

Why Above-the-Line Leadership Is Critical to Every Workplace

Leadership

By Michelle Bihary





In our increasingly complex, unpredictable and uncertain world, an organization's success is contingent on employees accessing their highest cognitive and psychological abilities. Strategic thinking, sound decision-making, seeing multiple perspectives, and developing new skills all require access to our highest mental functioning, located in the executive parts of our brain.

Modern workplace demands require humans to function optimally, to think strategically, laterally and creatively, to make decisions with increasing complexity in the context of unpredictability and uncertainty.

Equally important, we rely on our executive brain functioning to support our capacity for empathy, positive relationships, self-awareness and self-management. These skills allow us to see situations from different perspectives including viewpoints with which we may not agree and to cultivate an interpersonally healthy working environment, where people feel psychologically and physically safe.

The psychological workplace environment is critical

Workplaces differ significantly in their interpersonal environments. What is accepted for some would be completely out of bounds in others. Even teams within the same organization can function differently. These variations in acceptable workplace behavior create diverse experiences for employees, impacting performance, productivity and engagement, as well as customer service and workforce wellbeing.

If the psychological environment is harsh or hostile, it adversely impacts brain performance. A negative environment triggers a survival response in the lower parts of the brain, particularly the amygdala and brainstem. As they become more active, access to the executive brain reduces and the capacity to think, learn and relate effectively is greatly diminished.

A below-the-line workplace threatens organizational success, because employees are functioning from this survival brain. It also invites unwelcome and highly consequential risks, including a psychologically unsafe culture, uncivil behavior, bullying, harassment, and discrimination.



The role of leaders

In an environment where pressured KPIs and continually changing demands are prevalent, leaders can struggle to influence workplace culture and interpersonal dynamics. Leaders increasingly recognize that without attention and focus, the psychological climate can quickly spiral below the line.

However, we are still not capitalizing on this awareness and utilizing the emerging research from neuroscience to harness the best in ourselves and our workplaces.

Although the psychosocial environment is crucial to workplace functioning, it is generally ignored, neglected, and thrown into the “too hard basket.” Workplaces are usually low on psychological literacy, lacking adequate language to describe and discuss the dynamics at play.

It is now urgent and critical that leadership shifts in consciousness to build the sophisticated interpersonal skills necessary to optimize workforce functioning in order to achieve organizational and strategic success. Organizations need to be built on and aligned with the wellbeing of the workforce.

Leaders are in the unique position to steward the workplace culture.

Extensive research from Deloitte and SafeWork Australia highlights the critical role leaders have in determining the behavioral standards of the workplace.

These researchers have also shown that below-the-line behaviors like bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as behaviors like gossiping, bullying, excluding, and other forms of interpersonal incivility have been rising over the past decade.

If leaders tolerate, turn a blind eye, or collude with below-the-line behaviors, they are far more likely to escalate, creating risks for employees, reducing performance and driving poor retention. Even worse if it is the leader who is below the line in their own behavior. They keep their employees operating from fear, stress, and the reptile part of their employees' brains will dominate.

There is no point employing people for their strengths and skills if the workplace creates conditions that actively work against employees utilizing and optimizing their best capacities.

Leadership —————

In my new book, *Leading Above the Line: Applying Neuroscience to Build Psychologically Safe and Thriving Teams*, I provide insights and practical steps in four key areas that leaders can take to lead above the line.

1. Build awareness of the psychological environment:

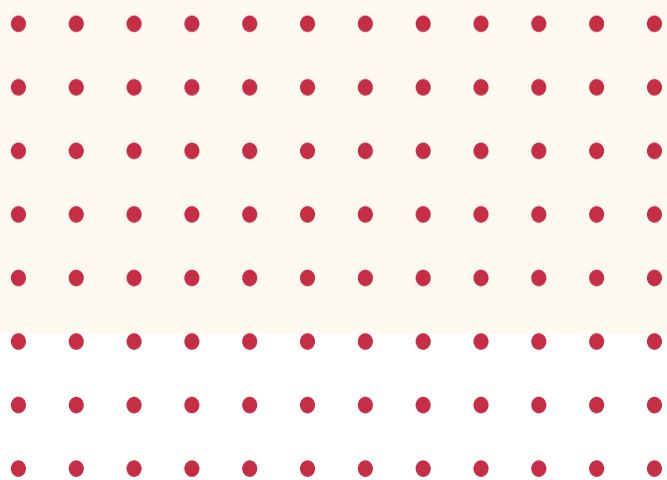
Be aware of the ways interpersonal relationships and behaviors influence and shape the workplace ecosystem. You cannot shape what you cannot see.

2. Lead yourself: So you can be a powerful and positive influence for others. Cultivate self-leadership to optimize your cognitive and psychological agility, performance, and wellbeing. You can't lead others if you can't lead yourself.

3. Lead your employees to shine, fulfill their potential, build on strengths, and feel valued and trusted, while navigating our evolving and complex world. Workplace relationships are pivotal in supporting employees' performance, engagement, and wellbeing.

4. Create a thriving, high-performing team in which team members are buoyed by an optimistic and appreciative climate where it's safe to contribute and learn. Teams need thriving ecosystems, not toxic ego-systems.

The crisis of Covid-19 has provided leaders with a once in a lifetime opportunity of enforced reflection on our workplaces. Many of us have deeply reflected on the importance of the psychological and mental health of our team environment and are challenged by the responsibility of positively influencing this critical aspect in the new era in which we have found ourselves.



Leadership

Establishing the interpersonal and systemic changes needed to help workplaces thrive can be elusive, particularly in this time of great change, uncertainty and complexity.

Organizations and employees both deserve and require the benefits of a psychological environment that enables them to perform at their peak.

Never before have the importance of human relationships and the interpersonal climate we collectively create been more critical to our professional lives and to an organization's success.



Author: Michelle Bihary is a people leadership and workplace resilience expert, author of *Leading Above the Line - applying neuroscience to build psychologically safe and thriving teams*. She works with leaders and teams to function optimally, elevating the interpersonal climate, ensuring performance, teamwork and wellbeing are at their peak. For more information about Michelle's work go to michellebihary.com