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From CLIMBING WALLS To A CULTURE Of Caring

Kirk Kelly and Brenna Kutch

Back in the 1990s to the mid-2000s, a phenomenon swept the United States in higher education: swanky new recreation centers with impressive new climbing walls. For the colleges and universities that followed the trend, these centers became a highlight of every campus tour as a way to help convince students that this institution was the school for them and that their lives—with the cascade of multicolored plastic rocks at their fingertips—would finally be complete.



On the employment side, we've seen a similar trend with technology companies. This can take the form of many on-site attractions, including dry cleaning, executive chefs for evening meals, kegs of beer, hair salons, jungle-gym slides, and more. At this rate, daily goat yoga sessions can't be far behind. To be clear, I'll state that none of these things are bad: they are good additions to a workplace that is employee-focused. Be it climbing walls or helicopter rides, these amenities give campuses and tech companies alike strong recruiting tools, but ultimately, it is doubtful that they significantly move the needle when it comes to student or employee retention. They are not the core of, and cannot replace, what makes a campus or workplace fundamentally great.

Returning to the idea of quality over quantity, is it better to have fewer, well-supported, dedicated employees or more staff with thinner benefits that don't support them as well?

Higher education is realizing that student success takes more than ostentatious facilities. As a result, it is focusing on what this success actually means, what contributes to the success, and what the services we provide are doing to drive that success forward. Many campuses are concentrating on coordinated care networks, which support not only educational success but also mental and financial health. Likewise, this is what higher education must do to move forward with employee success and engagement. Organizations with significantly less funding (e.g., higher education and the public sector) can never keep up with private tech companies; however, that doesn't mean they are noncompetitive. Even though higher education may not be able to compete in a traditional sense (from salons to salaries), it can offer something different—something that really matters and that doesn't require massive funding efforts. This something is the genuine culture of the organization: employees' relationships

with their boss and others and whether or not they feel cared for.

Work involving employee engagement isn't new; in fact, Gallup has been surveying this topic since the 1990s.¹ In recent years, however, the focus has shifted more to caring for employees on a human level and away from offering flashy perks that "should" equate to engagement and retention. Fortunately, research demonstrates time and again that engaged employees have a dramatic positive effect on the workplace in the form of productivity, customer service, higher retention, and support of and involvement in the core mission.² In fact, in *The Employee Experience Advantage*, Jacob Morgan emphasizes quality over quantity in terms of staffing. Companies that invest

in the employee experience can be more successful with fewer, higher-paid, and more engaged employees. The secret lies in the core elements of the workplace culture and not just the physical amenities. This book uses the phrase *employee experience* rather than *employee engagement* and defines the employee experience by asking, "Do you show up to work every day with the intention of helping others succeed?" rather than the traditional employee-engagement question, "Do you wake up every morning wanting to go to work?"³

Whether defined as engagement, experience, or any other number of words, the goal is the same. Mike Myatt, in a *Forbes* magazine article, summed this up excellently: "If you fail to care about people at a human level, at an emotional level, they'll

eventually leave you regardless of how much you pay them."⁴

What Is a Culture of Caring?

There are many definitions of leadership, of course, but Simon Sinek, author of the book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (2009), may have described it best: "Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge."⁵ Building a culture of caring means providing a supportive environment that is focused on the employees; it means truly wanting to take care of them.⁶ Creating this environment is a fairly well researched concept, and there have been many books, articles, TED Talks, and even comic strips (with some great examples of what not to do) about how to provide this environment.

A culture of caring is employee-centered, which means being human-centered. And at the core of every human, sometimes buried deep beneath logic and sensibility, are feelings that influence every aspect of our lives. Think about the time spent at work: *in general*, these are the peak productive years of our lives (between the ages of 25 and 65), in the peak hours of the day (8 am to 5 pm). We spend approximately 100,000 hours of our lives at work, and it would be delusional and possibly cruel to expect to leave our humanness at home. We cannot simply turn into emotionless robots of productivity at work.

