The key to Aetna's big turnaround

Rarely can you change culture by working on it directly.

Example: Aetna. The first three attempts in 15 years to transform Aetna’s strategic performance failed. Leadership ignored or tried to squash the culture, an “us-against-them” mindset that pitted the 40,000 employees of Aetna against doctors, medical providers and employers who bought insurance.

With the fourth attempt, leadership—John W. Rowe, CEO then chairman of Aetna Inc., and Ronald Williams, president then CEO of the company—tried something different.

First, Rowe identified about 100 people throughout Aetna as “nonhierarchical influencers.” Informally, he asked them to help him understand how employees felt about customers and patients, their own work and the goals of the company.

He stayed in touch with them continually, and they became the core group who shaped Aetna’s new direction.

Next, he set up dialogues in Aetna’s U.S. offices, asking, “Why aren’t our shared values practiced with our customers?” The company’s been here since 1819; its values are long established.

After 20 such dialogue events, Rowe and some colleagues wrote up a new statement of values and behaviors. He also set up purpose-driven councils—cross-functional groups that would find ways to make critical changes happen.

Finally, Rowe and Williams tapped respected front-line supervisors to become “master motivators.” By connecting widely and virally, these motivators energized many of the changes.

The result? This duo’s work is considered one of the most successful turnarounds in U.S. corporate history. In five years, Aetna went from losing $1 million per day to earning $5 million per day.

Bottom line: You can’t force people to change how they feel about their work.

What you can do is focus on specific behaviors that solve real problems and deliver real results. Bit by bit, people begin thinking differently.

— Adapted from “Working with and within Your Culture,” strategy+business.