Improving Culture by Reducing the Ambiguity of Work
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Upon entering an urgent care center, I can almost immediately characterize the center's leadership by the greeting I receive from the front office staff. Is the staff approachable—bright-eyed, smiling, and outgoing? Then it's often no surprise that the center's leadership is extraverted, excited about the business, and authentic in word and deed.

Or, does the staff seem bored, detached, and more focused on processes than patients?   Not surprising, I've never seen "zombie" staff working for anyone who's not dull at best or abrasive at worse—with a mix of dysfunction in between.

These observations reflect that, to a great extent, a center's culture is determined by the communication and behavior of its leadership.

Problem of the Ambiguity of Work

Work is important. It provides the cash required for basic sustenance and leisure pursuits. Work gives people a sense of purpose, it creates structure in their lives, it offers social interaction, and (rightly or wrongly) the size of one's paycheck provides external validation of an individual's "worth." In fact, work is so important that while individuals spend only about a third of their time working, thoughts related work consume more of a person's concentration than relationships, entertainment, and religious or intellectual interests.

Human nature is to seek stability and peace—which should result from steady work—but for many, work is characterized by uncertainty and stress. With so many people living "paycheck-to-paycheck," the loss of a job for just a few weeks could devastate many families. Influenced by a myriad of factors from commodity prices to government regulation and the confidence of consumers—the ongoing availability of work seems well beyond the control of any one person. And while people would like to believe that securing, maintaining, and advancing in a job depends on intelligence, skill, personal interest and hard work—they see far too many instances in which personal connections, charm or good looks, political savvy, or simply "luck" dictate an individual's success in the workplace.

Stability and peace come from having a sense of control over one's life. "Luck" is defined as "good or bad fortune in life caused by accident or chance, and attributed by some to reasons of faith or superstition."   By definition, a belief in "luck" is a belief in "no control"—meaning the most significant activity in an individual's life (work) is all too often subjected to ebbs and flows well beyond the individual's understanding.   Is there any wonder why people feel powerless and anxious in regards to their jobs?

Two Types of Workplaces

Workplaces, including urgent care centers, fit into one of two categories—places in which employees are:

　　1) secure, well-adapted, have a purpose, go above and beyond the call of duty, and are happy;

　　—or—

　　2) insecure, mal-adapted, there for a paycheck, doing the minimum they can get away with, and are miserable.

What determines the category for a particular center—in most cases—is the communication and behavior of the center's leadership (which may include owners, hired managers, and clinical providers). Effective leaders foster an

environment of security and peace—one in which "luck" has no role but is rather, stable, predictable and transparent—while "bad" leaders create an environment of fear and uncertainty in which people get thrown off base, become defensive, and eventually lose interest in their jobs.

Most urgent care centers are entrepreneurial physician practices. Starting as small businesses and experiencing rapid growth, they typically promote from within—with management coming from expert functions like nursing, billing, or medical technology—and with the physician-owner himself also thrust into a leadership role. The result is a leadership team who has strong technical expertise but often little or no formal training in the intricacies of people.

Consider the following common management *mis*-behaviors, how they create ambiguity, and the impact on center staff.

Table 1: Common Problem Behaviors of Urgent Care Managers

Management Behavior	Effect on Culture	Cultural Ideal
After reviewing timecards and discovering "excess" overtime reported, the manager reprimands employees and immediately implements a "zero overtime" policy.	Employees, afraid of getting in trouble when overtime is inevitable, start shorting their own timecards. Feeling "cheated" of legitimate overtime—and seeing the manager co-opt them in violating labor laws—employees then feel justified in "getting even" with the business by stealing or shirking on their jobs. Additionally, to avoid overtime and its consequences, employees begin turning away patients 45 minutes prior to center closure. The legal risk, lost revenue, and damage to reputation far exceed any incremental staffing costs.	"No exceptions" rules—particularly those adopted as a knee-jerk reaction to a failed management control—take away staff flexibility to utilize judgment in serving patients. Parameters should be set in which employees exercise some discretion in their roles but are also held accountable for results. This does not mean that employees are given carte blanche to do whatever they want—but in the case of overtime—exceptions should be made if the employee demonstrates such benefits the business. Eventually, trusted employees who "don't want to let management down" will control their own overtime levels.
Medical provider is moody on some days, snapping at and openly criticizing his medical assistants, but on other days is polite and complementary of the staff.	Uneven temperament of a leader puts employees on an emotional roller-coaster. Having been scorned in the past and not knowing how the leader will react, employees become hesitant to communicate with the leader at all. Employees who cower like broken dogs—or simply choose to ignore the leader—cannot effectively fulfill their job responsibilities. But ultimately, it's the leader who loses control of the operation.	Due to higher levels of education, pay, and social "status," professionals are held to a high standard of integrity. Thus, they are expected to be predictable and consistent in their demeanor and level-headed in their communication and behavior. Emotional outbursts, petty comments, and political game-playing are far below their stature. Instead, professionals should communicate "authentically"—without pretense and focused on making a genuine connection with the other person.
Employee suggests a new idea to improve the business. The manager ignores the idea, dismisses the idea without hearing the details, promotes the idea to others as his/her own, or approves the idea conditionally, saying "*if it doesn't work, you'll be looking for a new job.*"	The manager has created a risk-adverse culture focused on maintaining the status quo and defending the current business. New ideas are aplenty in employee's minds but are never spoken lest there be negative consequences. Opportunities to differentiate and grow the business are therefore lost and the business is beat by competitors who encourage creativity and controlled risk-taking.	Managers are responsible for making decisions and then being held accountable to those decisions. Thus, managers don't have to approve every new idea. If the manager isn't "bought in" to the risk, he should explain why in a way that acknowledges the employee's initiative, respects the employee's desire to improve the operation, and increases the employee's understanding.

