

The Culture of Engagement

Finding Common Ground to Keep a Team
(and a Company) Together

CEOs these days are under multiple pressures—to produce profits and create shareholder value, to innovate, to differentiate their companies from competitors, to attract and retain top talent and to secure “buy in” for a corporate vision, strategy and set of values. But the central foundational task—to build and sustain a unified, cohesive workplace—is often the hardest to achieve by even the most gifted CEO.

“Markets are driven by competition and self-interest, whereas people are brought together in organizations or companies out of *shared* interest,” said Mark Royal, a senior principal at Korn Ferry’s Hay Group. “In theory, we bring activity under organizational umbrellas to join people in a larger team effort where commonality of interest breeds cooperation. In real life it doesn’t always work out that way.”

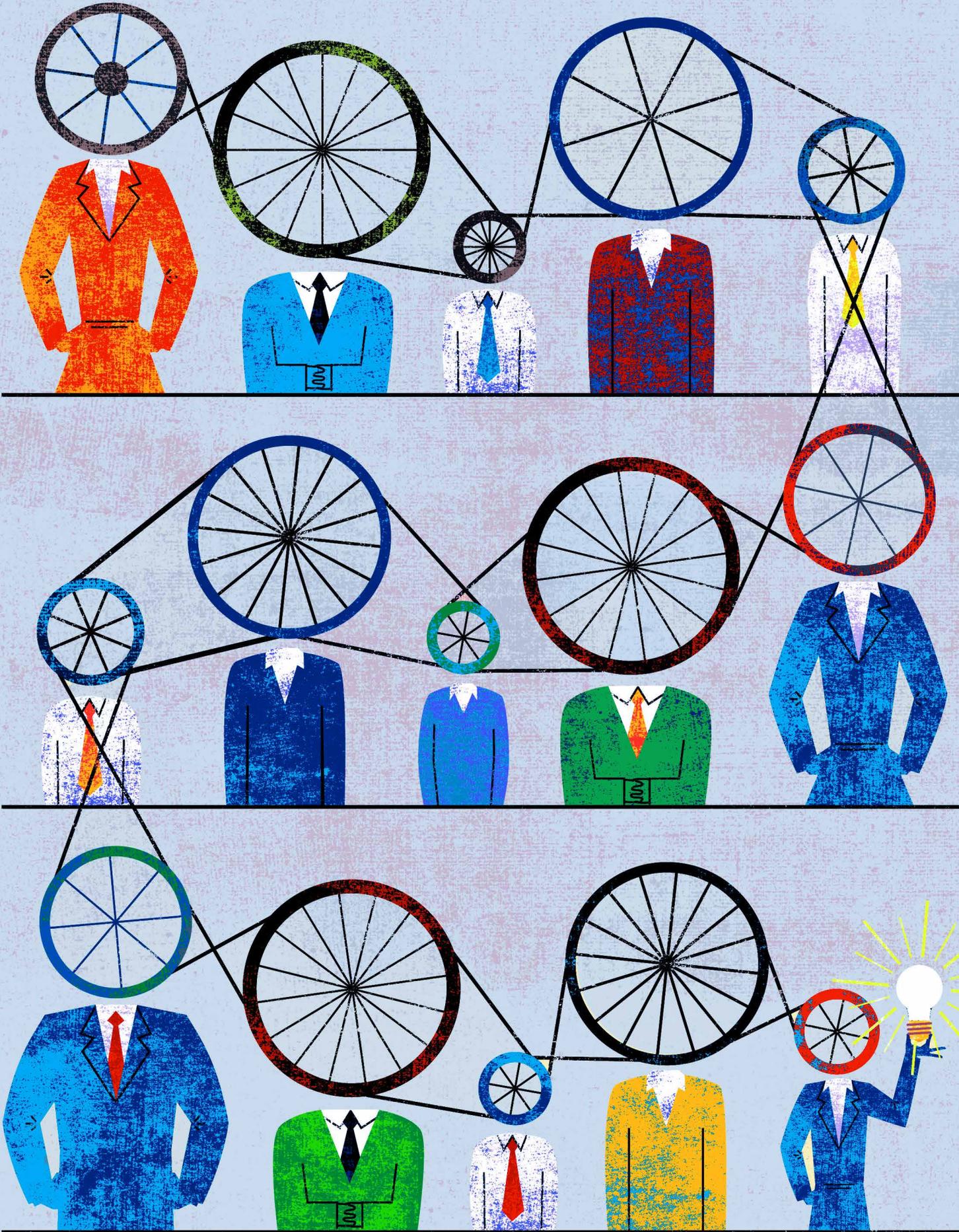
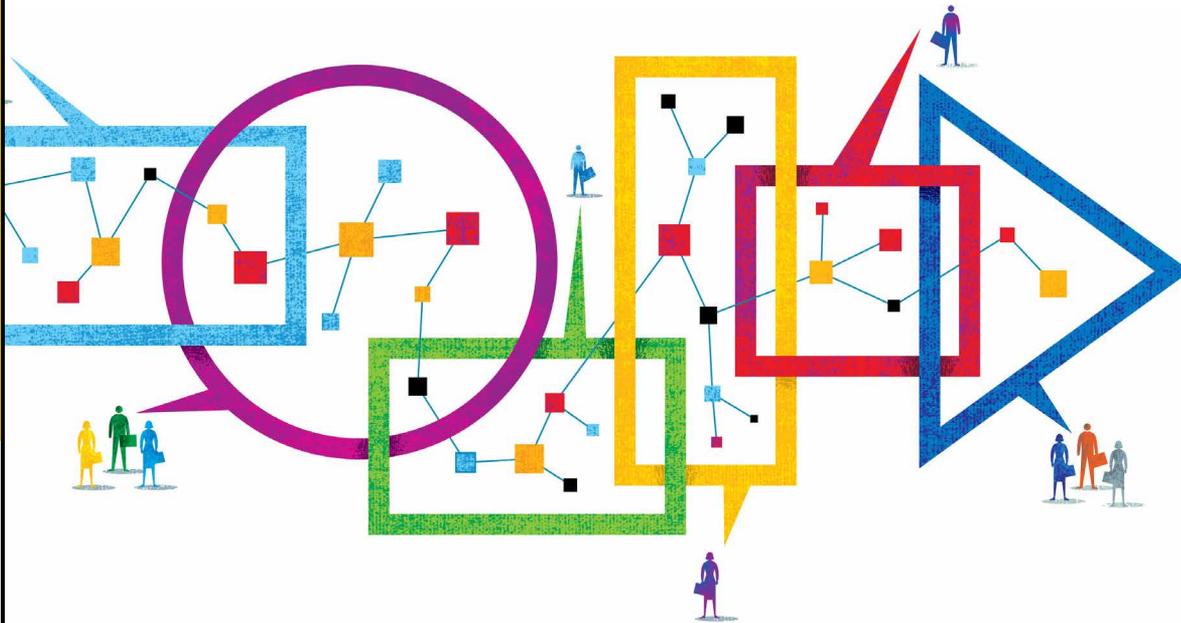


