**"Changing the Atmosphere"**

Becoming a leader that creates a contagious culture that everyone loves

Anyone want to create a contagious culture in their church that everyone loves?

**QUESTION: Describe the most inspiring organization or Church culture you have experienced? How did the senior leaders treat people? How did they impart their vision? How did the people respond?**

When I began Axis Church I had a group of 16 very broken and hurting people. The culture was not healthy for what they had been through had damaged them. They had just been through a climactic Church split and they were all hurting.

In the background 10 months before their Church implosion, God was calling me specifically to ‘focus my heart and attention on my herds and flocks and know the condition of the heart of my flock’ Prov 27:23. So when I met with this group for the first time, I know God had prepared my heart to minister to them. That was what I began Axis Church with. A wonderful group of hurting people. Jen and I were committed to their healing.

I knew I needed to create a new culture for God to work in. A new atmosphere. I didn’t need vision or strategy or goals, I needed a culture.

It’s the senior Pastor’s job to lead the way with this. It’s my goal to create the atmosphere for God to have freedom to work and heal and change lives.

I believe that culture, not vision/strategy is the most powerful factor in an organization. It determines receptivity of people, staff, congregation, members, and it creates the atmosphere for creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, creates a sense of satisfaction in people or deep discouragement. Culture shapes morale, teamwork, effectiveness, and outcomes.

Without a healthy culture forget about vision and strategy.

Vision and strategy focuses on products, services, outcomes, goals, but culture is about people – the most valuable asset of the Church.

There were some Keys to Changing the Culture. The first things I did to turn around our Axis Church culture:

**I focused on Culture before I cast a vision.**

Culture is far more powerful than any vision or strategy. It is hard to put a finger on it because it’s often invisible but it’s there. IT is unnoticed, unspoken, and unexamined, but you feel it in the atmosphere.

Whether its healthy or toxic people will feel it, and if it’s toxic they’ll wake up dead. Our culture needs to be healthy as it will determine how our people respond to the vision and leadership. Is there a culture where trust, respect among the leaders and people leads to a team approach of fulfilling great kingdom goals together? Unfortunately most times culture surfaces in our discussions when we are dealing with negative experiences in the Church. And the problem is that culture is not a quick fix, it’s a long process to change culture. It’s hard to change but it’s very important to create the atmosphere for God to work powerfully and transform the hearts of his people. It’s the most rewarding work to see the culture of your Church become healthy and act as an accelerant to your vision.

You may think your culture is great, but I recommend that you talk to the people who are removed from the leadership and ask them honest questions about what they see, think, and feel about the Church. I do this every week. In fact almost every conversation with folks from Axis I’m asking the honest questions.

Something I did 6 months into the life of Axis was in a prayer meeting, with about 30 people, got the white board, and we talked about our Churches Culture over 2 weeks of meetings. Honestly looking at how we were going and being brutally honest.

When we began Axis it was in a place of brokenness. I felt God show me that he is ‘close to the brokenhearted and heals those who are crushed in spirit’. So from the first time I met with this small group of broken people I began creating the atmosphere and expectation that God was ‘CLOSE’ to them. That he was ‘HEALING’ them.

The areas of culture that I felt led to develop first were:

* Built a pool of love for all to bathe in.
  1. Love the people – be their shepherd
  2. Culture is about people, not about programs, products and services and outcomes.
  3. Encourage them to love each other – they are the most valuable asset of the organization.
  4. Pray for and Expect waves of love from God
* Created a house of prayer
* Lifted up Jesus as the center of everything
* Focused on living out our values
* I never had a vision or strategy. I was content to create an atmosphere for God to work in. And he did! Within 2 years of meeting together our Church has grown to 4 services over 2 campuses and approximately 500 attending on Sunday morning services, with approx. 1000 calling Axis Church their spiritual home. That’s been a true miracle.
* My focus was to teach the core team to do the same. Senior pastors are in the unique position to shape the culture of their teams and churches, but they can’t do it alone. They need their team.

TEAM – I work so closely with my team every day to build culture. Staff members remind each other daily that what we are doing is changing people’s lives. It’s not a job, it’s our calling. We’re not just killing time. Our staff are available to our people, we have open door, and openness to everyone’s ideas. The team get down and do the dirty work, serving, first to arrive, help with the hard work. I speak to my staff every week affirming them in their commitment. I celebrate their successes, and support them in their stresses and struggles. My staff and my people are not there to help me achieve my vision… on the contrary, I am there to love and shepherd them. They have interests, homes, families, and it’s my role to treat them well, and know that I love them.

Before I left yesterday I sent a text to my Church telling them I love them and will miss them while I’m away, and that I’m praying for them everyday. I was overwhelmed with what happened next, and I didn’t expect it, but I received over 90 sms messages in the space of an hour from my Church members replying with the most loving messages. And I can tell you that we are all being prayed for by hundreds of people right now.

That’s a culture which has been created over the past 2 years.

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT CULTURE

1. IT’S A POWERFUL PLATFORM

Even without a grandiose vision, our Church has grown because the culture is clear. If I could explain it in a sentence it’s this, “we focus our heart and attention on our people, and know the condition of their hearts”. This focus has created a safe, healing Church.

I believe the culture of the Church creates the platform for a strong Church. It’s like fertile soil for the Church to grow in.

1. IT’S HARD TO PIN POINT

It’s like the air we breathe, you don’t notice it unless you think about it specifically. Culture is unseen, but it’s felt. It’s hard to explain in words but it’s shaping everything about the Church.

When I go to India next week I will step into a different culture. I will feel it, but it’s hard to explain. You know when you go into a healthy culture or a toxic culture.

