Creating High Performance Culture with Khalil Smith (S8:E3) – Transcript

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PODCAST

In a lot of ways, you know, you've probably heard the, the kind of phrase that, you know, the eyes are the window to the soul. I would argue that meetings are the window to an organization
Every meeting, every decision and every interaction at work is driven by an invisible force – your workplace culture. And if you feel like we've been talking about workplace culture for a long time, my guest today says we need to keep working on it because it's the fuel that drives organisational performance.

I don't know that we'll ever stop talking about culture at work because, you know, for as long as there's been work and as long as there have been people and as long as there will be work for people, we'll be talking about how to do those things fit together and how do we kind of organize ourselves so that we get those things done in really productive and effective ways.

Welcome to Work Better, the Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and my guest today is workplace culture expert and consultant, Khalil Smith. Khalil is also the author of a new book, The – Performance Culture.

Khalil says one of the new challenges organizations face when it comes to their culture is the tension between a vocal employee base expecting action on social and political issues and financial stakeholders who insist the focus be on revenue generation.

Here's more from Khalil.

Chris Congdon: Welcome to Work Better, Khalil.

Khalil Smith: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Chris. I'm super excited. A little bit, uh, scared from some of the other folks that I've seen that you have on, but I'm excited for the conversation.

Chris Congdon: No way. We have such a friendly group of people who join us, who we're all passionate about our work.

And you know, what we're learning and I'm really interested in talking more with you, first of all, because you have a fairly new book that's come out, which is exciting. I have so much admiration for people and all the labor it takes to get a book out into the world. And it's called "Performance Culture".

So I wanna ask maybe a tough question right from the start, but it feels like we've been talking about culture in the world of work for a long time, and I'm curious what you felt was what's changed? Like what's going on out there in the world that it feels like we have something else we've gotta talk about when it comes to culture at work?

Khalil Smith: Yeah. You know, in, in part, I think a lot has changed and in part I think not a lot has changed. And so, I don't know that we'll ever stop talking about culture at work because, you know, for as long as there's been work and as long as there have been people and as long as there will be work for people, we'll be talking about how to do those things fit together and how do we kind of organize ourselves so that we get those things done in really productive and effective ways. You know, for me it kind of goes back to, there's a quote, you know, all models are wrong, some models are useful. And so I wanted to put something into the kind of business and leadership world that was useful for folks.

I, you know, benefited so much early in my career from reading Jim Collins and Simon Sinek and, you know, Malcolm Gladwells and others. And the opportunity to add to that after, you know, decades in leadership and kind of studying and seeing what works was an amazing opportunity that I just couldn't pass up.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Well, so I wanna dig a little bit deeper into, I think a cultural conversation that we've been having or haven't been having. And when we speak to some of the other guests we've had on the show, I got a chance to talk with Nick Epley, from U of Chicago, who was encouraging us to have conversations that we know are gonna be kind of difficult.
And it feels like it's in the realm of culture, for a lot of years we've talked about the importance of things like diversity in cultures, whether it's diversity of thought or diversity of experiences, backgrounds, racial diversity. The same thing with the notion of inclusion. Like inclusion has been a topic that we've talked a lot about sometimes about how important it is that everybody feels included and feels like they're having equitable experiences.

It feels like that's getting to be a hard conversation to have when it comes to culture and I'm wondering what you have found about that in your work?

Khalil Smith: Yeah, for sure. And Chris, to your point, you know, some of the language around, you know, if we think of the kind of, you know, DEI, there's been a lot right now, right?
And so hopefully folks are listening to this now and in the future, and in the future they're saying, well, what's the big deal? What's the challenge? Yeah, of course we wanna surround ourselves with people that think differently and look different and bring different perspectives and backgrounds.

I think that in so many instances, what you were describing, we've tried to bring so many people along and we've talked about inclusion for all that message hasn't gotten through to everyone. And so in some instances, the work that folks have done has felt more exclusive or it's felt more like it's only about a particular demographic or, you know, correcting some kind of institutional challenges and barriers. And while that may absolutely be a part of it. There is an element of this classic of rising tide that raises all boats.

