Courageous Cultures

What's in it for me? Learn how to inspire your staff to speak up.

You've probably encountered employees who are afraid of speaking up. Perhaps they see that something's not right within their company, but they don't want to stick their heads above the parapet. Initially, this may seem like a safe tactic – but, in the long term, it actually holds people back from growing. It also stops companies from reaching their full potential. To encourage employees to speak up, you need to help them feel safe and supported. And that means building a courageous culture in your workplace. These blinks will show you how to create such an environment. As your colleagues begin to open up and share their views and ideas, both they and your business will benefit. In these blinks, you'll learn

why anger is sometimes a gateway to creating a courageous workplace; how to weed out schmoozers; and when to use curiosity and clarity to foster culture.

In today's increasingly automated world, creating a courageous culture is vital for growth.

Picture yourself managing enthusiastic, confident self-starters and team players. Every day, they approach you with novel ideas. They want to tell you about an innovative service that will reach new customers, or a cost-saving device that could revolutionize the delivery of a product. Or perhaps they just want to hang up a bulletin board and use it to post birthday greetings – a proven morale booster. Big or small, new ideas are the lifeblood of a company. However, if managers don't have the proper culture set up to receive those ideas, the company will squander its most valuable asset: the minds of its employees. The key message here is: In today's increasingly automated world, creating a courageous culture is vital for growth. We're living through an automation revolution. Robots and computers are taking over much of the routine work that used to fall to us humans. However, computers can't encourage people to speak up and share their best ideas so the company can thrive and grow. They can't empathize and coach, connect and create. We still need people for that. Moreover, in today's gig economy, many employees no longer want to stick around an office doing a nine-to-five job if they can have more flexibility elsewhere. Studies show that one in three employees get money from contracts and freelance projects – and just under half of college students said they would rather be entrepreneurs than employees. In this environment, creating a courageous culture has become extra important. This culture can serve as a huge incentive to keep those valuable employees in place when they hear the siren call of freelance work. If staff feel comfortable speaking up in the workplace, it means they also feel heard and appreciated. If you can create a courageous culture, you'll be able to attract the kinds of employees who will bring value to your company. You'll have microinnovators – people who always look for small but effective ways to make things better, easier, or faster. Then, there are the problem solvers – who treat the workplace like their own company and try to find solutions. And, last but not least, your customer advocates are always working to meet clients' needs. In the following blinks, you'll learn how to create a courageous culture that'll retain these valuable employees – and guide

Replacing a toxic culture with a courageous one will give employees the confidence to share their ideas.

Here's the million-dollar question: Why don't people speak up at work? The reasons are many and varied. Sometimes, people don't offer new ideas because they think their managers don't value innovation and that their ideas won't have an impact. Other times, people don't speak up because of something psychologists call diffusion of responsibility; they think someone else will say something, so they stay quiet. But many employees also have a fear of speaking up because they've had a toxic response in the past. They're worried about looking silly or being labeled a failure if their plan doesn't succeed. The key message here is: Replacing a toxic culture with a courageous one will give employees the confidence to share their ideas. Does your company suffer from "courage crushers?" These are toxic behaviors like shaming others for speaking up, blaming them when things go wrong, or trying to intimidate them when they point out something you don't want to hear. If so, you need to make a change. Instead of letting toxicity infect the workplace, you need to cultivate a courage oasis. Fostering a courageous culture can be especially useful in times of stress or flux. Maybe your firm is restructuring, and things feel unstable. Leaders are indecisive, scared of innovation, and determined to stick to existing processes. As an employee, you'll only offer ideas if you're operating in an open environment of trust. Take Ivan, a senior manager at a successful company. His team was under intense pressure to meet a deadline – a problem in itself. But there was more. Ivan was facing a difficult leadership decision. One of his team members – a brilliant expert who contributed significantly to the project – bullied all the others. Mercilessly. Ivan spoke to his manager, who told him it didn't matter what Ivan did – as long as his team met the deadline. So Ivan grabbed his courage by the horns and fired the bully. He also informed the rest of the team what had happened. They were now one man down, but everybody pulled together. And they didn't miss the deadline; in fact, they succeeded far beyond their expectations. The courageous culture that Ivan had created within his department brought about excellent results.

Find the right mix of curiosity and clarity, and your employees will reward you with great new ideas.

