

CEO: CREATE AN EXCELLENT ORGANIZATION

Tracey B. Walker, Guest Contributor
Chief Executive Officer, Journey Found, Inc.



The vast majority of CEOs and other senior leaders worry about service quality, organization reputation, staff performance and morale. But how often do we pause to consider those areas in terms of overall excellence, holistic accountability and a widely shared and understood collective vision? When and how do we make the time (indeed do we EVER make the time) to consider these things in the context of what is happening daily in our organizations?

As CEOs (or as I have been affectionately dubbed by my team at Journey Found “the Big Cheese”) we are charged with the awesome responsibility for very important outcomes both for those we serve and those we employ to serve them. We are responsible for holding ourselves accountable to our Boards, to funders, to regulators and a variety of other stakeholders. We handle great volumes of information, balance numerous competing priorities and make hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions each week. This sounds quite impressive, doesn’t it? We should pat each other on our CEO backs and add another skill to our resume.

But wait, I don’t believe that any of us wants to be remembered for the things we “manage.” I don’t want my epitaph to be “She always came in under budget and ahead of deadlines.” While this may be a desirable part of a good reference, it is not the legacy I wish to leave behind and it certainly is not the fuel that has kept me going professionally for the span of more decades than I care to mention. I don’t believe it’s what brings meaning to you in your work either. We gain powerful satisfaction and meaning in our work when we actively take the time to consider and take action that moves our organization toward excellence and it is up to the CEO to set this stage.

How often have you hired consultants, gone to seminars, sent staff to training only to see minimal lasting impact? We see it all the time. We take the first necessary step of recognizing that the organization may not be performing at an optimal level. Often we feel like staff are not engaged at a high level and are not holding themselves accountable. Perhaps this has led to a morale issue. So having identified these issues as a barrier to completely fulfilling our

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mission and vision, we set about hiring a consultant. We solicit proposals, interview the candidates and hire the person who we think has the “magic” to solve our woes. We often invest heavily in terms of cost and time to work with this expert. We ensure that all of the right players get into the room for each piece of the project and congratulate ourselves on a job well done. Yet once the consultant finishes and the last invoice is paid, we are little different than we were before the consultation. We fail to put the tools offered into practice.

What CEOs and senior leadership need to realize is that it is up to them to create the context in which consultation, training or any change initiative occurs. To do this it’s necessary to actually stop doing things long enough to assess things. It’s imperative to take the time to analyze the outcomes of our actions and decisions and learn from them. The first step needs to be from the CEO and s/he needs to become crystal clear on what the organization they are proud to lead looks like. This will take as many different forms as there are CEOs but I am willing to bet that underlying each of them is one item. The people of the agency are happy.

At this point you may be shaking your head and saying “I’m not responsible for their happiness.” While it’s true that everyone must challenge themselves in creating their own happiness, it is up to leadership to build a culture that allows them to do so. There is nothing stopping us from being kind. Kindness costs us nothing. Adopting person centered practices that focus on actively treating employees as people first and employees second helps build relationships that foster better service delivery and productivity. When we focus on developing capable people instead of supervising employees, we are actively sowing the seeds of excellence in our organizations.

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Sounds simple, right? While the concepts seem basic they are not exactly second nature and certainly not how many of us were trained. To begin working toward an engaged, accountable, happy workforce producing high quality results, you need to be able to risk inclusion. By this I don't mean inclusion in the typical diversity context but inclusion of multiple layers of the organization in important decision making. We need to take the risk of not making decisions alone while taking full responsibility for the decisions of the group. Seeking input from the people most impacted is a tried and true way to ensure a better thought out plan and buy into the plan. It helps make the pain of change bearable. Instead of seeing this as a threat, let yourself feel the relief. You don't have to do this alone!

Leadership also needs to be the first to challenge the status quo and ask the tough questions all the while approaching their role with humility and humor. If we can laugh at ourselves then we are far more able to roll with the punches. Time to step out of that comfort zone and dare to lead with the strength that is found only when allowing yourself to be a bit vulnerable.

Five More Things You Can Do Right Now

1. Create time to discuss leadership with your staff on a regular basis. Form a discussion group to discuss articles that are circulated in advance. You facilitate but do not lead the discussion. Or you can have different facilitators each meeting.
2. Recognize the events in the lives of your staff. Send birthday and work anniversary cards to everyone personally signed by you. Have HR and managers let you know when there are births, family deaths, an employee graduation or illness so you can send a card.
3. Have a fun activity to start team meetings. Each meeting the activity is chosen and led by a different member of the team.
4. Walk around the office each morning and afternoon saying good morning and have a good night to everyone.
5. Ask other CEOs to join you for breakfast or lunch to share ideas and encourage each other.



About Tracey Walker:

Tracey B. Walker is the founding Chief Executive Officer of Journey Found an agency that helps adults with intellectual disabilities lead incredibly happy lives of their own choosing. She has 35 years of Connecticut based nonprofit experience. Her career has included organizational and statewide leadership through a variety of agencies and associations including the former Connecticut Association of Nonprofits. Tracey's work has included advocacy, development, consultation and programming for children, youth, families as well as individuals with disabilities and co-occurring challenges. She holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from Rhode Island College. Tracey has two grown children and lives in East Haddam, CT.