The poet Maya Angelou reminds us of the lasting memories that others will have of us as people and most certainly as leaders: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." As we look at how to create a culture of caring and have a lasting impact in people's lives, we must do so from employees' perspective: how are we making them feel?



They Should Feel Welcome

Feeling welcome centers on the basic human need to feel that we truly belong, that our contributions are wanted, that we are being included. Think of it this way: when you approach a circle of people talking at a party, either the circle remains closed or it opens up to include you in the conversation. We all know what it feels like to stand on the outside and eventually walk away. Is it possible we are making our employees feel this way?

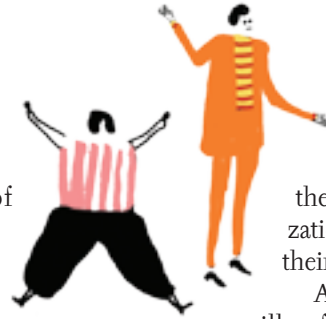
Recruitment and Onboarding

Feeling welcome starts well before the first day on the job. The opportunities to welcome future employees include the organization's job posting, recruiting tools, interview process, job offer, and then the first day and subsequent onboarding process. Hiring is a two-way process, and the organization is responsible for how it markets itself during recruitment. Does the job advertisement reflect why the organization is a great place to work, or does it merely list a set of demands reminiscent of a hostage negotiation? Are the interviews a positive experience for job-seekers⁷ or an arduous and intimidating experience not remotely resembling a day of actual work in the organization? On the first day, is the new employee directed to an empty office and left alone to figure out the bureaucratic paperwork process and what lunch spots to avoid, or is the team and manager there to guide the employee through the process of settling in at a new organization?

Employees' first day at a new job is one that they will likely remember for years to come (be it good or bad), and the feeling that organizations give new employees will be essential for those memories as well as retention. Great employees with high expectations will often become disillusioned after poor onboarding experiences and will depart the organization much sooner than expected. Many other good candidates will never even get that

far if the recruitment process is lackluster or, worse, focused on the checkboxes of organizational needs. If we care about people, we will work hard so that employees feel welcome during the hiring process and throughout their job experience. This necessary hard work will be well worth the time and will result in more successful employees.⁸

What are a few steps to make this experience feel more welcoming? Throughout the recruitment and hiring process, take the time and effort to communicate with candidates in a timely fashion. Inform new employees why you are excited to have them join your organization, and



impress any Borg or Dalek swarm?⁹ Are leaders a good example of the inclusive culture the organization is trying to create, or does their talk differ from their walk?

An un-inclusive organization will suffer by driving out anyone who does not fit the cookie cutter of majority culture. This can result in lower-performing teams, harmful press (remember the Uber article?), and lack of ability to keep diverse talent, which is essential for organizational growth. On an ethical level, if we care about people, we want them *all* to feel welcome and a part of the organization. Acknowledging that the tech industry has historically not included (or has even actively excluded) certain types of people—including

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provide them with as much information as possible about their first few days on the job (including a schedule and what to expect). Make the onboarding process as transparent as possible so that managers and new employees alike understand everything that needs to be accomplished in the first few weeks and beyond. Intentionally carve out a welcoming space for new employees.

Inclusion

An essential part of employees feeling welcome is an environment that encourages people to bring their true selves to work. This is not just about the numbers and demographics; a culture of true inclusion and diversity means an environment that is open to encouraging discussion, being wrong and learning from it, and meeting in the middle. Does the organization respect and encourage differences, or does it exude a mentality of culture assimilation that would

women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks—and that it has been difficult for some of these employees to feel welcome or to advance in the industry is the first step to looking at how to change this situation.

In her book *Take the Lead*, Betsy Myers lists authenticity as the first of seven leader attributes.¹⁰ Like any other aspect of workplace culture, authenticity must be led by example. Leaders who bring their true selves to work every day are an important component of encouraging the organization to be authentic and inclusive. Leadership must encourage healthy conflict practices so that when differences inevitably arise, they can be handled in a constructive manner. Teams and hiring committees, as well as organizational leadership, should reflect diversity and different perspectives; newly hired diverse employees will not stick around in an organization that does not truly make people feel included.