And so you know, if we think about some of the challenges that folks have, whether that's around ageism or biases against smokers, or people who may be a bit heavier or any of the various things that go on, we've traditionally defined diversity as very narrow.

And so if we're talking about men and women, sometimes men have felt left out, if we're talking about race, sometimes certain, you know, ethnic groups have felt left out. When in reality, I think when we do this work really well, we're talking about all of us and we're talking about how do we remove those barriers so that every one of us can show up, do great work, be rewarded for the contribution that we're adding and not excluded from the conversation or from moving forward and not unintentionally benefited or privileged.

And so when we think about fairness, the vast majority of humans have a very strong reaction to fairness from a very young age. You see it in children. You see it in animals. And so the more that we can anchor on fairness as a way to, you know, unpack this conversation and move things forward, then that starts to become something that folks don't really disagree with all that much. But when it feels like it's about one group versus another, or a single pie that needs to be kind of divided up in different ways, then it does start to feel like a zero sum game.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, I mean it, it feels like the workplaces, maybe it's not the last place, but it feels like a place where we still have an opportunity. Or a mandate to work with all kinds of different people, people who have very different perspectives, and that's a good thing, but it's not always an easy thing to navigate as well.

Khalil Smith: Absolutely. And to your point, the fact that it's not easy is kind of inherently woven into the whole nature of this. And so if you put, you know, 50 Kahlils in an organization and said, "hey, make a decision." We'd probably get there pretty quickly. Because we'd say, you wanna turn left also? Oh, so do I. That's brilliant. That's the smartest thing I could imagine anyone saying. Great, let's go grab lunch. Where do you want to eat? That's where I want to eat too. Wonderful. Right? That feels very fluid and in some instances it kinda makes us think that that's what teams should feel like.

And yet in the best scenarios when you bring in diverse perspectives and different backgrounds and different information, there is a degree of dissonance, right? Of challenging one another, of pushing back against things, and that tension, that friction can feel like you're underperforming or you're not doing what you should be doing.

And yet in reality, if we thought about something like a gym as a metaphor, you would look at that and say, well, if you go to the gym and you work out for half an hour and you leave and you think I could do that all day. You probably didn't burn a lot of fat or build a lot of muscle or really, you know, get any better cardiovascularly. You want some of that tension, you want some of that grit. You want to be a bit tired and sweaty, and that's how you should feel at the end of a good work day. But similarly, if at the end of a gym session you can't walk or you broke a bone or tore a muscle or something, that's not good either. And so there's this kind of, you know, Goldilocks zone of tension and conflict and challenging ideas and experiences that allow us to really kind of push for that.

And as you say, I've often believed after most of us are done with kind of our, you know, being raised by our parents or you know, educated in our school systems, work is a lot of where we learn what's okay and what's not. What's rewarded and what's penalized. And so when you're bringing together different people from different experiences and different cultures and different points of view, that can feel really challenging.

And yet if the company truly believes that there's a responsibility to kind of grow people, develop them, support them, and then send them back out to their lives to do things differently and to continue to kind of be good citizens, be good parents, do all of the things that they should be doing, the company has this amazing space to say, listen, I know that you may not believe these things outside of work, but here we do believe that everyone can contribute and we absolutely want everyone to have the opportunity to step up and do great work.

And so when you see that happen, there's something called this kind of mere exposure effect, right? That you may not believe it right out of the gate. But you know, if I had some bias against female leaders, but then all of a sudden over and over and over again, I work in an organization where I see incredibly talented female leaders, just the exposure to that is going to fundamentally change the way that I view things. And we'll probably change the way that I view women outside of the workplace as well. It's not easy, it's not fast, but it is incredibly effective and it benefits the organization.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, so let's talk more about that because I think on one hand we don't have to convince anybody that having a strong culture is important and yet it feels like – the and yet part – is it feels like when we set our priorities, you know, for what we need to accomplish or the things we really need to focus on, maybe that's not the top of the conversation that we're having. But I'm interested in some of the things that you've written about, where you talk about culture being a performance imperative. And there's probably moments where the culture is helping, but there's sometimes where it's holding us back. Could you talk about that a little bit, Khalil?

