Lessons from the Bacteria: How Good Culture Trumps Bad Leadership

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Posted to Ethics Newsline, December 6, 2010

Last week, just as scientists announced the discovery of a bacterium that lives on arsenic, I was talking to an executive whose company had endured a major management upheaval. Her firm, known for its integrity, had weathered the recession well, but then a group of high-flying executives had been hired into top positions. They thought they could stamp a flashier, less principled way of thinking onto the company. But they never fit in. After an exhausting and unsettling stretch, they were expelled, allowing the company to return to its roots.

To her, the whole experience seemed like an unnecessary detour. Except for the misfits' ultimate departure, she found it hard to find any positive lessons in that story. I saw it very differently. To me, this was a narrative about organizational culture triumphing over charismatic personality. In an age fascinated by "tone at the top," this was a story of "tone in the ranks." In an era cowed by the claim that senior leadership has all the power and influence, this tale proved that an ethically charged culture can resist and finally spit out the corrosive influence of wrong leadership.

Trying to help her make sense of her experience, I recalled my undergraduate days as a summer intern in a bacteriology laboratory. Granted, we were looking for something far more mundane than an arsenic eater. Our goal, as I remember it, was to find a bacterium that could use phosphate as a source of energy.

To isolate such a wee beast, we created what bacteriologists call an enrichment culture. First, we filled a flask with a carefully chosen cocktail of nutrients, rich with phosphates but thin on the more ordinary sources of energy. Next, we drove over to the local sewage treatment plant to get some raw effluent — useful because it contained a huge number of different strains of bacteria. Then we put a few drops of sewage into the flask.

The results were thoroughly predictable. The bacteria that loved phosphates grew like Jack's beanstalk. Those that needed some other energy source struggled to stay alive. Before long our flask contained hardly anything but the phosphate lovers. Why? Because we deliberately had enriched for them, and they had prospered obligingly.

So it is in an organizational culture. Each culture is different, with a unique array of executive nutrients and managerial conditions. But if a key attribute of our culture is a strong presence of ethical values, we'll see two thoroughly predictable results:

- **Ethics attracts ethics.** Our culture will naturally attract people who are already ethical. A culture enriched for integrity draws to it a like-minded set of moral thinkers. As business schools increasingly insert ethics into their curriculums, it stands to reason that their

graduates increasingly will gravitate toward companies where they don't have to check their personal values at the door each morning and adopt some lower set for use within the workplace. And as high-integrity middle managers seek career changes as they advance toward the top, they too will be drawn to similar cultures.

- **As in flasks, so in firms.** These ethical actors, as they grow into their careers, will naturally crowd out other strains that don't much care about integrity. The corporate culture, like the flask, may not immediately produce a pure state of ethical executives. But the proportions quickly will become significant. And with each wave of hiring and promotion, the ethics enrichment will become stronger — increasingly marginalizing the unethical actors, who will either wither away or bail out.

Which brings us to the sewage. There's a great deal of good will among executives who genuinely long to create cultures of integrity. But they're afraid. Will their culture be able to stand up against the competitive pressures around them? Will their purity be safe in a world tainted by managerial sewage? To survive intact, must they create an almost surgical isolation from the rest of the world? Don't they risk being tainted by every outside contact — every hire, every customer, every vendor?

If this were a metaphor about stasis, yes: Their beautiful white shirts slowly would become soiled. But this is a metaphor about growth, change, and dynamic expansion. What protects a culture of integrity is the nature of the nutrients within it. Keep the mix enriched with ethics, and whatever loves integrity will prosper. Compromise that enrichment — add just a little dishonesty, disrespect, irresponsibility — and you'll begin to attract the bacterial personalities that thrive on those nutrients.

In the static metaphor, such compromise is inevitable, and the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. In the dynamic metaphor, purity begets even more purity, and the perfect drives everything else to the dark edges of the Petri dish. It may take a while, and it even may get smelly. But it explains how good culture triumphs over bad leadership.