They Should Feel Healthy

Although employee wellness programs might look like some of the extravagance that is unnecessary for a culture of caring, they are an essential part of supporting employees. Caring about people means wanting them to be physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy. While research is more substantial on physical health, the latter two are harder to notice but just as crucial.

Benefits and Leave

The first and most obvious way to make employees feel healthy is to provide them with a good benefits package, not to placate them but because you truly want them to be healthy and happy. This package should go beyond healthcare to include retirement, vacation, and more. Returning to the idea of quality over quantity, is it better to have fewer, well-supported, dedicated employees or more staff with thinner benefits that don't support them as well? Do you encourage employees to not exceed a 40-hour work week whenever possible, or do you

expect them (either verbally or by example) to often work longer hours, leaving them physically and mentally exhausted when they are at work? Do you encourage them to take time to care for their families via a healthy work/life balance, or do you expect the organization to be their topmost priority at all times? Do you provide time and resources for therapy or other forms of mental health, or do you acknowledge only physical sickness?

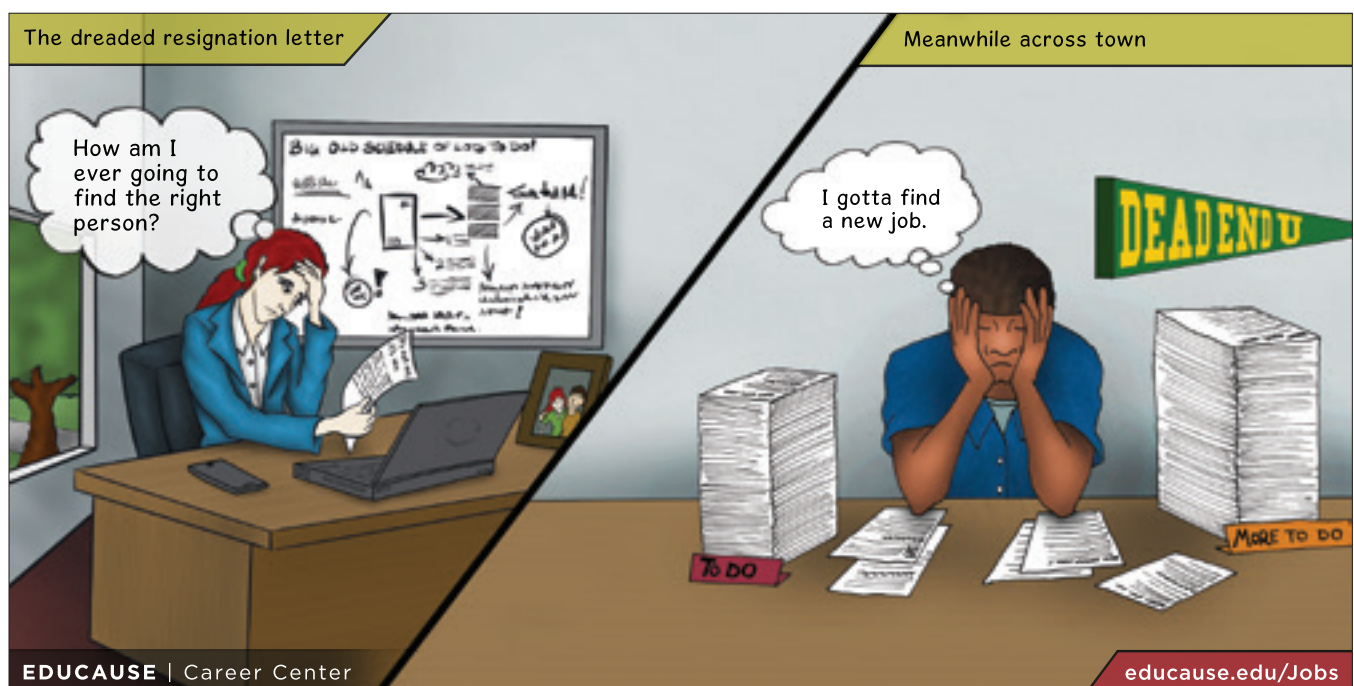
The effects of an unhealthy work culture range far beyond lost productivity from sick days, though the physical effects of mental and emotional stress can certainly add to these days. Employees with sick family members or emotional distress will be "checked out," which is something that cannot be overcome by lectures or discipline but only by support, time, and resources. Those who never take the time to unplug from work for a week or two at a time will be overloaded and overextended without time to relax and focus on themselves and their families. Despite what policy may dictate, having a boss who responds to