Khalil Smith: Ultimately if we just take a step back and think about culture as how things get done around here, right? In a lot of ways, you know, you've probably heard the, the kind of phrase that, you know, the eyes are the window to the soul. I would argue that meetings are the window to an organization. And so if you dropped into a meeting inside of any particular company and you saw the dynamics around who speaks, how they speak, how decisions are made, how time is used, what's the level of follow up, how do all those things go together very quickly from an ethnographic perspective, right?

If you were just observing and then you walked outta that meeting, you would probably look and say, I don't know that they're actually gonna follow through on that, or did you see the way that Khalil zoned out when they were having that conversation? All of those things are the little kinds of behaviors and nuances and different things that either benefit an organization.

So are we aligned around our decision making? Do we include perspectives and disagree vehemently? And then say, great decision. We've heard everyone now a decision has been made and we need to all go off and execute as if it was our decision from the very beginning. Or do you find kind of what you might hear in the business world, this idea of a pocket veto, right? Where we nod and smile in the meeting and then immediately go out and say, I'm not doing that.

Or you know, just wait for the thing to fail. And so those are the examples of times where a culture is not benefiting the organization because the habits, the behaviors, the ways of operating are working against what you would ideally want.

And then there are the organizations where you go in and there's a meeting with a clear agenda. Everybody knows what they're there to do, you know, they haven't just invited people for the sake of being there. There's real clarity and kind of execution. Decisions are made after folks are leaving. There's, you know, a kind of visibility into who's going to take what on next. And so again, not everything happens in meetings, but that's just a small example of the difference.

And those differences are very slight. And to your point, it's probably why it doesn't always rise to the level of how are we going to focus on our culture? Because it can be very easy, not easy, you know, just in general, but easy compared to focusing on culture, to think about, you know the finance budget or the marketing budget. Or the thing that is right in front of you that everyone can agree to.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. There's so much good stuff in there. I think the one of my big takeaways as I was listening to you, Khalil, was I think I'm gonna try to be an ethnographer in one of my upcoming meetings and just observe us, try and say like, how are we behaving? In our meetings, like, what are the rituals? What are those behaviors like? Does this seem like we're going to get things done? And that we're asking everybody for different opinions and that we're accepting that, you know, I think that might be an interesting exercise.

Khalil Smith: It is. And, Chris, there's a reason that folks talk about this idea of the beginner's mindset, right? How can I go back to a place before I was kind of encumbered or burdened with all of this knowledge?

And the ability to take a step back, view those things, really look at them through an unbiased lens and not judge whether this is good or bad, but just what are we doing, and is what we're doing going to get us closer to our intended objectives and to our intended outcomes? Or is it moving us further away from those things?

So it's one of the first things I talk about in the book, kind of the A, in this model awareness, how do you get awareness around the challenges or the benefits of your organization and do so by asking deep questions and looking at research and pulling in different perspectives. And in order to get to some degree of truth, yet you kind of have to admit that you don't already have everything all figured out, which is also not always a comfortable place to be.

Chris Congdon: I am, I'm so glad you went there because I did wanna ask you about this model that you put forth in your book. I always love a good framework. If you remember things, so an A, B, C S framework. Can you just walk us through, like, you, you talked about awareness, but maybe you can talk about the others too.

Khalil Smith: So they are linear at the very start, and then I find that organizations tend to kind of pop into the place that makes the most sense for them as they're continuing to iterate and go through the cycle.

So the A as I mentioned, is for awareness. It's kind of the, "how do you get oriented around the challenge really." Really understand the thing that you're trying to solve as a part of the culture and what you're trying to understand.

