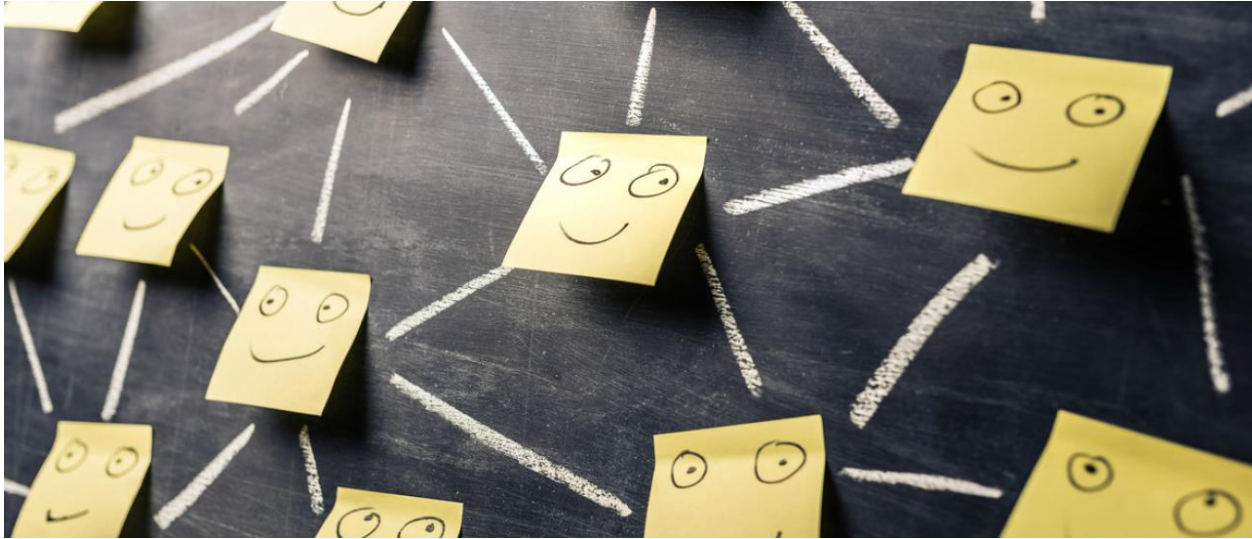




Corporate Heaven: The ‘Authentizotic’ Organisation



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

How to create an organisation where people find meaning in, and are captivated by, their work.

The CEO of Wickrott Corporation was known as a suspicious control freak. Symptomatic of his leadership style were the numerous “internal consultants” hired to keep him informed of the goings-on in the organisation. Staff described their work environment as a cutthroat, Darwinian “soup”. Information was power; secrecy was the norm; transparency and teamwork were conspicuous by their absence. To add to the company’s paranoid culture, the CEO demanded pre-signed resignation letters from all of his senior executives so that he could fire them on the spot if he felt that they had transgressed. At meetings, he frequently subjected them to abusive, even profane tirades. During these humiliating sessions, he made it quite clear that the firm owed every bit of its success to him alone.

At the Uplung Corporation, by contrast, great efforts were made to ensure that every staff member was aligned behind the firm's values, mission and vision. Senior executives emphasised the importance of a coaching-oriented, people-centric culture. Employees were proud of the organisation as it offered mutual support, promoted trust and provided them with meaning. Pay was decent and the benefits were excellent. Senior management encouraged people to speak up, come up with new ideas and take risks. In particular, entrepreneurial activities were advocated. Work-life balance was taken seriously, and the company strived to be a good corporate citizen for the community and the world at large.

The “authentizotic” organisation

As this juxtaposition of corporate hell and heaven illustrates, work environments can range from the awful to the awesome. For many executives the million-dollar question is: How to shoot for the latter? Based on my decades of academic and consulting experience, I would like to make a few observations on how leaders can create high-performing, sustainable organisations where people can be and give their best.

I call these organisations “authentizotic”, a term I created by combining two Greek words: *authentikos* and *zootikos*. As a workplace label, *authentikos* implies an organisation characterised by fair processes. Such a workplace emphasises self-actualisation, producing a sense of effectiveness, competency, autonomy and creativity. The term *zootikos* means “vital to life”. It describes an environment in which people are invigorated by their work, able to find balance, commitment and completeness, as well as fulfil their need for exploration.