After his meeting, David returned to the office of the nonprofit he led – and found his assistant in tears. A habitually rude donor had unleashed an outburst on her. David was furious. Although the donor represented big bucks, David wrote him a terse letter. It explained that the man's behavior had been unacceptable, and that the donor could now only visit the NGO by appointment. The bully resigned from the board. But, curiously, he never stopped contributing money to the cause. What's more, David never received any significant blowback from his board. In fact, David's action paid him rich dividends in loyalty from his employees. The key message here is: Find the right mix of curiosity and

clarity, and your employees will reward you with great new ideas. What do the words "curiosity" and "clarity" mean in the context of courageous cultures? When people are curious about things, they're constantly trying to figure out new ways to improve. And clarity is when management is transparent about goals, processes, and roles. In a company with good clarity, employees feel safe and are confident about the firm's direction. But can you have too much of a good thing? Certainly. If there's too much curiosity, everyone will do their own thing – creating a chaotic environment and confusing customers. And if there's too much clarity, people will think the company culture is set in stone; they won't see the point in speaking up. You need to find a balance on the clarity–curiosity continuum. Get the mix right, and employees will understand and respect the framework of the company; they'll also feel comfortable innovating within it. One practical way to do this is by building a courage map. Make a timeline of your career, and identify three examples of when you were courageous. Encourage your employees to do the same. This is part of a process called navigating your narrative. Remember David from the NGO? That incident with the donor would certainly be part of his courage narrative. CX Accelerator cofounder Nate Brown had a different approach. He gave each member of his frontline team a "magic button" on their computers. When they hit the button, they received a form to record ideas and feedback. It doesn't matter whether it's a magic button, an online poll, or even just a bulletin board where employees can put up ideas – these tools all signal that you're open to people speaking up.

When managers show gratitude and invite employees to participate, everyone benefits.

Imagine you come up with a workaround that can save your coworkers lots of time. You bring up the idea with your manager, but she shoots you down: "That's not what I hired you to do. Stick to your job description." Many employees report having ideas disparaged or ignored. But what if the reverse were true? What if bosses were constructive and supported those who offered new ideas? Well, according to one study, people in such companies are 12 times more likely to recommend their firm as an employer. And that's a great sign of loyalty. The key message here is: When managers show gratitude and invite employees to participate, everyone benefits. For many people, speaking up doesn't come naturally. So when you have an employee brave enough to report an inefficient process or a failing protocol, recognize the courage and time it took them to voice their concern. First, thank them. Then, explain how you'll deal with the information they gave you. Be clear with time expectations. If you can't use their idea, explain why. Of course, not every idea is a good one. But even if an employee comes to you with a bad idea, coach them through the situation. You might be able to help them refine their thoughts and come up with something more useful. A good way to do this is by using an idea path. Work through every step of developing an idea, from the very beginning all the way to implementation. Where do you start? Who needs to get involved? What permissions and processes will it take? By the end, the employee will understand their idea's life cycle. Here's another trick: galvanize the genius in your employees by clearly articulating your company's goals. This will give staff room to innovate with purpose. Once you've established a culture of respectful listening and responding, your employees will feel confident that they're in a workplace where courage is not only encouraged, but celebrated.

Don't just replicate great solutions – instead, tailor their core principles to your work.

Imagine a team manager who organizes a feast every year: sausages made of game he's hunted himself, handmade noodles, sauce with vegetables he's grown in his own garden. His staff really looks forward to this annual event. In the same company, the manager of a different team wants to create a similarly spirited event – but she worries she'll never be able to put together anything as elaborate. Actually, though, she doesn't need to compete with her colleague. Instead of carbon-copying his successful solution, she can adapt it to her own personal environment and character. And even on a smaller scale, the outcome will still be great. The key message here is: Don't just replicate great solutions – instead, tailor their core principles to your work. How does tailoring core principles of a great idea work in practice? Well, let's say there are two call centers in a company. Each call center's manager is tasked with increasing the empathy of their employees. The first manager asked his staff to imagine that all their customers were his grandmother, Betty. Betty was a retired nurse and Girl Scout leader. Every time a customer got in touch, the person who took the call conjured up the image of the manager's grandmother. After a while, the phrase "What about Betty" became an instant way to boost empathy. At the second call center, the manager didn't have a grandmother called Betty. But he took the principle – using a person to guide empathy – and adapted it. He put baby items, like bibs and pacifiers, all around the office. When the staff's curiosity was sufficiently piqued, he introduced an infant doll named Carl. The name stood for "Care About Real Lives." Soon, employees were trained to think about and care for Carl. In the process, they transferred some of that empathy into every customer interaction. These managers didn't do exactly the same thing. But they practiced the same principle: teaching their employees to show empathy. By localizing the principle, they were able to create ownership and pride in their employees – factors that lead to an employee feeling secure and speaking up freely.

