



Transform Aid
INTERNATIONAL
For a world without poverty

Episode 2: Culture

Impact Leaders

Leigh Hatcher: Hello and welcome to Impact Leaders - for a world without poverty, supporting and equipping business leaders to grow their business, give purpose to their people, and make a transformational impact on global poverty. I'm Leigh Hatcher. In recent years we've heard much about the culture of organisations and how that culture can have a huge impact for good or for ill. So how can you change a culture to have an impact for good? How can organisations and the people who work in them take on a new culture and respond to major changes in our society where they actually want to make a difference to our world ethics and doing good really matter to them. John Hickey has seen cultures change for good and real transformation. As a result, John is CEO of Transform Aid International. He's had decades of experience specializing in organisational leadership and the development and implementation of vision and strategy. John, thanks so much for joining us.

John Hickey: Thank you. Leigh.

Leigh Hatcher: So from the breadth of your experience, what are the dynamics that are at work in how business culture develops at first?

John Hickey: Trying to understand what is the organisation, what is the organisation trying to achieve in terms of it's impact? What do you want the people in that organisation to be and to do together to achieve that desired impact? So culture isn't a uniform thing. No, there are differently mechanics to bring it together, but it's much more about an art, or if I dare use that quote from the castle, it's the vibe.

Leigh Hatcher: Well that's when what sounds like a good culture develops, but there are adverse cultures also. What are the dynamics involved in them?

John Hickey: Well, I think when there's a vacuum of leadership is a key example. So often I've seen where where that occurs. What happens is certain people will try to rise into the leadership role to fill that vacuum unofficially of course, but maybe assuming power that they don't quite have and that's when you start to get confusion. Yeah. So it really does take strong leadership and leadership isn't necessarily about totally being at the front. It is about being collaborative with your colleagues at all levels across the organisation, but it is also trying to role model and set what you think are the standards for how people should operate in the organisation and I think it comes back to a core. It's a core of people understanding why they're there and how they are going to operate while they're there.

Leigh Hatcher: And often as we've discussed in one of our conversations, the leader will be behind the group encouraging them and listening, not necessarily out front all the time.

John Hickey: Absolutely. I personally see leadership as a word, but how you apply it is sometimes you are behind the group. You're beside the group. You're within the group and sometimes you are in front of the group depending on the context and the situation and I think a leader needs to be very adaptable. Sometimes a leader does have to be directive, particularly in a crisis scenario, but a lot of times it's in that space where you're just one of the team letting other people step up into leadership, feeling empowered. Sometimes it's alongside just coaching. Other times it's behind encouraging all sorts of different roles that that a leader plays.

Leigh Hatcher: The more I've learned about leadership and there are many aspects to it. Of course. As you say, the more I think empowerment is one of the keys to it. Being able to surrender power, almost to other people to see them flourish.

John Hickey: Yes. I think it's one of the most uncomfortable positions to have in an organisation. When you're the leader that you feel that you're the only person generating the energy and the ideas.

Leigh Hatcher: It's pretty lonely, pretty tiring.

John Hickey: That's right. It's not sustainable. You need to find people who will take ownership themselves, will be inspired and have the capacity to take on ideas and move forward with them in a good collaborative process. One of the things I love with Transform Aid International is that I am constantly challenged by high quality people who have ideas, who are prepared to debate them and we but still want to do that in a spirit of being collaborative around doing it. Where we are today as an organisation is not about one person. It's about a whole bunch of people really taking ownership and passion for what the organisation achieves.

Leigh Hatcher: How have you seen people change in their expectations of what it means to work for a particular organisation John?

John Hickey: I think a culture is is an interesting thing and by that, I mean your culture can be around people just feeling mercenary about what they do. You've got a job to achieve, it's about getting a profit. You're trying to maximize that profit, minimize the costs or that is a standard business practice, but a lot of that is really wrapped around short termism and often bonuses, incentives are really set up around those short term results. Long term successful companies and there is enormous amount of research that backs this up are ones that think more holistically about the whole environment. In which they operate, they think about all the participants from the customer right through to the supplier, whether it's local or international, and how are they going, how are they thriving or not in the whole space and thinking carefully about how to do that. Well so that what happens over time is a far more sustainable result and people feeling good beyond just that short term incentive, feeling good about what they're a part of.

Leigh Hatcher: And that's a pretty new thing when you look at the totality of business experience.

John Hickey: Totally. Once again, I, I shouldn't focus too much on particular industries, but often you see that the instruments used to try and get people to perform are very blunt instruments and they're not very encouraging instruments. It's more stick rather than carrot. From what I've seen in my own experience in the corporate world, but then also through various other things that I've experienced or seen over the years, those organisations hit a point where

that's not sustainable. They hit crisis point because people can't keep doing it. Whether it's huge staff turnover or whether it's a certain ethical or moral boundaries that get crossed as a result of a behavior that's around people getting desperate to perform rather than feeling like I really enjoy being a part of this organisation and contributing to it. These sorts of things are ultimately unhealthy.

