How to Know If We're Getting Social Cohesion Right

By Jan Johnson and Jeff Leitner

Jeff: There is a strong case for social cohesion as the new north star — to help us reshape organizations and workplaces for our present cluster of catastrophes. But we can only do it if we can measure social cohesion, find where it's lacking, and know when we're getting it right. And up to now, that's been a real problem for scientists.

They've long tried to measure the cohesion of groups, teams, and organizations with what are called self-reporting questionnaires. But these self-reporting questionnaires — with questions like "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you trust your boss? — are problematic.

First, we don't know how much we trust our boss. And even if we did, we probably don't think about the world on scales of 1 to 5. Second, we would undoubtedly base our answer on all sorts of things that don't have anything to do with trust, like whether we felt appreciated. That's just human nature. Third, we're never sure how honest to be on questions like that, even if we know the survey is anonymous.

Even with all that, the biggest problem for scientists is that self-reports don't actually measure how groups think and feel; they just measure how one member of a group thinks and feels. But teams and organizations aren't just collections of individuals. You can't figure out how an organization works simply by asking each member of the organization how he or she works.

Organizations are complex, dynamic, living things, where what I do and say affects what you do and say and vice versa. Or in stuffy, scientist-speak: cohesion is a relational emergent state that emerges over time as teammates interact.

We need to stop asking about the "I" and figure out how to ask about the "we." Fortunately, there's a new, more effective way to do this. Jan and I have been researching, writing, and touring the country talking about it for the past couple of years and our audiences agree it's helpful.

The answer is unwritten rules. Every organization has dozens or hundreds of unwritten rules that dictate how things in that organization work. I'm not talking about formal policies. I'm talking about the kind of things you would confide to your best friend before he or she starts work with your company. Here are some unwritten rules from organizations we've talked to:

- If the boss can't see you, you're not really working.
- Act like this job is your everything.
- Titles don't reflect who's really in charge.
- The people who go to the bar with the boss get ahead.

Notice that three of the four examples have to do with management. That's not a coincidence. Most unwritten rules have to do with management. That's because unwritten rules are collective beliefs that run counter to formal policy. Let me say that another way because it's important: unwritten rules are what we believe when we don't believe formal policies. While a formal policy might state that the best producers who work hardest get ahead, an unwritten rule might say that the people who go to the bar with the boss get ahead. If that were the formal policy and unwritten rule in your organization, you know which one you'd believe.

That wouldn't make you cynical. It's just that unwritten rules have a bigger influence on us than formal policies do. Formal policies are transmitted through official structures, communicated through proper channels, and packaged in solemn language. And unwritten rules are whispered by our peers, in private conversations, and bundled up with emotion. Of course, we put more stock in unwritten rules; we're people, not machines.

So what does this all have to do with social cohesion? Unwritten rules are the DNA of social cohesion. Unwritten rules tell us whether an organization has good cohesion or not-so-good cohesion. Unwritten rules tell us whether people trust the boss or work well together — far better than a self-reporting questionnaire can. If you want to measure social cohesion, find where it's lacking, and know when you're getting it right, figure out the unwritten rules.

Without these insights, we cannot help our clients strengthen social cohesion.

Jan: Uncovering unwritten rules is a critical tool for strategists and designers.

While we're accustomed to asking leaders how their organizations work, the problem is that leaders don't know unwritten rules in their own organizations. For one, the people in charge play by a different set of rules than everyone else does — whether they know it or not. And two, unwritten rules are usually a response to the formal policies leaders have laid out. We must look to a healthy cross-section of workers for the organization's unwritten rules.

I can't say this strongly enough: finding unwritten rules has to be a part of the needs analysis and programming process. Exploring how workers really work will not only give us their functional requirements, it'll give us profound insights into interdependent behaviors and experiences — and get us much closer to the "we." Without these insights, we cannot help our clients strengthen social cohesion.

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