



# Follow the Leader

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CHANGE COMES FROM THE TOP DOWN



By Brian Wasyliv and Matthew Badrov

**H**R professionals deal with myriad workplace issues on a regular basis, including chronic absenteeism, poor performance, persistent employee complaints, allegations of harassment or a “poisoned work environment.” While no workplace is immune, more often than not these issues stem, at least in part, from a weakness in the organization’s culture.

Just as a poor organizational culture can harm a business, a strong and healthy one can yield great dividends. By minimizing workplace discontent, and enhancing positive employee relations, a strong organizational culture is almost certain to increase employee retention and engagement and, ultimately, productivity.

Organizational culture is made up of its members’ shared values, beliefs and behaviours; it also guides individual decisions and actions at the unconscious level. As a result, it can have a potent effect on a company’s well-being and success.

# workplace culture

## HOW IS AN ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE CREATED?

There is a common misconception that an organization's culture is defined by its policies. While it is true that a workplace policy can guide behaviour and impact organizational culture, the much more important impact is made by the organization's leadership team. An effective leader will engender employee trust and engagement, whereas an ineffective leader will almost always provoke the opposite response.

## WHAT MAKES A GREAT LEADER?

The following is an interactive exercise (originally created by Kenneth Blanchard) we have conducted with clients seeking

to effect a change in their organizational culture. It illustrates the magnitude of a leadership's influence on organizational culture and highlights the qualities that make a leader great.

Begin by writing down the name of the best boss you have ever had. This is the person for whom you most enjoyed working.

Now think about why you chose this person. What makes this person the best boss you ever had? Was she a good listener? Did she care? Was she compassionate? Did your best boss motivate and stand up for you? Did she have a great sense of humour?

Next, think about how you felt about your job when you were working for this person. What impact did those feelings have on your work performance and overall experience in the workplace?

Our guess is that you felt inspired, motivated, excited, happy, challenged, engaged or all of the above. You may have even enjoyed going to work or felt like you were a part of something special.

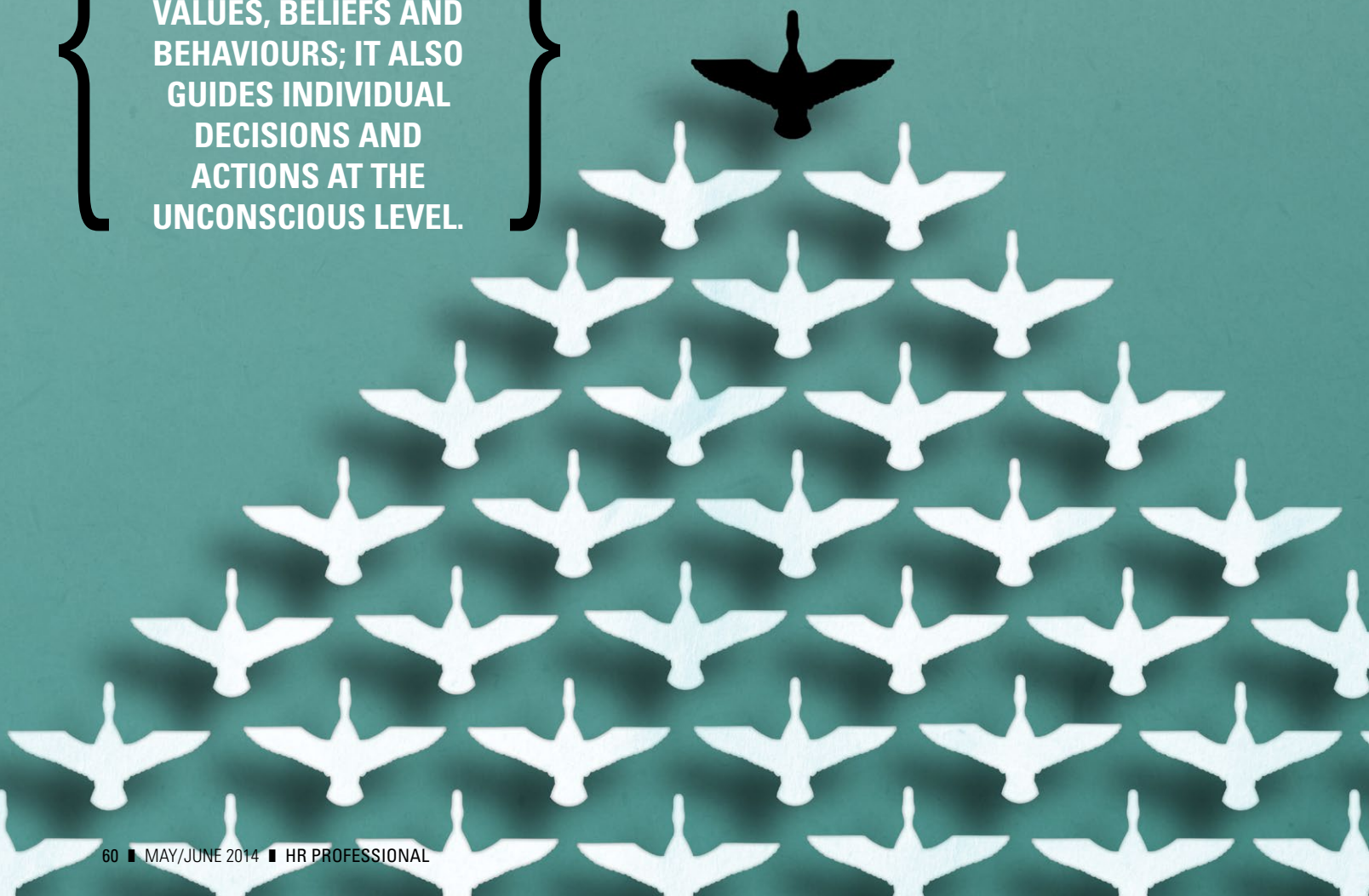
Now consider how each employee in your current workplace would respond if asked to participate in this exercise. How many of them would write down the name of a "boss" in your workplace? How many would name you?

