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Deliberately Developmental Organizations

Transparency is absent from most work environments. Practitioners of Conscious Capitalism believe that the single greatest factor holding back the culture of American business is lack of transparency. In addition, lack of transparency is the single biggest cause of wasted resources in nearly every company today.

Most people at work, even in high-performing organizations, divert considerable energy every day to a second job that no one has hired them to do: preserving their reputations, putting their best selves forward, and hiding their inadequacies from others and themselves. What would happen if people felt no need to do this second job? What if, instead of hiding their weaknesses, they were comfortable acknowledging and learning from them? What if companies made this possible by creating a culture in which people could see their mistakes not as vulnerabilities but as prime opportunities for personal growth?

The definition of the word conscious is: aware of and responding to one's surroundings; awake. In many business cultures, there is a preference for secrecy in which the only people who know are those who need to know. It is difficult for employees to be aware of and respond to their surroundings when information is deliberately kept from them.

Being transparent, taking time to share thinking behind policies and strategies and engaging the full team in this work will make a great deal of difference. Your team will feel respected and valued, and in turn you will continue to earn their trust.

Feeling respected and valued creates engagement, which makes people more productive, which drives efficiency and innovation. All of these things are very difficult to achieve without a high degree of transparency in an organization.

Unfortunately, there are very few organizations that are committed to developing every one of their people by weaving personal growth into daily work. Two companies stand out: Bridgewater Associates, an East Coast investment firm, and the Decurion Corporation, a California company that owns and manages real estate, movie theaters, and a senior living center. Both had been meeting the definition of a **deliberately developmental organization** for more than 10 years.

These companies operate on the foundational assumptions that adults can grow; that not only is attention to the bottom line and the personal growth of all employees desirable, but the two are interdependent; that both profitability and individual development rely on structures that are built into every aspect of how the company operates; and that people grow through the proper combination of challenge and support, which includes recognizing and transcending their blind spots, limitations, and internal resistance to change. For this approach to succeed, employees (Decurion prefers to call them members) must be willing to reveal their inadequacies at work—not just their business-as-usual, got-it-all-together selves—and the organization must create a trustworthy and reliable community to make such exposure safe.

As you might guess, that isn't easy or comfortable. But by continually working to meet these linked obligations, deliberately developmental organizations may have found a way to steadily improve performance without simply improving what they're currently doing. That's because

progress for their employees means becoming not only more capable and conventionally successful but also more flexible, creative, and resilient in the face of the challenges—for both personal and organizational growth—that these companies deliberately set before them.

Note: This article is an excerpt from a course, Thriving Michigan, that Michelle Dugan (and two board members, Karen Essary and Mark Elliott) are participating in. For more details on the concept of Deliberately Developmental Organizations, contact