The basis for developing authentizotic organisations is trust. A number of ingredients are needed to foster this, and it all starts at the top.

Developing trust

Trust is earned when actions meet words. We trust forthright leaders who walk the talk and set an example by working with integrity. Consistency in actions is also a critical factor in building trust. This implies living up to one's commitments and promises.

Furthermore, leaders should be prepared to show their emotions when appropriate; they should demonstrate that they care. Trust, however, is not

only affected by the ability to express emotions, but also by the way these emotions are conveyed. For example, volatile anger doesn't help an organisation. In addition, senior managers need to have confidence in their team and acknowledge individual efforts and contributions so everyone feels valued.

In authentizotic organisations, senior management listens carefully to what people have to say. This means paying attention not only to the story that's told, but also to its underlying meaning, the language used, the tone of voice and, last but not least, the body language. Equally important is to listen to what's *left unsaid*. Furthermore, senior executives should feel sufficiently secure to show vulnerability through admitting (when appropriate) that they don't have all the answers.

Trusted executives unconditionally invite their subordinates to express their opinions. They make it clear that people can disagree and that disagreement is part of the creative process. They present failure as a great learning opportunity. They personify ethics and also set clear boundaries for what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Such boundaries, like in childhood, contribute to the creation of feelings of safety. Only when people feel safe will they be comfortable to speak up in an organisational setting. They will not be afraid to be seen as incompetent, ignorant or disruptive.

The clinical paradigm: A well-tested method for change

Authentizotic organisations have what I call **C⁴** in their DNA: They embed ***courageous conversations*** within a ***coaching culture***. And I have designed a well-tested intervention method to help leaders create such a culture. Its main goals are to build trust, to alleviate concerns about reciprocity in dealing with sensitive issues and to deter lingering paranoid reactions. It's about overcoming fear of the negative consequences of having courageous conversations – and talking about matters that really influence the effectiveness of the organisation.

Underlying this intervention method is the *clinical paradigm* – the psychodynamic-systemic lens allowing us to explore people's inner theatre and motivations. This conceptual framework brings a deeper and more nuanced understanding of intra-personal, interpersonal, team and organisational phenomena. Through it, we discover a world of fantasy, dreams and daydreams, all representing forces that bear on our decisions, actions and interactions.

Personal and organisational change starts with an honest look at what holds us back. To this end, *multi-party feedback questionnaires* can show the gap between self-perception and the perception of others. I am referring to feedback on a person's individual leadership style, but also pertaining to team dynamics and organisational culture. If the process is done well, this feedback (preferably shared in a group setting) provides a more rounded portrait of the individual, the team and the corporate culture. Such an assessment can have a deep emotional impact and produce paths for change.

From my own experiences with thousands of executives, short periods of "play" – experimentation with ideas and feelings – in a group setting can yield more insights than hours of presentations. Play unleashes the opportunity to start conversations that contribute to change. Taking the form of various "ice breakers" touching on deeply felt emotional issues, these "play sessions" create a *transitional space* where participants become willing to discuss the things that really matter.

Stories for real change

Narration is another gate to illuminative catharsis. Coaching is always a narrative process. Telling our personal stories to a group of people that listen in a respectful manner can be emotionally impactful. Talking about what bothers us provides an opportunity to re-experience and transform deeply troubling themes in our life. It can help us better understand why certain psychological issues keep holding us back and why we persist in dysfunctional behavioural patterns that hurt the organisation.

Furthermore, while listening to other life stories, we may realise that we are not alone in our confusion. We may come to understand that others, too, struggle with similar problems. This offers many opportunities to discuss alternative ways of dealing with common situations. In addition, as participants give each other support, they become part of a true and supportive community.

To get the best out of people, organisations need to inscribe courageous explorations and conversations into their DNA. The intervention method that I described helps create a culture that reflects people's realities, with a cascading effect from the top. Courageous conversations can be contagious in a good way, transferring between individuals, moving through teams and, finally, spreading throughout the whole organisation. Eventually, as these

courageous conversations become integrated into a *coaching culture*, the organisation can bloom into a workplace that gives meaning and purpose, one that has the **C⁴** in its DNA.

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