

Is your workplace a “Cult?”

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Abstract: *There is a long history of well-known global companies that have built cult-like followings among customers and encouraged cultish behavior in their employees. Workplace cults are those with tight control by management over how employees think and behave. To combat a cult-like environment, embrace dissent, encourage communication, spark debate, value differing opinions, solicit feedback, promote critical thinking, and allow people to ask questions. Tap into the individuality of all employees. Assimilate their unique strengths and knowledge. Adhering to the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion will help prevent your organization from becoming a cult or reversing the process once it is already in place.*

There is a long history of well-known global companies (Apple, Tesla, Nordstrom, Harley-Davidson, Neiman Marcus, IBM, Disney, Enron, and Theranos; to name just a few) that have built cult-like followings among their customers and encouraged cult-like behavior in their workforce. If you have been hearing phrases such as “Category of One” or “That’s how we do it here,” at your workplace it just may be a cult!

Kets (2019) describes cultish workplaces as those with tight control by management over how their employees think and behave. It is paternalism and alignment taken a step (or two!) too far. The pathology starts with the recruitment and hiring process. This is where potential future employees are carefully and tightly screened for “fit.” Hiring focuses on young people for entry-level positions preferentially over more experienced mid or late career candidates. These individuals can then be more easily rigorously molded to the company’s way of thinking and behavior. The on-boarding process (indoctrination or brainwashing) reinforces the requirement for alignment and tightness of fit, with a clear mandate for consistency (Collins). This early intense orientation is training and “socialization” that emphasize ideological content; philosophy, values, norms, history, tradition, heritage; all created to impart a sense of belonging to something special (Collins). Preservation at all costs of a fervently held self-image and self-identity includes fanatical attention to tiny details, including minutia regarding personal grooming and dress code; along with an uncanny concern with secrecy (Collins). The vigorous screening continues in those crucial first few years. Those who display effort consistent with the ideology receive positive reinforcement, recognition, and rewards. Those that breach the sacred ideology or display disloyalty will get left behind, penalized, or are removed (Collins). Then, for those who get to stay (whose mindset was successfully shaped) there is a rigorous *up through the ranks and promotion from within* policy. If your organization’s incentives, decision-making, evaluations, and termination decisions favor insiders, you just may be working in a cult. In cult-like workplaces the highest positions are only available to the loyal few that grew up inside. Only insiders are allowed to “peek behind the curtain to see the mechanics” (Collins). If all your top leadership are insiders it’s a cult.

Along the way, to reinforce a sense of belonging (expand upon the brainwashing), these organizations will create unique rituals, pep talks, slogans, motivational team-building activities (Kets). Having their own special language, terminology, and internal jargon (“xxxx speak”) that only those on the inside can relate to (Bashi), reinforces the sense of belonging to an elite group (Collins). This type of authoritarian coercive control emphasizes conformity, cohesion, unity of belief, and purpose. It helps create the perception of a compelling ideology that has the image of being unique and exclusive (Hassan). People actually start to believe they are different and special; that they are important components of an exclusive group. This strategy is used to first attract, and then to keep “members.” The established pervasive mythology creates and manages a workforce of believers (Atkin). All along, the emphasis is on achieving coherence (Tourish). It’s been likened to the binary nature of a country club: you’re either “in” or “out” – there’s no confusion about one’s membership status (Miller, Collins). If you’re in, you’re portrayed as being special and elite.

There are many problems with cult-like workplaces. You must be willing to give up your individual identity and groupthink prevails (Kets). People feel excluded for how they think and feel. Rigid behavior stifles innovation. Everyone is expected to follow blindly without asking questions. Dissent, which is vital to effective decision-making, is penalized (Tourish, Hassan). If you are not an ardent believer, you will be uncomfortable, feel like you do not fit, feel out of place. You will stay and be unhappy or you will leave.

Creating a cult appeals to many organizations for many reasons. Once a brand achieves cult status, it becomes very difficult for competitors to dethrone them. In fact, competitors study them. Cults also create fierce customer identification and loyalty. Cult-branding and marketing cultivates and retains loyal customers and employees (Atkin). There is strong dedication to the enduring core ideology. Once employees buy-in, they proceed with pride to work hard to perpetuate the instilled perspective of being special, unique, superior, and elite. The instilled intense sense of loyalty to the company and its values become a mechanism to influence and enforce the desired behavior (Collins).

If you are a leader looking to combat a cult-like environment, consider a few suggestions. Embrace dissent, encourage communication, spark debate, value differing opinions, solicit feedback, promote critical thinking, and allow people to ask questions. Tap into the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki) and the individuality of all your employees. Assimilate all their unique strengths and varied knowledge. Adhering to the fundamental principles of diversity, equity and inclusion will go a long way toward preventing your organization from becoming a cult or reversing the process once it is already in place.

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