Why teams eat culture for breakfast

Peter Drucker famously said that "culture eats strategy for breakfast". With that he highlighted that however great your strategy, it is your company's culture that really determines how much or little success you will have over all.

I think however that in turn, it is teams that eat culture for breakfast !

There is no single agreed upon definition for organizational culture. Different authors and thinkers have described organizational culture as "a set of shared assumptions that guide behaviors" [1] or the pattern of collective behaviors and assumptions that are taught to new organizational members as a way of perceiving, even thinking and feeling [2].

Google published end 2015 its findings about why some of their teams were really performing well while others were average or worse. The Google researchers concluded that the key difference was psychological safety, the notion that "team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other" [3]. But how is that possible within Google's organizational culture ? How can members in some teams feel safe while those in other teams do not feel safe, if all of them belong to the same organizational culture and should therefore embrace the "same ways of perceiving, even thinking or feeling"? Shouldn't Google's organizational culture determine how teams function, and remove or at least limit any differences between teams?

Maybe there is something at play that has a bigger impact than organizational culture ?

The concept of an organization with its all-encompassing culture is appealing, but when it comes to actual work, individuals interact with a limited set of other members of the organization. They may belong to, but they do not work "with the organization". In many cases they work with a direct manager, peers, subordinates, or other members from different parts of the organization. That is the organization's sub-environment within which they work and contribute. It turns out that the different teams or groups individuals are part of are very different, sometimes even in direct opposition to what the organizational culture is supposed to be.

When studying psychological safety, Amy Edmondson writes [4]: "The data are consistent: psychological safety seems to "live" at the level of the group. In other words, in the organization where you work, it's likely that different groups have different interpersonal experiences; in some, it may be easy to speak up and bring your full self to work. In others, speaking up might be experienced as a last resort."

There is nothing wrong with emphasizing organizational values and beliefs, and an collaborative culture is obviously better than a toxic one ! But motivation, engagement and performance are impacted by what happens at the level of a team, not at the level of the organization.

Corporate programs developed by the Human Resources department to communicate and strengthen the organizational culture are great in principle, but when it comes to the impact they have on individuals, these programs are secondary compared to what happens in the teams these individuals are part of. Feeling

appreciated, a key driver of intrinsic motivation (Gallup), exists at the level of the
team an individual is part of, not at the level of the organization. Appreciation is felt only from other human beings, not from a function or department. "At work, what matters most to people is feeling they can make a contribution and that others value their work. From a tribal perspective, this means they are needed by the group and therefore less likely to be ousted."[5] Feeling appreciated by those with whom we work is a fundamental human need. The level of engagement with the organization to which one belongs is more linked to the peers and colleagues someone works with, than to the overall organization and its culture. "The most effective way to build engagement is to focus not on culture or on individuals as though they work in isolation, but rather on what makes an individual's performance shine: their team."[6]

Teams eat culture for breakfast.
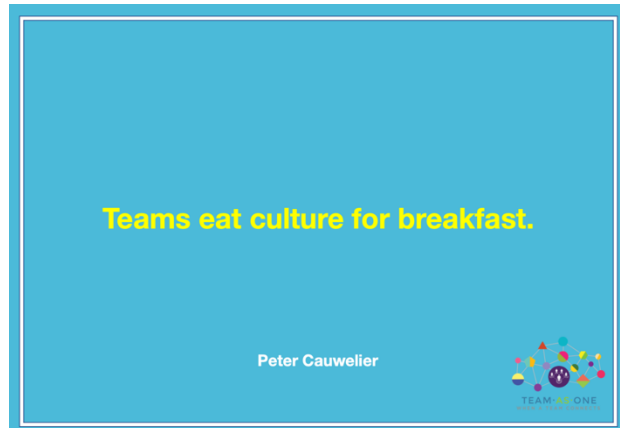
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So next time you are thinking how to improve engagement, motivation or performance, maybe you should take a closer look at what happens in the different teams in your organization, and focus your efforts there !

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