Manager says to an employee, *"at the end of your shift, stop by my office—we need to talk about some things."*	The manager has created uncertainty. Productivity is lost and morale is hampered as the employee spends the day worrying about the reason for the meeting—most likely assuming the worst. When it turns out the meeting is for "good news," the positive impact has already been contradicted by the stress experienced.	Employees should never be left "in suspense." Managers should clearly communicate the purpose of any meetings, let the employee know what he can do to prepare, or wait until an appropriate time to pull the employee aside for a private discussion. If there are performance issues—there should have been sufficient ongoing disclosure that the employee is not surprised by the manager's feedback.
Growing frustrated with an employee's sub-par performance, but never having engaged the employee in a performance improvement plan, the manager fires the employee at the end of the day.	Employees do not communicate their performance issues to one another so morale suffers as co-workers perceive firings are arbitrary, due to political game playing, and reflect management's insensitivity to the economic impact of unemployment on individuals and families. If employees believe there is no "legitimate" reason behind layoffs, they start to think they may be "next"—and employees with the greatest marketability "select themselves out" by seeking jobs elsewhere. In addition, employees who perceive an employer has no loyalty towards them will feel justified in being disloyal towards the employer.	Managers should take great care in hiring and firing decisions. Adequate numbers of prospects should be interviewed to assure the "right person" for the job and investment should be made in training and development. A 90-day review process should be in place and "conditional" employment terminated if an employee never catches up to speed. A tenured employee whose performance has fallen should be given a structured improvement plan—if performance does not improve, the employee will either leave on his own or will have no surprise upon being terminated.
Employee provides "bad news" to the manager regarding an issue with the operation. The manager "blows up," responding angrily at the employee's comments.	"Shooting the messenger" leads employees to withhold potentially negative information from managers. Management loses visibility to the front line, believes things are running smoothly when they aren't, and then spends inordinate amounts of time resolving "crises" that could have been prevented he had been aware of issues early on.	Managers should periodically engage employees in respectful, constructive dialogue on what is working, what is not working, and what can be improved. Such discussions help employees feel greater "ownership" of the operation, resulting in greater initiative to voice legitimate business concerns to management as they arise.
Owner submits personal expenses for reimbursement by the urgent care center, carries non-working family members on the center's health insurance plan, uses a company-owned vehicle for non-business purposes, and flaunts expensive purchases in front of employees.	Employees who see management act unethically will feel justified in acting unethically themselves. Particularly in matters of finance—employees will blame owners "using the business as a personal bank" for their lesser pay and benefits. To "get even," some employees will steal cash or supplies, give away services, pad timecards, or shirk on the job. After all, they feel the owners can definitely "afford it" and probably even "deserve it."	There should be clear separation between an owner's personal and business financial affairs. Care should go well beyond IRS guidelines—owners should always be cognizant of how their words and actions could be perceived by others. Expectation should be set that everyone in the center will conduct themselves with absolute integrity— meaning zero tolerance for unethical behavior—with controls in place to monitor and enforce rules. Few employees will feel justified in "cheating" a boss who has been fair and honest.

