

Transforming Animosity and Mistrust into Employee Satisfaction

Challenge

In 2011, a university in the US was mired in conflict between the dean and the faculty of one of its colleges. There were tremendous levels of animosity and distrust between the parties, leading to a festering enmity with widespread negative impact. The dysfunctional relationship between administration and faculty made collaboration essentially nonexistent and rendered meetings pointless. The ongoing conflict detracted from the college's overall mission to provide quality educational experiences for the student population. Despite the involvement of highly educated and experienced university employees, previous attempts to reconcile the estranged parties had proven ineffective.

In order to gain perspective on the scope of the issue, a faculty survey was conducted in February of 2011. The results were sobering, especially when compared to the same survey results from faculties at comparable universities. Only 26% of the faculty respondents at the struggling university felt they had opportunity to provide evaluative feedback on the performance of their administrators, a response that was 43 percentage points lower than the results reported by comparable schools. While nearly 80% of the faculty felt that administration was aware of their needs and challenges, only 42% believed that the administration was responsive to those issues. That result suggests that the majority of faculty felt that the administration was deliberately neglecting to respond to their problems, despite knowing that the problems existed.

Unsurprisingly, given the deeply contentious relationship between the dean and the faculty, most of the faculty believed the dean to be an ineffective leader. In nearly every measured category, the faculty response showed levels of dissatisfaction substantially more pronounced than those at other educational institutions.

The university direly needed support to rebuild a working relationship between administration and faculty. They did not have a conflict resolution process in place to effectively deescalate tension or the means to nurture a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. They sought out Arbinger's expertise in mindset change and cultural transformation to improve the situation.

Solution

An Arbinger consultant met with the faculty and administration. Over the course of two days, the consultant facilitated a tailored intervention designed to transform dysfunction into willing cooperation. Addressing both historic challenges and future disagreements would only be possible by creating an atmosphere of trust, shared understanding, and mutual concern.

Deploying a process that has been successfully used to help clients facing seemingly intractable conflicts, the Arbinger consultant knew that two days intentionally used could lay the foundations for a fundamental shift towards an others-focused, outward mindset. The consultant introduced Arbinger principles and provided opportunities for the faculty and administration to see each other's viewpoint more accurately and sympathetically. With greater self-awareness regarding their limiting perspectives, the participants began to recognize how their beliefs and behaviors had been reinforcing unproductive patterns and undermining the conflict resolution process. These new insights facilitated greater levels of

accountability and empowerment to create changes.

With Arbinger's help, participants brainstormed ways they might better offer support. When considered with an outward mindset, roles that had before been narrowly defined in terms of administrative tasks were reimagined. Where fault-finding and blame previously ran rampant, the faculty and administration began to set aside accusation to instead take responsibility for the impacts they had on other members of the organization.

Results

Three months after beginning to work with Arbinger's mindset change tools and conflict resolution process, the faculty was surveyed with the same questions that had captured their dissatisfaction earlier in the year. The results were so dramatically transformed that one might have assumed they came from a completely different group of respondents.

Arbinger's work helped increase clarity regarding administrator responsibilities with 100% of faculty survey respondents now feeling that administration roles were well-defined. There was a nearly 30 percentage point increase in faculty members who believed that faculty meetings effectively helped the governance of the college, reflecting improved processes and an increased sense of empowerment. The number of respondents who felt that the dean was competently fulfilling her leadership role essentially doubled, a remarkable change of sentiment nearly unimaginable before Arbinger training. The faculty viewed the administration as a more unified team, with 88% of faculty members believing administration was attentive and responsive to their needs and problems. Three months earlier, that number had been a paltry 42%. Overall faculty satisfaction scores also went up nearly 60% in the second survey.

These substantive changes experienced by the faculty reflect

the fundamental role that mindset plays in organizational success. A transformed mindset opened the way for this university faculty and administration to productively resolve conflict, clarify role responsibilities, and enhance personal accountability.