emails regularly at night and on weekends will make employees feel pressured into being connected at all times.

How can you help people feel healthy through benefits? Provide a benefits package that shows you care about your employees and that values the person and not just the financial impact. Promote a culture of real work/life balance by encouraging employees to unplug when they're not at work and by beginning this behavior with managers and leaders. The organization not only will lead by example but also will demonstrate trust that employees can handle things as needed. Finally, poor sleep can have drastic effects, so if an employee isn't sleeping often, find out what is going on and see if something can be done at work to help.

Physical Environment

Create a workspace that employees enjoy and that facilitates their physical health. Do you ask staff where, when, and how they prefer to work and try to accommodate that, or do you assign spaces and schedules with no flexibility? When staff



ask for higher-quality chairs or standing desks, do you take their physical needs into consideration and invest in their workspaces? Do you have a refrigerator and prep area for staff who want to bring healthy home-cooked lunches, or is dining out every day the only option? Do you encourage employees to walk around and stretch throughout the day?

Skimping on physical support for the sake of saving a few dollars will have much greater financial impact in the long run. The physical repercussions of our techno-industrialized culture in which we spend most of our daytime hours sitting (often with poor posture) can spawn serious negative health issues, from musculoskeletal to cardiovascular and more. Staff who feel forced into a physical environment that is a mismatch to their working style, such as in a bland cubicle or with no scheduling flexibility, will be less engaged and less excited about coming to work. Those who have no option other than dining out will end up spending more and likely eating a less healthy diet than if they could manage their own lunch and snacks throughout the day.

To help encourage health through the physical environment, look at the workplace from the viewpoint of employees and also ask them what they need. See where you can be more accommodating. Approach scheduling and location flexibility with an open mind and find a way to meet in the middle if possible. Encourage employees to personalize their office spaces. Encourage walking meetings, stretch breaks, or group activities such as lunchtime yoga or potlucks. Staff are full of great ideas and have many different perspectives; utilize that to come up with ideas for making the workplace a physically supportive, healthy place to be every day.

They Should Feel Trusted

We all want to feel trusted, but we sometimes have trouble giving our trust to others. If we care about our employees, we should genuinely have faith and trust in their abilities and motives.

Autonomy

In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink talks extensively about autonomy—that it's in our nature is to be curious and self-directed, not inert and passive.¹¹ Autonomy means acting with choice, being players not pawns. Do you lead your staff with autonomy (which breeds engagement) or with control (which breeds compliance)? Are employees empowered to make decisions, or are they told that they must consult with management for everything? Do they refer to management as trusting or as micromanagers? The repercussions of a micromanaged workplace that lacks trust are disastrous. Loss of productivity, increased stagnation, high turnover, less collaboration, and higher stress are all problems found in low-trust organizations.

To increase autonomy, empathize with your employees' point of view. Assign goals, not tasks, and realize that many people will take different paths to accomplish the same goal. Allow employees to select their own schedules, environments, and teams when possible. Understand how they work best and what kind of feedback is the right balance of structure and autonomy.