Illustration by MICHAEL AUSTIN



In **ndeed, real life intruded dramatically in 2000** at Akamai Technologies, a high-flying startup in Cambridge, Mass., and the young company's then-CEO George Conrades had to find a way to unify the workforce.

The bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2000 staggered Akamai, and the innovative Internet content-delivery firm, founded just two years earlier, saw its stock plummet so low that it was nearly delisted from the Nasdaq. Conrades was forced to initiate layoffs and figure out a path forward through the chaos. Akamai suffered another severe setback the next year when its co-founder and spiritual leader, Daniel Lewin, was killed on Sept. 11. Lewin was aboard the first ill-fated flight that crashed into the World Trade Center. His death was a devastating shock to the young company. Struggling to get traction, Conrades was forced to come up with a plan to reunify the fractured firm.

Creating unity can be challenging even when a company is thriving. But when it is under severe stress, the challenge goes much deeper.

"We held multiple 'town halls' with employees where I reinforced the importance of making Akamai successful in Danny's memory and asked four questions," Conrades recalled: "Do you still believe in the big idea, the mission, that we can make the Internet faster, more reliable and secure? They did. 'Does our technology work to support the big idea?' The answer was yes. 'Does the business model make sense?' We were able to demonstrate, by sharing graphs of sales, revenue and bottom-line data monthly, that we were on the road to profitability. And, finally, 'Do you like your fellow employees?' People would laugh and start hugging the person next to them."

"The idea," added Conrades, "was that we had the right vision, the right technology and a great team to get us through a tough time." The answers to his questions

helped hold the company together. While many other startups would have folded under the pressure, Akamai eventually turned a corner and became highly successful, the leader in its market space. Today, Akamai has annual revenues of greater than \$2 billion and is considered a highly desirable place to work.