Leigh Hatcher: So here's the big question, how do you go about changing that kind of culture?

John Hickey: It takes courage. It really takes courage. It takes the foresight to say, if we keep going the way we're going, that's not going to end well. And it's hard these days in the bigger end of town in the corporate world where CEOs often have an average life of two to three years in their roles. So you see this huge turnover of the key person trying to impact culture. But once again, the long term leaders, the ones that have been able to have that foresight and try to build a culture where people feel engaged, empowered and feel like they're part of a team.

Leigh Hatcher: It's often going to be a big shift of culture though, isn't it? So that's where the courage comes in I suppose?

John Hickey: That's right, because often you've got boards, you've got shareholders, you've got other groups that are expecting results.

Leigh Hatcher: Or liking the dividends.

John Hickey: They love the dividends. So that's in the public company sector, but it can be private shareholders or whatever. And I think often private companies get it better because they're so invested in the business. They're not just a mercenary, so to speak. They're really invested in the business and the really savvy ones get this and that's why you see in the private sector often a lot more profit sharing, for example. And longer term incentives and other things that really promote loyalty and engagement in their teams.

Leigh Hatcher: Will this change of culture often demand a new leader or if it's the same leader, how on earth can they make that shift, that culture?

John Hickey: Well, that's a very, very personalized question. I think if somebody has a certain set of character traits and driven a certain way that's hard for them to change and that's where courage comes in. Emotional intelligence, that's an often used term these days to me your question is right around emotional intelligence. How self aware are people, how are they taking feedback, criticism, how are they thinking through who they are and what they stand for,

what are the principles they should operate? I do, they need to recalibrate. Sometimes it's tweaking. Sometimes it can be more radical, but the majority of people tend often not to really invest in themselves that way. But to me that's the real secret sauce. That's the x factor in longterm sustainable, successful leaders is that they prepared to use emotional intelligence and to be self aware and self critical in a healthy way.

Leigh Hatcher: And they can be guided by that by experts as well. You say this process culture change is more of an art than a mechanical exercise. Please explain.

John Hickey: There are certainly mechanics that have to happen. There are processes that you can have, but it's something we've worked through in our organisation in the last few years. I lead an organisation that's for one of a better term is a social justice oriented organisation. People are committed to a cause. They might start, here taking a job, but it becomes a cause for them. We've got some people believe it's their life's mission to be working in our sort of organisation. So they are committed, they're beyond committed and they don't necessarily trust leaders to lead them all the time.

Leigh Hatcher: That's often a challenge.

John Hickey: It's very much a challenge. They have a need to be engaged with what's going on and want to provide input to it. So the key for me in this space is trust. I have to work on building trust. It's not about building friends, it's not about being a nice guy. It's about trust that they know that I will act in a way that is in the best interest of the organisation and our stakeholders and what we're trying to achieve but is fair and that they are listened to. They have a voice and they can participate appropriately in the direction of the organisation that we're going.

Leigh Hatcher: Tell us about some of your experience in the world of business where you've seen the need for cultural change and actually seen it happen.

John Hickey: Well, an organisation I've got to lead a number of years ago was really in a bit of a mess. It was an iconic organisation brand wise, but it had really slipped in terms of market share. The staff were mainly longterm people, but the culture had been a bullying culture. So people tended to largely do the job but weren't really committed to doing it well. And it was largely out of fear. It's very much a stick driven approach. And so it started with me just going and getting to know people, getting to know about their family, their life, their passions about things as well as their jobs

and just genuinely really trying to understand them a little bit, care for them, and consistently do that. Go back and be able to just talk about them. Remember their names.

Leigh Hatcher: What drove you in that? So, is this an ulterior motive or what's at work here?

John Hickey: I think in any meaningful relationship you have to really start by getting to know people and show an interest in them. Is that manipulative?

Leigh Hatcher: It's a bit unique at the moment, but um, I mean there's genius in it really.

John Hickey: Yes. I think it can be harder for introverted people and may need to be a little bit more practiced to do that. But I feel it's essential. I find you can build enormous goodwill, that simple principle people won't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Leigh Hatcher: There's genius in that. So what was the result? So was it all motherhood, everybody's liking each other, or did it actually mean much for the business?