A business owner—spending time in the operation—speaks negatively of decisions hired managers have made, tells employees that a manager is incompetent, or reverses decisions the manager has made.	Owners who undermine a hired manager's autonomy demonstrate to employees that the manager has no control of the business. Employees learn that if they don't like what the manager is doing, they can go straight to the owners to get what they want. The owners begin to micromanage the operation, over-riding management, resulting in inconsistent decision-making. Eventually, the organization becomes a "free for all" driven by politics and devoid of meaningful management control.	Prior to hiring or promoting a manager, a business owner should assure that the manager's values, vision and style are aligned with those of the owners. Once a manager is in place, the owner must defer day-to-day decision-making to the manager. Owners maintain control through reporting systems and by assuring the manager's incentives are aligned with those of the owners.
Manager gossips with one employee about another employee's performance or personal affairs.	When a culture becomes infiltrated with gossip, backstabbing, favoritism, and other "petty" behavior—trust and security is lost as employees realize they could easily fall victim to a slander costing their reputation or their job. Also, a manager who engages in these activities will soon find the staff is gossiping about him and undermining his own authority. The result is a toxic environment where time and energy is expended on game playing rather than serving patients.	Petty behavior in the workplace undermines a leader's credibility and authority. In order to maintain control of the operation, and create an environment in which employees will feel secure, communication should be professional, focused on strategy or task, authentic, free of ulterior motives, and in the spirit of full disclosure.

Because they are "working managers," urgent care leaders are typically busy tending to the delivery of clinical services. So when they enforce a rule on Tuesday, but not on Wednesday, or when they hold Jack accountable but not Jane—they usually don't intend malice. Rather, focused on keeping the operation going, they are simply unaware how their communication and behavior instills uncertainty among staff.

When management desensitizes staff by reprimanding, demoting or firing co-workers, demonstrating inconsistent demeanor including moodiness or snappiness, showing favoritism, withholding disclosure, withholding feedback, playing games that pit co-workers against one another, or making cutting, abrasive, or dehumanizing remarks—employees end up in a constant state of panic. After time they "burn out," become numb to it all, and the result is staff who is emotionless, bored, with no aspiration, and could care less whether the operation succeeds. Their focus becomes their paycheck and time spent as work is as though in "prison." These "zombie" workers need to be brought back to life.

Seeing Through the Big Phony

An urgent care leader, realizing that the center's culture is strained and employees have become disengaged, attends a seminar on "best practices" from leading customer service cultures. At the seminar, she learns the reasons why companies like Southwest Airlines, Nordstrom Department Stores, and Apple Computer have extraordinary cultures—which is a separate but related topic as to why they offer good customer service—and energized, she begins to implement what she has learned. Her memo reads:

> *"Starting immediately, we're a happy-go-lucky culture! My new title is 'Chief Excitement Officer.' Wear your wacky t-shirts and Bermuda shorts on Friday. Decorate your workstation like your favorite cartoon superhero. Here, everyone read this book on 'dazzling' service and next Sunday, report to the nature ropes course for a mandatory day of intensive morale-building activities!"*

Although the urgent care operator acted earnestly in her desire to improve the center's culture, over time she becomes disappointed to observe that no meaningful change has occurred.   The reason? The manager never embraced the values she wanted staff to emulate. She continued to participate in workplace politics, continued her demeaning and undermining communication, and ultimately—all of the "change" she introduced increased the ambiguity of work. To cope with the uncertainty created, employees dismissed her efforts as contrived, superficial, and lacking credibility.

The Remedy for Ambiguity

When employees don't know what's going on with a business, they don't understand the reasons for decision-making, and begin to think everything is arbitrary or by chance. Lack of disclosure may encompass industry changes affecting the operating model, the center's financial performance, hiring or firing of key personnel, development plans for individual workers, and specific plans for the future of the business. Authentic communication—honest self-expression that's free of pretense and judgment and empathetic to the needs of others —is the only remedy for uncertainty.

By focusing on employee's underlying needs for stability and peace, an urgent care operator who communicates authentically will spend less time judging, analyzing, complaining and comparing—and spend more time addressing the challenges that impact the operation and cultivating connection and compassion with the staff.

The most important component of authentic communication is full disclosure—letting employees know where the business is headed, the values that guide the operation's path, and what each employee's role in the center's future is. Authentic communication is fair, respects the individual, and avoids game playing and politics. At its root, it is one human being reaching out to another human being with the integrity that mutual respect demands. The result is the staff always knows where it stands and guessing and assumptions become unnecessary. Confident that management has a plan, employees feel more secure and satisfied in their roles—which reflects in their engagement with patients and the quality of service they provide.

Conclusion

People want security and peace in their lives but the ambiguity of work often creates a state of chaos in which individuals feel powerless—attributing workplace opportunity to chance and believing their success is determined by "luck." The remedy to such uncertainty is information. People feel secure when led by strong, competent, respectful managers who act consistently, with purpose and integrity, and who are transparent in their decision-making. Managers who communicate authentically will cultivate a culture in which employees feel personal ownership of the work of the center and have confidence in their futures.   The results can be seen in satisfied patients, who not only return more frequently for services (and tell others to do the same) but can also be found in patient testimonials about the "bright-eyed, smiling, and outgoing staff" they encountered.