Finding a Shared Interest

Royal identified several keys to building unity from the boardroom to the mailroom.

"Consensus requires clarity around a broad organizational direction," he said. "What is our mission at the highest level? People don't get out of bed in the morning to maximize share price. They get out of bed to make a difference. Giving people a collective purpose, and a sense that they are in it together, is critical.

"But you also need to align personal incentives to keep people invested in organizational goals," added Royal. "Employees need to see how their efforts in working toward those goals will impact their compensation, their growth opportunities and their futures. Leaders must be able to relate the broad organizational mission to the individual employee's world. What does this mission or strategic goal mean for our company, our team and for me?"

The larger and more far-flung the organization, of course, the bigger the challenge.

Royal pointed to Novartis, the pharmaceutical giant, as a company that has succeeded in bringing unity of purpose to a very large and disparate work force. Former Novartis CEO Daniel Vasella has said that the key questions are, "What does everybody have in common? And how can we strengthen this and communicate this? What we have in common is primarily the purpose of the company."

Filling In the White Space

“Corporate culture,” said Royal, “fills in the white space around formal plans and systems. If you carefully manage and shape the culture, it reinforces formal messaging about direction and helps employees understand how they can help the company move forward.”

How can companies fill in that white space?

“CEOs and senior leaders have to shape the culture,” added Royal. “It’s shaped by how leaders talk about the mission, the stories they tell, the key values they articulate and the heroes they create. How they reward and recognize employees also influences the culture. If leaders talk about the importance of collaboration, but only promote strivers and Type A personalities, they’re sending a mixed message.”

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When senior management is inattentive to the need for strong communication from the top flowing through the organization, or there’s a disconnect between the work culture they say they’re striving for and the one that exists, the resulting vacuum allows people to create their own narrative, which can be divisive. Just ask Amazon’s founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos.

In 2015, a scathing New York Times story described a brutal work environment at Amazon, one that sounded like something out of “The Hunger Games.” Whether or not the portrayal was fair, the public indictment by numerous employees suggested that Amazon’s leadership had lost control over the corporate culture. Bezos, who often described the culture as “friendly and intense,” told The Times, “I don’t think any company adopting the approach portrayed could survive, much less thrive, in today’s highly competitive tech hiring market.” Amazon certainly is thriving.

But the highly public point/counterpoint debate over its culture was a black eye on a famous brand. Though Bezos, in response, urged employees to speak up about problems, some, talking with reporters, wondered if their concerns would fall on deaf ears.

The Right Kind of Competition

While unity is unquestionably a desirable organizational attribute, competition, which is a naturally divisive force, can bring out the best in people—the best ideas and the best performance—and is often used within organizations to drive creativity. Steve Jobs was famous for instilling such creative tension at Apple.

Competition among corporate teams, or within them, can be positive, said Royal, provided it is organization-driven and people are motivated by the organization’s best interests.

“As long as people feel they’ve been heard, that their effort was valued, internal competition doesn’t need to be divisive,” he said. “Where competition is self-interested and driven by personal goals, it’s more likely to be negative.”

“Leaders should foster debate and be personally engaged in finding common ground,” said Akamai’s Conrades, who today is the company’s chairman. “Conflict left untended can be very damaging. You have to create an environment where people can argue their assumptions and feel it’s safe to speak up. But the leader has to keep the debate from becoming personal. You can do that by always bringing the discussion back to the mission. That should be where the common ground is.”

Journalist Charles Duhigg, author of the new book “Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business,” took a close look at Project Aristotle, a five-year effort (and counting) by Google to determine how to build the perfect team. Because an organization is, fundamentally, a team writ large, what Google has learned has important implications for how to unify people behind a common corporate vision or mission. And what it has learned reinforces what Royal has observed, and turns some basic assumptions on their heads.

For example, putting all of your best and brightest on a team does not necessarily translate into teamwork. One of the markers of a successful team turned out to be that each member spoke roughly the same amount. The implication was that “being heard” was more important than carrying the day—it raised the team’s “collective intelligence.” Also essential was having a team leader who “let the team members know how their work fit into Google’s larger mission.”

“What Project Aristotle has taught people within Google,” wrote Duhigg, is that “[w]e can’t be focused just on efficiency. Rather, when we start the morning by collaborating with a team of engineers and then send emails to our marketing colleagues and then jump on a conference call, we want to know that those people really hear us. We want to know that work is more than just labor.”

“To create unity, leaders have to show they are human and that they care,” added Conrades. “If people know you care about them, they will follow.”