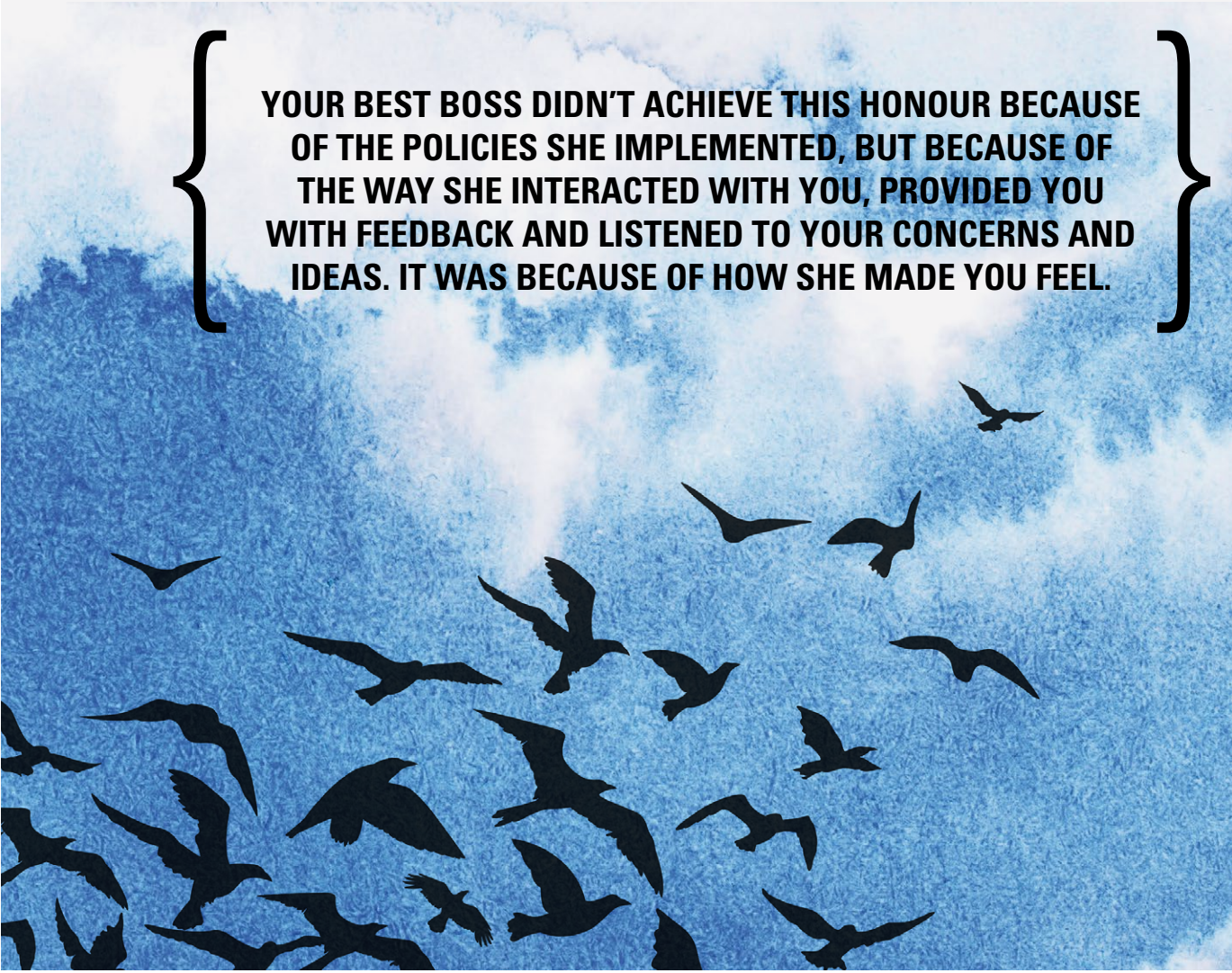
## BEING THE BEST BOSS

The "best boss" exercise is powerful because it illustrates the impact of leadership on workplace morale, but also the pivotal role leadership plays in creating an organization's culture. Your best boss didn't achieve this honour because of the

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**YOUR BEST BOSS DIDN'T ACHIEVE THIS HONOUR BECAUSE OF THE POLICIES SHE IMPLEMENTED, BUT BECAUSE OF THE WAY SHE INTERACTED WITH YOU, PROVIDED YOU WITH FEEDBACK AND LISTENED TO YOUR CONCERNS AND IDEAS. IT WAS BECAUSE OF HOW SHE MADE YOU FEEL.**

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policies she implemented, but because of the way she interacted with you, provided you with feedback and listened to your concerns and ideas. It was because of how she made you feel.

So, how can you and the rest of your leadership team achieve the status of best boss?

While every workplace is different and managerial styles vary, incorporating the following practices into your organization's managerial approach will go a long way toward helping you and your team become the best bosses:

**Build relationships:** Demonstrate you care about employees as individuals, not merely commodities, by inquiring about their families and remembering personal details they share with you. Instead of asking, "How was your weekend," which generally leads to a one-word reply, start a conversation by asking open-ended

questions like, "What did you do over the weekend?" You'll be surprised about how much you can learn.

**Be transparent:** Communicate with employees about decisions that affect them and explain the reasons for those decisions. They may still be upset about a particular decision but their response will almost certainly be more negative if they feel the decision was made arbitrarily or without any regard for its impact on them.

**Empower employees:** Ask employees for suggestions about how to resolve operational problems, increase efficiencies and respond to new market demands, etc. Soliciting ideas from employees will not only improve engagement by making employees feel part of the team, but invariably will yield creative ideas based on the employees' experience.

