

Do You Have a Culture of Optionality?

Description

What is a culture of optionality? How do you know if you have one? The answer lies in the definition of *optional*. When something is optional, one can choose to do itâ?¦or not. When a company finds itself not getting the outcomes we want over time, it may be that a culture of optionality has developed.

At times, the leader of an organization may decide to add a new tactic or make a change due to not achieving the desired results. Before acting on the decision, my recommendation is to take time to measure compliance. It may not be the tactics that are not working. It could be an issue of compliance.

Here is an example. An organization adopted a new way to hire and onboard new employees. All leaders received training on the process. Results were very promising. Employee turnover steadily declined. But after several months, turnover stopped decreasing. It was still much lower than before; however, it was not as low as the CEO would have liked it to be. At a meeting, new tactics were discussed, for the feeling was the current tactics had taken the lowered turnover metrics as far as they could go.

Before going much further, the CEO decided to pause and research how consistently the new tactics were being utilized. The findings were that some leaders in the same division had never implemented the new tactics. This was what was causing the decrease to stagnate. The CEO had a senior leader who had made the decision that the new method was optional for him. The decision was made to not implement a bunch of new tactics. The tactics were not the issue; compliance was the issue.

It is interesting that some leaders feel *mandatory* is a bad word. I donâ??t agree. Research shows that a major factor in success is clarity. This does not mean everything is mandatory. It does mean to clearly define what is mandatory, or a necessity, and what is not. Imagine that you go to the physician and they discuss your bloodwork results. The physician says that based on these results, it is a medical necessity to do some additional testing. Most likely you will do it. But what if the physician says based on these results, additional testing is recommended or suggested? Some people will get the additional tests based on *recommended* and *suggested*. However, fewer will do so than if it is presented as a *necessity*.

I see so much confusion on what is optional and what is not. In my work, I am fortunate to attend many leadership meetings. It is the norm for the CEO to highlight leaders or departments that are achieving excellent results. It is then explained to the group what is being done to get these results. The CEO will share that the results are important and show how to get the results. The CEO is saying to the team, â??Please do what the department just highlighted is doing.â?• Guess what? Some leaders will not act. Why? Because they view the change as optional.

The past year, I was with an excellent health system. Their quality was in the top quartile. In looking at some very key actions, it became clear that they were at 75 percent compliance. Now, because they were in the top quartile, the pressure may not have been on them to get better. However, if the values are there, they will know they need to move to 100 percent compliance to achieve the top results their patients will benefit from.

Here is one more example. A CEO sent out an email to the entire management team about an upcoming seminar that he would like them to sign up for. They could watch it virtually while the seminar was taking place, or if they could not view it in real time, they could register to have a video of the seminar sent to them. Only about 10 percent of the managers signed up. The CEO would not have recommended this if he did not feel it would be helpful. So, why the low response? It could be the CEO did not connect the dots on the *why.* Or it could be that while the CEO felt the communication was clear that people should register, the people receiving the email decided it was optional. What you permit you promote.

Here are some tips:

1. Take time to assess compliance. For example, are people even opening the communications you send? At Studer Family of Companies, supervisors receive my weekly column, as it is an important part of our training and development. Having everyone read the same ideas at the same time is powerful. We track open receipts. We then send the results to the senior leaders. At the supervisorsâ?? various department meetings, attendees are asked for their takeaways from the weekly column. This practice takes reading the column from optional to mandatory.
2. Clarify what is mandatory and what is not. It is fine to have non-mandatory actions; just be sure to spell out when something is optional.
3. Take time to connect the dots on the value of the mandatory actions.
4. Recognize those who are compliant and quickly address those who are not.
5. Before changing course, ask yourself, *Is it the tactic, procedure, or tool that is not working, or is it the level of compliance?*

A culture of optionality works for a while; however, it does not achieve the best results and will lead to less-than-desired outcomes.

Donâ??t look at *mandatory* as a bad thing. It helps people see what is most important. They appreciate the clarity it creates. It reduces the anxiety that comes with uncertainty and helps them do their best work. When we achieve a high level of compliance, we end up creating consistency in our organization, and that leads to the kind of results that keep performance high, good employees engaged, and customers and clients coming back to us again and again.

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