a departmental morning tea, then it will lose its value.

There are several different ways of celebrating.

- Simple recognition – even just pausing work to tell everyone and congratulate or give a high 5
- Reward or gift – could be a physical gift or a reward such as a weekend getaway
- Award – symbolic acknowledgement that can include wider recognition
- Gatherings – various scale from a special morning tea to a spectacular party, at the workplace or another venue, during work hours or after hours

Celebration infuses people with purpose, reconnect shared values, and create shared purpose.

Celebration is an important factor not only in performance but also in organisational resilience. It helps employees to feel belonging and loyalty and this helps protect organisations for change and hard times.