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**Be receptive:** Listen to concerns raised by employees and, where you can, do your best to address them. A concern may seem trivial to you but it likely isn't to the employee who raised it. This doesn't mean you must cater to an employee's every request. However, a good manager sincerely listens to employees and considers options to address their concerns.

**Be consistent and fair:** Treat employees fairly. Nothing builds resentment like disciplining one employee for arriving five

organization. However, changing an organization's culture is not easy, nor will it happen overnight. Meaningful and sustained change for the better requires commitment, unequivocal buy-in and modeling of good behaviour from the leadership team.

In today's competitive market, it can be difficult to complete even the most essential operational tasks, let alone nurture organizational culture. However, if you and your management team commit

yourselves to effect positive organizational change your business and employees will thank you. ■

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minutes late for a shift while giving another employee a ten-minute grace period. While it can be difficult to separate personal feelings from management decisions, it is critical to do so.

**Address issues promptly:** The annual (or semi-annual) performance review should not be the first time an employee learns about an ongoing performance issue. While conversations about performance can be awkward and unpleasant, nothing undermines trust like failing to raise serious and ongoing concerns until the employee's formal performance review.

**Recognize achievements:** Celebrate successes! We have a tendency to point out how employees can improve, and sometimes forget to acknowledge what they are doing well.

## COMMIT TO CHANGE

Creating a strong and healthy organizational culture is a laudable goal and when achieved, is almost certain to benefit the