The B is for behaviors, and so that gets at very clearly, very specifically what are the things that we want to see or hear done differently after we're kind of, you know, through this cycle. And so it is different than something like being inclusive, right? That's very robust. It's very broad. It's difficult for folks to kind of determine, was I inclusive or not? Was he or she inclusive or not? Versus, you know, and we can talk a bit about what do better behaviors look like.

The C is for community, I think in any change management space in any organization, you can't move things unless you go from a small group to a larger group, right? You need to bring people along so I can build all the awareness I want, kind of identify the behaviors, but if I don't expand that out to a larger group of people, it's going to stay pretty narrow and pretty focused only potentially on my own kind of ways of operating.

And then the S is for systems. And so you know everything that you want to bake into the fabric of your organization, you've got to put it into your systems. And the systems can be things like rewards and promotions and recognition. They can be performance management, they can be technology, you know, technology systems. But it's about how are the things that we have put in place, reinforcing or undermining, all of those other things we've said?

So if we say we want to take five minutes at the end of every meeting to capture agenda notes and you know, be clear about who comes next, because the thing that we've identified in the awareness stage is we're having these meetings and nobody knows what comes next.

Okay? Why? What's going on there? Great. We've identified the behavior, we spread it out to more people. But if our meetings are not set up in such a way, or we don't have a great place to capture those notes, or we don't have a mechanism for distributing them to people, then we may say that this thing matters but we either constantly go all the way to the end of the meeting and we discard it, or we say that folks should capture it, but they're capturing it in a million different ways. So it really is this symmetry of all of these things and them fitting together that allows us to go from identifying a challenge to really weaving it into the way in which we operate.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Well, and back to your kind of working out analogy earlier. You don't ever really stop.

Khalil Smith: I wish, wish that we could, Chris.

Chris Congdon: I know, I know. I know, I know. And I feel that way whenever I have to do another rep. You know, like doing the hard stuff. I'm like, no, I don't wanna do one more of those. Let's stop.

Khalil Smith: Exactly. Yep. And working out I think is a great, you know, metaphor in a lot of ways because you have to get clear on what it is you're trying to accomplish because the same exercise can you know, do very different things. And so if you just go to the gym and watch what someone else is doing, which is sometimes what businesses do. They look at the popular press, they look at what others are doing and say, let's deploy that performance management system. Or let's, you know, do this thing over here, or let's jump headfirst into that.

But without really understanding, well they're doing that because that fits in their ecosystem and what they're trying to accomplish. And so taking all of that all the way through to say, well, if what I'm trying to do is build this muscle, then I should do these particular types of activities. Not just, you know, run, but it's how far you run, how fast. Not just squat, but squat with weights or without weights.. How often you know, all of those things.

And ideally when you bring others together, you create a bit of a social fabric that allows you to do it more effectively. CrossFit is a great example of that where people say, I continue to work out because of the community, right?

Chris Congdon: Yeah. So when you mentioned the word community, it is a trigger for me that I want to pick your brain a little bit about the physical expression, the physical environment, which of course we think about a lot. People who listen to the podcast or thinking about as well.

We think a lot about how one of the things that we often say is like your, your physical place is like the body language of your culture. When somebody walks into the door and they see how you work and where you work it is that manifestation of what your culture's all about.

So I'm curious, and I know you're, you're not an interior designer, but if you had advice for, you know, those of us who are thinking about space and putting that together with culture, are there things that you'd say, you know, you really try and think about this or try and do that?

Khalil Smith: I think it's exactly what you've already been describing, which is to be really thoughtful and intentional about the physical space. And you used the term manifestation, which is exactly what came to mind, is a physical manifestation of what we're trying to accomplish.
And so, you know, I've worked at Apple for a long time. It would always tell these stories of Steve Jobs and it was the story of him helping to design the Pixar building and being really clear about why we want this shared space where there's going to be this kind of serendipity where people just accidentally bump into one another. Right?