Transparency and Two-Way Communication

Caring for employees includes giving them the information they need to do their jobs autonomously so that they can perform the best work possible. Do you default to sharing organizational information unless it is confidential, or do you keep things hidden unless someone asks? Do employees know how decisions are made (and by whom), or is the leadership process a black box? Are employees allowed to ask questions at all levels of leadership, or do they feel they will be punished for their curiosity?

Leaders who are opaque and closed off from staff can damage the feeling of trust, which is particularly crucial during rough times when hard decisions



need to be made. If you don't communicate with employees, they may assume you are hiding information and may fill the void with their own stories, which will increase the rift between leadership and frontline staff. Lack of information flow also means that the organization will have less capacity to know what's going on and to make decisions, which will have its own set of logistical issues.

Increasing transparency must be done strategically, since not everything should be shared. Make budget information or meeting minutes available, whether online or in person. When you survey staff, share the results and what you've done as a result. When staff request information that you can't share, explain why it can't be shared and avoid penalizing them for their curiosity.

They Should Feel As Though They Are an Investment

Caring for employees at a human level includes furthering their learning and development—and not just because doing so benefits the organization.

Professional Development

Investing in professional development means you value their learning. Do you commit to sending them to needed training, or is “it's not in the budget” a commonly heard phrase in the organization? Do you proactively provide nontechnical opportunities that might be helpful, or do you simply react to what people ask for? When employees seek out learning, do you consider their future career path or only whether the training will benefit their current jobs?

Claiming to care about employees but not investing in their learning and development is an obvious disconnect that they will notice. Though professional development budgets may be an easy target for reductions, keep them steady, especially in times of shrinking funding. Understand what your staff members want to learn. In addition to conferences, there are other low-budget learning options such as cross-training, projects, or online courses. For college and university employees, many classes can be audited or taken for credit at very

low cost. Think about the nontechnical skills that are useful for employees regardless of their job function (e.g., communication or time management), and proactively organize on-site training to get more learn for your dollar.

Humans are generally unhappy with stagnation. If your employees feel “stuck,” they will likely look to another organization to provide opportunities for growth. Refusing to invest in your employees will cause negative repercussions not only for the individual but for the organization as well.

Mastery and Flow

Caring about employees means you want them to enjoy and be challenged by their work. In *Drive*, Pink notes that mastery isn't just about excelling in a skill; it is also about reaching that point of optimal challenge that balances the “Goldilocks line” between too difficult and too easy. Is the work you assign your staff appropriately challenging, or are they constantly finding themselves bored or overwhelmed? While work



that is too hard and work that is too easy sound like opposite problems, they will likely have a similar effect: your employees will be unsuccessful and will leave the organization to seek out something that is appropriately challenging. Bored or floundering employees are less productive and less likely to be giving discretionary effort to your organization.

In addition, flow and mastery cause employees to get lost in their work. Do you provide the time and space for them to get “sucked in,” or are they constantly being interrupted by meetings or inefficient communication practices? Do you invest the resources (time, energy, and money) to give them the surroundings they need to for mastery and flow, or do you expect them to find mastery on their own? Constant interruptions mean more time is wasted with stopping and starting—leading to higher frustration and lower output.

To support flow, find out what your employees are interested in and

what makes them lose track of time. Review meeting and communication practices to ensure that interruptions are being tamed as much as possible. Consider blocking off one day a month on everyone’s calendars so that they can catch up, achieve flow, or dive into learning something new.

Tools and Technology

Employees must have the tools necessary to do their jobs well. In his book *The Employee Experience Advantage*, Morgan challenges organizations to use consumer-grade technology (i.e., user-friendly).¹² Do you provide staff with newer, easier-to-use technologies, or are they using technologies that are decades old?

Skimping on tools means that more time is wasted finding ways to perform work with subpar resources, and in IT organizations, that can mean that a significant amount of time is spent creating new technologies to tape together

the misgivings of old ones. Refusing to spend a few hundred dollars to greatly improve employees’ ability to do their job will be perceived as not understanding or caring about their work.

