RYP Quarterly

Nice vs. Winning

The Culture Shift Senior Leaders Can't Ignore

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RYP QUARTERLY

A winning team culture prioritises the pursuit of excellence, continuous improvement, and achievement. There is a focus on setting ambitious goals, challenging the status quo, and the encouragement of new ideas for improvement. Key is an ability to execute plans well in an aligned and consistent manner, which leads to an environment of innovation, accountability, and transparency of performance. This can lead to a more demanding and high-pressure culture, which can be offset with a team commitment to collaboration, support, and co-designed problem solving.

In boardrooms and strategy days around the World, the word "culture" is tossed around like confetti. Everyone wants a "great culture." But when you dig a little deeper, many leaders confuse nice with winning, mistaking surface-level harmony for true high performance. It's time to draw a clear line between a nice team culture and a winning team culture, because the difference is costing organisations more than they realise.

All winning teams are dissatisfied with the status quo

THE ILLUSION OF "NICE"

A nice culture is polite. It's friendly. People smile in meetings. There's no yelling, no conflict, and everyone's "happy," at least on the surface.

But here's the catch: niceness often masks avoidance. Hard conversations are sidestepped. Underperformance is tolerated. Feedback is sugar-coated or withheld altogether. Decisions get diluted by consensus. Accountability? Shared, until no one really owns anything.

In these environments, teams may look cohesive, but they lack the grit and edge to push into exceptional territory. They don't challenge each other. They don't move fast. They don't grow. Staff never do the 1%ers that make the difference between mediocrity and excellence.

Niceness feels good. But it rarely wins.

WHAT WINNING CULTURE REALLY LOOKS LIKE

A winning culture isn't always comfortable, but it's clear, direct, and fiercely committed to progress. It's built on trust, but not the fragile kind that crumbles under pressure. It's the trust that says, "We can challenge each other directly, because we know we're all aligned, and here to win or achieve what we have planned to do"

A WINNING CULTURE SYMPTOMS:

The key attributes of a winning culture include:

1. **An unrelenting focus on results, trends, and the fulfilment of goals and objectives.** Facts and lived experiences are treated as the inconvenient truth!
2. **Accountability and performance are linked** to ensure transparency, so the team can offer assistance quickly when required.
3. **Resilience and adaptability are part of what good teams do.** Setbacks are treated as inevitable, so learnings can be used as feedback to problem solve and respond as one team. Unity, alignment, and agility are key team qualities in any successful team.
4. **"Good, better, best" mindset and thinking.** This is all part of a continuous improvement discipline and culture, which is drummed into teams that excel.
5. **Feedback is treated as a gift, not a threat.** Communication is safe, open, honest, and transparent without fear of retribution. The key is to provide feedback respectfully in the right spirit with good intent.

A winning culture isn't about being ruthless. It's about being real. Winning cultures aren't devoid of kindness, but good manners are expected, being respectful is at the heart of how people behave, but teams just don't let kindness become an excuse for comfort or complacency.

Pollyanna Syndrome

There is a syndrome called "Pollyanna Syndrome" which can present in nice teams. It refers to an overly optimistic or naively positive approach to situations. The name refers to the fictional character Pollyanna created by Eleanor Porter, who maintained a positive outlook to every situation, no matter the circumstance. In a "Pollyanna Culture:

- There is an avoidance of negativity – positivity reigns supreme.
- People who challenge the status quo are unwelcome and considered "toxic."
- There is an emphasis on the need to be positive, and not raise negatives.
- There will be a dismissal of realistic concerns – so conflict is avoided at all costs.
- Decision-makers ignore or are reluctant to address concerns and problems.
- There is resistance to any change, as it is deemed disruptive.
- There is little to no resilience when things get tough.

THE REAL COST OF "NICE"

Let's get practical. What does a nice culture actually cost your business?

1. **Mediocrity becomes the ceiling:** When no one's pushed, challenged, or stretched, people coast. You get B-grade output from potentially A-grade talent, thus mediocre performance becomes the norm.
2. **Top performers walk:** High achievers don't stick around in cultures where underperformance is tolerated, and excellence goes unrewarded. They'll leave for places where they're challenged to grow.
3. **Speed suffers:** Nice cultures lean toward consensus, often stalling progress. Decisions get revisited endlessly to keep everyone happy, and the organisation slows to a crawl.
4. **Accountability evaporates:** When conflict is taboo and everyone's feelings come first, accountability turns into blame deflection. Outcomes suffer.

WINNING ISN'T CRUEL — IT'S CLEAR

Here's the misunderstanding: Many leaders believe that a winning culture is harsh, cutthroat, or cold. It's not. In fact, the best winning cultures are incredibly human, but with a clarity and conviction that nice cultures lack. They are environments where people:

- Know exactly what's expected.
- People believe in the purpose of the organisation, so they are purpose-driven
- Provide timely feedback on how the team and organisation are tracking.
- Feel they are supported but are held to account.
- Are psychologically safe, so people feel safe to speak up and be challenged.
- Take pride in high standards, performance is acknowledged, and feel a sense of progress not just harmony.

In a winning culture, people feel energised, not coddled. Where work has meaning, not just meetings. Where tension, when it arises, is a sign of commitment, not conflict.