John Hickey: Well, I think when you go in to a place that has a big need for change, you have to establish trust early. But know that not everybody will want to go on the journey. Yes, it's a given. Not everybody will go on the journey. They want to protect their agenda, what they're comfortable with. So inevitably there were a few people that just found it all too hard. They felt threatened, whereas most felt, absolutely excited to be finally part of something that was moving forward and positive. And it worked in terms of business very quickly. We achieved record amounts of business in all our core areas. We totally changed our advertising. We rebuilt the image of the organisation publicly, and we brought in selectively a few people from outside the organisation who had expertise to work with the people. So it wasn't about what I see sometimes is I'll clear out the old putt in the new, we encourage the old said you want to be a part of the journey going forward will help equip you to be a part of that journey. So that helped with trust as well. A lot of these people had talent and desire, they had great attitude, they needed help and the whole thing came together beautifully.

Leigh Hatcher: All of this may involve advocacy for change, which is very much part of the work of Transform Aid International. So how do you go about advocacy? Big Picture and small picture. I mean maybe even just one on one.

John Hickey: Maybe start with a small picture. So if I think inside an organisation, if people don't feel like they have a voice, you've got a problem. But it's also managing expectations around that. So what is a reasonable way to have a voice and create those avenues for people to have a voice, to be offering ideas to say this isn't quite right. We could do all this better. Or you know, a whole bunch of other issues if people are participating in wanting to make a place better and they're advocating for it. And the channels are there, that are just about the ones with the squeakiest wheels or the loudest voices doing the advocacy. I think you've got a good formula going forward.

Leigh Hatcher: Getting back to empowerment, there's a direct correlation between advocacy, I think, and empowerment.

John Hickey: Yes, absolutely. Once again, in our work that we see around the world, uh, we embed advocacy in programming work in the field because for a lot of people, they've never known how to talk to local government officials to get access to rights for things. And when they are educated, they're trained, they're empowered, and they're taught how to go and speak to appropriate influencers in their local community and up to a regional level and, and they start getting results. That's huge to see people that couldn't even feed themselves and their family three, four years before now actually sitting in regional committee bodies and really influencing change, not just for themselves, but a very open approach to doing it for their whole communities because they learned a bit about advocacy is just transformative.

Leigh Hatcher: Yes. Give me a practical example. How have you seen that culture change, that advocacy at work, which has improved the lives of people, improve the lives of communities, even societies?

John Hickey: Well, let me try a couple of examples. One being people out in the field themselves in communities achieving change. So I think about a country like Nepal where there's all sorts of complications in a country like that and deep poverty right across the nation. And yet you see communities that we've been involved with over the years, really thriving where people step into leadership, set up their own savings associations where people can get loans for micro enterprises or health needs and even sometimes getting counter funding from government bodies to help support that over time. So in each country, in each region, it can be very different. There's more resources in some places and less than others. But usually the starting point is that people in communities don't have access to it and they don't know how to have access to this. And just helping them learn those pathways. If a community can raise x amount of rupee and then they can

partner with government who will give them a similar amount of matching amount. That's a beautiful leveraging exercise. And you actually see communities thriving. You see these businesses emerge, you see full employment developing in the area, no signs of poverty, healthy people, children going through to finish their high school and going on to university all because resource is created through people being empowered and knowing their rights. So a rights based approach is important here and that affects big change over time.

Leigh Hatcher: I know this is not about you, but what's it do for you as you lead this work and as you see it happening on the ground, and I know you don't do it for yourself, but how does it impact on you personally?

John Hickey: As a kid, I don't know why it was in me, but I had a father who was a really community minded person and it just got to me. I saw what he did. He didn't talk about it. He just role modeled it and I really set this vision for my life even before I was a teenager that I wanted to make a positive difference. I wanted to leave people in a better place. I know sounds a bit corny, but it was, it was just something in me and even though I went through university really following that whole belief, then I found myself in the banking world of all places and I thought what on earth happened here, and there's a long story around that, but what I did was I developed the skills around leadership and change and strategy and how to make organisations work to come to a place in leadership where I can actually really have a key influencing role, not only in Australia but globally to facilitate change in people's lives. And it's not just about me. I'm part of a big ecosystem of people doing this. It is beyond a privilege. It is a very humbling, exciting, problematic and challenging thing to be doing, but you know, for those people that are listening that go, you know, am I doing something that really energizes me and makes me feel like I'm making a positive difference? I can say you can do that from whatever context you're in. When I was in the business world and I had the opportunity to lead large numbers of people, always in the back of my mind was how I could make a positive difference for people. And now doing it here is a different way and it's probably a more obvious way. I just feel privileged being able to do this

Leigh Hatcher: And you're an absolute inspiration and I know it's not about you. John, thank you so much for your great work leading this wonderful organisation and thanks for joining us.

John Hickey: Thank you so much, Leigh

Leigh Hatcher:

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