Make sure you know what your staff members do and the tools they need. Instead of creating workarounds, take a serious look at a permanent solution. Finally, provide useful technologies, but be sure you’re not using them as a substitute for face-to-face interaction.

They Should Feel Heard

When you care about people, you care about what they have to say. You care that they feel respected, heard, and valued—isn’t that a basic desire that drives us all? Plus, employees often have great ideas that can help the organization. Listening to your staff may take time and may occasionally feel less important than some of the more pressing or technical aspects of leading an IT organization, but doing so is essential for building a department with staff who feel cared for at an individual, personal level and who



feel comfortable sharing ideas and asking questions.

Communication with Leadership

Listening to people lets them know you care. Are you actually listening to employees when they talk to you, or are you “multitasking” and not really absorbing their words? Are you paying attention, or are you just waiting for your turn to speak? Are you interested in who they are as a whole person, or do you care just about the job-related parts?

Your employees can usually tell when you are feigning interest, which is arguably more insulting than completely ignoring them. If they feel that talking to you is a waste of their time, they’ll likely stop. Listening (or not) will set a very strong example for the rest of the organization despite what you claim to value.

If you are worried about forgetting ideas when your employees are talking, jot down on a piece of paper notes about what you want to say. Make sure you won’t be distracted by emails or text messages when you are talking to someone. Initiate conversations and ask questions. Take a genuine interest in employees’ lives and their problems, even if not job-related.

Feedback

Hearing what employees think is difficult if you never ask for their feedback. Even the best leaders can’t think of everything, and the perspectives of frontline staff are invaluable for understanding the organization and getting new ideas to solve ever-changing problems. Do you ask staff what they think, or do you assume you know it all since you are the leader or once performed their duties? When you receive negative feedback, do you have humility and use it as constructive guidance, or do you punish honesty? When your employees tell you things, do they see changes as a result, or does their feedback go into a mental file cabinet never to be discussed again?

Not asking for or listening to feedback will cause your employees to feel disrespected, unimportant, or not valuable. Ignored employees are less engaged and productive, and they take more sick time. Employees who feel disenfranchised can actively damage the organization by spreading their sentiment to others. Refusing to care about your employees’ opinions is one very effective way to damage loyalty to you or the organization.

Be sure to incorporate employees’ suggestions when appropriate. Set up multiple venues for providing feedback, from anonymous forms to group exercises in staff meetings. Provide staff with space and time to talk to you, and avoid the “open door policy,” which puts the impetus solely on them. Demonstrate

Leaders must be able to have difficult, emotional conversations with staff and must set an example for how they expect others to communicate as well.

your appreciation by ensuring that you are prepared to accept negative feedback without resorting to anger and accusations or ignoring what they have told you.

Difficult Conversations

Leaders must be able to have difficult, emotional conversations with staff and must set an example for how they expect others to communicate as well. When someone criticizes a decision you made, do you reflect on the situation, or do you get angry? If you are having a bad day and an employee comes to you frustrated, do you explain that you’d prefer to have the conversation later, or do you let the conversation get heated to a damaging level? When someone sends an accusatory email, do you spend an hour writing a zinger of a response, or do you pick

up the phone and try to understand the sender’s viewpoint? Employees who aren’t sure which “version” of you they will get will not feel comfortable coming to you with their concerns. If they fear an angry or retaliatory reaction, they will quickly lose trust in you and the organization.

Consider reading *Crucial Conversations* or *Fierce Conversations* or one of the many other books about constructive communication in stressful situations.¹³ Make sure your employees feel safe talking to you about difficult things, including criticism of the organization. Hold managers to the same standards, and check in with them about their difficult conversations, ensuring they are having these conversations when necessary.

They Should Feel As Though They’re Making a Difference

Making a difference and affecting the world around us is one of the strongest motivators for why we do *anything*. Helping employees find that fulfillment in (and also outside of) their jobs is one way to demonstrate that you care.