To build infrastructure for courage, hire the right people and train them well.

We've talked about how we can grow as managers to encourage our employees to speak up. Now let's take it a step further. How can we create systems and structures that make a courageous workplace? It requires creativity and intention. But, if you get it right, you'll be so much closer to building an environment that attracts the best and the brightest. The key message here is: To build infrastructure for courage, hire the right people and train them well. To create a courageous culture, begin by hiring the most competent people. When interviewing potential candidates, ask questions that can help you gauge their track record of courage. Here are some examples: "How did you overcome a problem at work?" "How did you handle a time when you disagreed with your manager?" "What is the biggest mistake you've ever made?" "How do you encourage employees when they come to you with ideas?" Then, within a month of hiring your new employees, ask them to write down their top three ideas. Encourage

and regularly give feedback; you might even consider implementing a reward system to promote communication. The process of supporting courage needs to be constant and intentional. You don't want even a droplet of toxicity to seep into your company's culture. Start out small. Try getting a group of managers together, and coach them on how to look for courage gaps in their employees. Tell them you're only doing this as an experiment, and that the new approaches won't necessarily turn into large, company-wide projects. That should get everyone on board. Always be clear about fundamental values – and about who is responsible for what. Having that kind of clarity gives employees a sense of security and stability. But creating an ideal environment doesn't have to rely purely on talking. Try solutions like encouraging employees and managers to read business books or speak at conferences. Organize an internal "field trip," and have one department visit another. Propose holding skip-level meetings: events at which leaders interact with employees in junior roles. Through it all, keep asking your peers to consider their recent courageous acts and mistakes in order to foster continuous growth.

Managers should create a culture in which every individual feels seen and heard.

Close your eyes, and imagine your workplace. Think of the coworkers who sit across from you and next to you, and the ones you only see at lunchtime or in meetings. Chances are, you're a pretty mixed bunch. Even though you're working in the same industry, you're all individuals with different personalities. These differences can make it hard to create a cohesive culture – hard, but not impossible. The key message here is: Managers should create a culture in which every individual feels seen and heard. It isn't just the employees who are diverse. Managers are all different, too. And some leaders may find it more difficult than others to understand exactly how to treat their employees. For example, if you're the type of person who craves autonomy, you might give your team plenty of freedom. But if your employees prefer a more nurturing approach, this hands-off strategy might make them feel like you don't care about them. On the flip side, if you're an involved leader, some of your employees may feel stifled – and that means they won't bring forth their best ideas. If you encounter this sort of silence from your employees, understand that it can be caused by a variety of factors. Some people are the "silent wounded." They've spoken up before and been hurt. Others are the "silent ponderous." They're quiet because it takes them a while to work out how to speak up. Everyone needs different levels of guidance. A good manager will recognize when to leave employees alone to do their work, and when to provide a little extra direction. You know the employee who shoots you four emails a week with a bunch of new ideas but no solid plan? Managers should also be able to recognize, and gently redirect, these people who may think they're contributing – but are merely muddying the waters. When you coach employees, it may seem tempting to jump in and tell them what to do. But it's far better to train them to gather the courage to speak up meaningfully. Ask them what their goal is, what they've tried, and what happened as a result. Find out what tools they need to succeed in speaking up next time so they can get the ultimate professional reward – the feeling of having made a real difference. Giving your employees the tools they need to be courageous in the workplace is how you'll create a culture where everyone succeeds.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Creating a courageous culture in your workplace will help you attract and retain employees who feel appreciated and supported. This will help bring forth the ideas and observations that will truly add value to your company. Actionable advice: Use the IDEA approach. When you're encouraging employees to verbalize their ideas, have them consider the IDEA approach to check whether what they're offering is feasible. In this acronym, I stands for Interesting, D for Doable, E for Engaging, and A for Actions. By keeping this list in mind, you can come up with ideas that are both practical and exciting.