THE LEADERSHIP SHIFT

So how do senior leaders or business owners start shifting from nice to winning?

1. Set and protect standards. Define what "great" looks like. Be crystal clear on expectations. And protect those standards relentlessly, even if it ruffles feathers. Disciplines and standards must be endorsed and enforced relentlessly by leaders.
2. Lead with feedback. Make feedback a daily norm, not an annual ritual. Model it yourself. Be specific, timely, and direct, always grounded in achievement, progress, and the desired culture (mindsets and behaviours) and standards (disciplines, systems, outcomes)
3. Value truth over comfort. Treat feedback as a gift! Any feedback is good feedback. Stop sugar-coating poor performance. Embrace honest conversations, even when they're awkward, because they should be safe to have, so they do not become difficult conversations. If something isn't working, call it out early.
4. Reward outcomes, not just effort. Being busy isn't the same as delivering results. Recognise people for real impact, not just participation. Being proactive, solution-focused, and following something through to the end should be the expected norm, not a one-off event!

5. Invest in psychological safety, the real kind. Safety isn't about avoiding discomfort. It's about creating an environment where people can speak freely, take risks, and challenge ideas without fear. That includes the freedom to fail fast and to be held accountable.

6. Be consistent. Culture doesn't shift with one strategy day or pep talk. It shifts when leaders walk the talk, every day, in every meeting, in every decision. It is the little things done each day by leaders that shape team culture.

FROM CULTURE FIT TO CULTURE CONTRIBUTION

Another trap of "nice" cultures is the obsession with "cultural fit." Too often, it becomes code for sameness, people who look, think, and behave alike.

Winning cultures aren't built on fit. They're built on diversity and contribution. They seek people who challenge the status quo, who bring different perspectives, who care enough to question. That's where innovation lives. That's where progress happens.

NICE CULTURES LOOK GOOD ON PAPER. WINNING CULTURES BUILD LEGACY.

At a glance, nice cultures win awards. They're easy to promote on social media. They photograph well at team offsites. They aspire to be an "employer of choice" over being seen as an organisation that achieves superior performance.

Winning cultures consistently innovate, deliver superior services or products, define and measure excellence, and invest in their staff to continually grow and develop. The leaders of winning teams build resilient teams, they grow talent, outperform the market, and grow leaders at every level. They don't just look good — they do good work. Consistently. Sustainably. Proudly.

FINAL THOUGHT

As a senior leader or business owner, your culture is your competitive edge, or your silent assassin. If your team is too nice to speak up, too polite to challenge, or too comfortable to stretch, you're not building a team that will win in the long run.

The question isn't: *"Is our team happy and engaged?"*
But rather: *"Is our team growing, accountable, and aligned with our highest potential?"*

Stop chasing nice. Start building winning.

Leadership Lesson:
Leaders must be intentional about cultivating a culture that fosters both positivity and a pursuit of excellence to build a winning team culture.
It can only be done by leaders co-designing the desired behaviours and mindsets as one team with a shared vision of what success might look like.

Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words

David Stewart (B Ed, Grad Dip Sports Science, Master's Business Leadership) David is the Founder & Principal of RYP International – A Team Development Advisory Practice. He has worked globally with organisations, their leaders, and teams to develop their capability and culture to maximise performance.
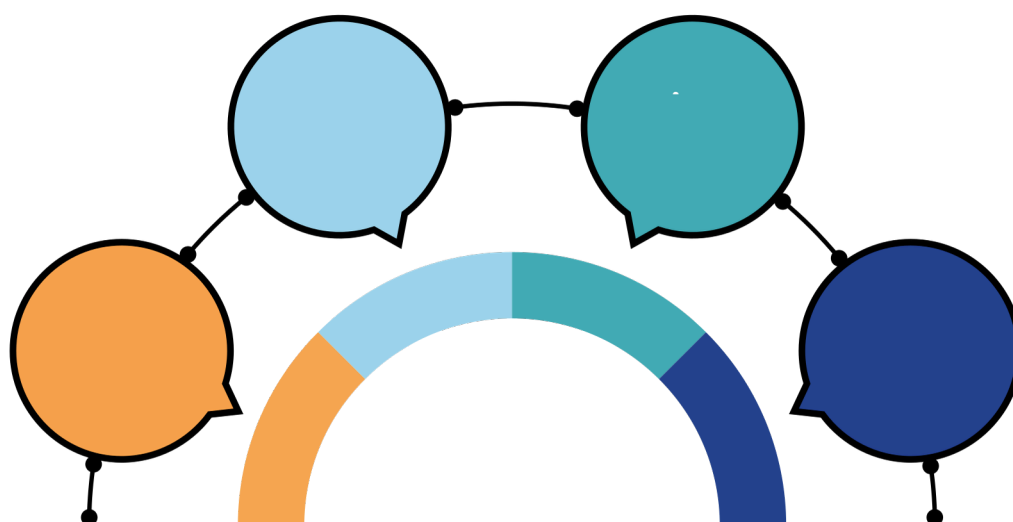
David Stewart is the Principal of RYP International and has been an international thought leader in Team Culture and High Performance for over 30 Years. He has a Masters in Business Leadership, a Bachelor of Education and a Graduate Diploma in Sports Science. You can contact him via

Email: dstewart@rypinternational