Purpose

Purpose is the intrinsic human drive to work toward something greater than oneself. It must be infused into the daily work of employees. Do employees understand how their work benefits the greater good of the organization, or do they see only the small circle of influence closest to them? Are they engaged with the larger purpose of the organization, or do they simply show up for eight hours a day and then go home? Do they spend a majority of their time in a job mindset, a



career mindset, or a purpose mindset?¹⁴ Does the work they do for the organization align with their personal goals regarding the differences they want to make throughout their life?

Employees who do not have a strong sense of purpose in their work lack the guiding star of motivation. They may not see the value in the less exciting aspects of their work and may thus feel less inclined to do those tasks. A lack of purpose for the organization or for their own lives will eventually leave them unfulfilled, no matter whether other aspects of the job are great.



How can an organization create purpose? It may just take some connecting the dots. Higher education and other public services have already been tasked with serving the public good, so purpose is fairly easy both to define and to draw a line to.¹⁵ Talk to employees about the purpose they find in their life, their job, and the organization and about how (or if) those all align. Survey your entire staff to see if they find purpose in the work they do.¹⁶

Connection

Myers says it best in *Take the Lead*: “Feeling connected to others is what gives our lives meaning and fuels our sense of belonging. A sense of connection can come from a shared passion, a shared experience or history, a shared goal or mission. It speaks to our desire to identify with and feel part of something bigger than ourselves.”¹⁷ Caring for employees means encouraging those connections to further solidify their sense of purpose. Do employees have personal connections at work so that they can understand how their work

affects others, or do they feel like an army of one? Do they see the difference they make with their work, or is there a wall that they can’t see past? Do they feel encouraged to connect with coworkers and the community, or do they think their jobs end at the proverbial door?

How can you promote a sense of connection between employees and their community? Create or encourage events that draw the two together, such as hosting or volunteering at community events (colleges and universities have many options available). Find mentoring or other volunteer opportunities to provide one-on-one time with individuals. Look for ways to bring your community into the workplace, or highlight individual stories of how your organization has made a difference.

Why Care?

Ultimately, creating a culture of caring will make the difference between paying employees to work for the organization and having them get up in the morning *wanting* to work for the organization. Staff will be more engaged, more committed, and more productive, will encourage others, and will live longer lives. Caring can’t be faked. While this article has mentioned many ways to focus on a culture of caring, caring is not a list of boxes to check off. It is never “finished.” Training people to genuinely care is difficult to do, so organizational leaders must keep this attribute in mind, along with the traditional technical skills, when selecting managers. A culture of caring must be led by example from the top down. If created successfully, this culture will infuse an organization with a feeling and an energy that cannot be replicated no matter the amount of money spent on climbing walls or executive chefs. ■

Notes

1. See “Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey,” Gallup website, accessed July 10, 2017.
2. John Baldoni, “Employee Engagement Does More than Boost Productivity,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 4, 2013.
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5. Simon Sinek, Twitter post, January 28, 2015.
6. See David Bruce, “Team Culture: If You Don’t Build It, Someone Else Will,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, September 19, 2016.
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10. Betsy Myers, *Take the Lead: Motivate, Inspire, and Bring Out the Best in Yourself and Everyone around You* (New York: Atria Books, 2011).
11. Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).
12. Morgan, *The Employee Experience Advantage*, 82.
13. Kerry Patterson, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2012); Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time* (New York, NY: Viking, 2002).
14. Dan Pontefract, “You’re Never Done Finding Purpose at Work,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 20, 2016.
15. Check out theories on Public Service Motivation (PSM), such as Gregory A. Mann, “A Motive to Serve: Public Service Motivation in Human Resource Management and the Role of PSM in the Nonprofit Sector,” *Public Personnel Management* 35, no. 1 (2006).
16. If you need some help getting started, try Pink’s *Drive*, and also Sinek’s *Start with Why* (2009), about the efficacy of purpose in the workplace.
17. Myers, *Take the Lead*.

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