Sam Chand says, “toxic culture is like carbon monoxide: you don’t see or smell it, but you wake up dead.”

1. PEOPLE WILL RESPOND TO IT

Ask youself 2 questions:

Would I want someone I love to work in my Church or would I want to invite a friend into my Church?

AND Do I really want to work or serve in my Church?

Depending on the culture of your Church will determine how you answer those questions.

**TWO WAYS TO CHANGE MY CHURCH’S CULTURE?**

The following questions are paraphrased from Sam Chand’s book, “Cracking your Church’s Culture Code”.

1. **Determine what is killing your Culture – what do you need to detox?**

**Stagnant culture**

* Lost energy
* People just seen as production units
* Staff members just tolerate each other
* Only heros are the top leaders
* A lack of trust, respect and loyalty among the team
* Complaining becomes normal
* Leadership team are not happy with declining
* People become clock watchers instead of passionate

**Discouraging Culture**

* All about the top people
* Everyone is just trying to survive the power struggles
* Trying to protect themselves from hurt from top leaders
* Top leaders are authoritarian and threatening
* When leaders set vision no-one really cares because of lack of respect

**Toxic Culture**

* Leaders have created a closed system – incestual
* Individual rights are surrendered to top leaders
* Fear becomes a dominating factor in the Church
* Leaders delegate responsibility but fail to give authority
* Creativity and risk taking have vanished
* Sin enters into organization

In summary – Unrealistic demands on people; Blaming others instead of taking responsibility; Feeling threatened by others’ success; Power struggles; dishonesty; creating an atmosphere of fear; Using people instead of valuing them; Unclear vision, strategy , goals and values; a lack of authenticity.

1. **Focus on the keys of an INSPIRING Culture.**

**Inspiring Cultures**

* Leaders give clear direction but are not authoritarian
* Leaders value input from everyone.
* Authority is decentralized
* Trust and respect is part of the culture
* People believe what they do really matters and have a great sense of purpose, and they are involved in something important and bigger than themselves.
* They are high but realistic expectations. Set high goals, train people, give them the resources they need, stay together and encourage them to succeed.
* Creativity is rewarded, and failure is viewed as a stepping stone of growth. Failure is essential to growth.
* Communication flows up and down the organization
* Top leaders retrain or replace ministry leaders who can’t provide a positive work environment for their teams.
* There is a powerful synergy between relationships and organizational goals.
* The Church invests significantly into building a healthy church culture.
* Leaders regularly celebrate success throughout the organization and they even celebrate those who leave and find success elsewhere.
* The Church is a magnet for job applicants. They have their pick of the best and brightest. People want to be there.
* The overall atmosphere is very positive.
* Unresolved issues are dealt with promptly.
* People don’t feel the need to defend their turf, because the team are likeminded and supportive of each other’s roles and goals.
* Difficult decisions are faced, not avoided, and addressed expeditiously.
* The Church enjoys are strong reputation, which naturally is attractive to everyone.

Sam Chand – Church growth consultant uses the following 7 Keys of Culture:

**C**ontrol

**U**nderstanding

**L**eadership

**T**rust

**U**nafraid

**R**esponsive

**E**xecution

Let’s ask ourselves some questions in each of these important areas:

**CONTROL** – People function best when they are given control and responsibility, with accountability to fulfill the task. On the other spectrum if control is centralized on one person it creates a bottleneck.

* Are the lines of control and responsibility clear on your team?
* Do people know what’s expected of them?
* Would you say there is too much control from the top on your team, too little, or just the right amount?

**UNDERSTANDING** – Every person on the team needs to have a clear grasp of the vision, his or her role, the gifts and contributions of the team members, and the way the team functions.

* Is the vision for your team both God sized and specific?
* Do people on team feel understood, valued, and directed to give their best each day?
* Do most lines of communication on the team flow from the leader or is their cross pollination?

**LEADERSHIP** – Healthy teams are pipelines of leadership development. They seek to discover, develop and deploy a pool of rising leaders with roles that enflame their hearts, challenge them to excel and propel the Church to new heights.

* What kind of resources (time, money, personnel) are devoted to leadership development?
* How would you describe your leadership pipeline in your Church?
* When times are tough what happens to leadership development?

**TRUST** – Mutual trust among members is the glue that makes everything possible. Without it, a team quickly disintegrates into a gang of people protecting their turf and forming alliances. Trust is important up, down and across the Church. Trust grows in an environment that is honest, open, and transparent.

* In what ways is trust being built or eroded on your team?
* How is failure treated on your team?
* How does the team handle gossip? Are there clear guidelines?
* Do you have an honest, open and transparent environment?

**UNAFRAID** – Teams that take courage are convinced that what they are doing counts for eternity and they are committed to and believe in the people serving on their team.

* Do you have examples of great courage on your team?
* How does courageous action effect the team spirit?
* In what ways is walking courageously encouraged?

**RESPONSIVE** – Teams with healthy culture are sensitive to open doors and alert to closing doors. They develop times of collaboration and consistent processes of feedback to stay focused on where the Holy Spirit is leading.

* Does your teams current organizational system (delegating, feedback, collaboration) foster responsiveness or hinder it?
* How often do little things like returning phone calls and emails fall through the crack?

**EXECUTION** – Consistent failure to follow through on action plans or decisions that were made will poison the atmosphere. Healthy churches follow through on decisions which is a function of clarity, roles and responsibility, and the system of accountability.

* How are people held accountable on your team?
* How do team members give feedback to each other about their performance and communication?

**IN CONCLUSION:**

Ask yourelves…

* Re culture, in what areas is your team doing well? What needs attention?
* What is your role in changing and shaping your team’s culture?
* What will it take to get buy-in from the whole team?