And so being thoughtful about, well, we want collaboration. How are we gonna get that? Well, if we create some shared spaces that are drawing people in and people are bumping into one another, that's going to help create some of what we're looking for.

Are you looking for isolation? Are you looking for creativity? You know, I was at a conference a little while ago and folks were talking about, you know, where the light is coming in and the plants. And the seats and the music and this sound and the scent. All of these things are a part of, is my physical space optimizing the things that we've said are important as an organization?

I think that the challenge that we don't always see is the marriage between the physical experience, the kind of mental experience, the emotional experience, the performance experience, and blending all of those together because they do tend to live in very isolated parts of the business.

The places that are doing that thoughtfully and saying, well, let's talk about what we believe our culture is and what does that mean for our physical spaces, and what does that mean for the type of music we wanna play, or the type of food we wanna have available, right? Or the type of seating that we wanna have. All of those things then come together and you feel the intention and that, that that intention comes through in a number of ways, both that you can observe sometimes, but also just ways that help optimize how the organization gets work done.

Chris Congdon: So before I let you go, I wanna ask you to look out into the future for us and share with us if you see any kind of big inflection points coming or if, there's something that's out on the horizon that you would say organizations really need to be thinking about this over the next five, 10 years.

Khalil Smith: Yeah, I think the biggest thing, and I'm probably, you know, a little bit anchored on the conversation around AI right now and I think that will continue to be. But more than that, I think the best organizations, the most thoughtful organizations are gonna get very clear on the relationship between technology and their people.

And so I see some organizations that are swinging that pendulum in one direction and saying, let's ignore the technology. We're all about our people. You know, we don't need to worry about that stuff. That's just all smoke and mirrors. It's no big deal. I see a lot of other technology companies in many instances that are swinging the pendulum in the other direction and saying, I don't know that we need younger coders or middle managers or any of those folks anymore. Now we're just gonna go all in on AI because that's going to allow us to really be successful.

I think even beyond AI and whatever that promise or peril may be, there's this conversation around what is the social contract between an employer and their employees? And 50 years ago in certain parts of the world that was: you come here, give us your, your energy and your effort; you can retire here; we'll give you a gold watch and a pension; everything's gonna be wonderful. Now there's a bit more of a gig economy where it's, I don't believe in you; you don't believe in me; I'm here while I get a paycheck. And then you may let me go.I may decide to go take on something else.

I think there will come a rebalancing where again, some of the best organizations get a real reputation for being places that say, we want you to stay; we want you to grow, we want to develop you. And when the time is right for you to move on, if you're moving on to something, because I often say in my role, I'm at my best when people are leaving because they're running towards something, not running away from something.

And so if they're running away from the organization or running away from a manager, that's a problem. But if they said, oh my gosh, I'm gonna take everything I learned to go open my own business, or I feel like I'm ready for a promotion and I get, my manager isn't going anywhere, and so I'm gonna go off and take my skills to this other organization.

That for me is a win because they will still go back and say, oh, you're thinking about working at this company? I loved it there. I learned so much. That's an incredible place.And so the companies that I think get that balance of extracting value from people and injecting value into their people, their teams, are gonna be the ones that have a real performance differentiator.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, for sure. I mean, we just can't. I don't see how we can continue to produce good work if we're just extracting from people all the time.

Khalil Smith: Absolutely. But you see it in a, in a lot of instances where folks have said, Hey, listen, it's just, it's kind of just a workforce. And so CEOs that are excited about the, you know, their company's getting smaller, or folks that have said, you know, this whole group of people can be replaced. And some of what you forget is that everyone is listening. And so it goes beyond that group. It's everyone else who is still in your organization that says, well, how long until I become that group? And so how is the organization gonna treat me? Not in the best of times, but in the worst of times for sure. And when you treat people well, when times are tough, they tend to remember that and reward it.

Chris Congdon: I think that is a very important point. So let's end on that note and our wishes that everybody who's listening carries that forward with them and thinks very intentionally about how do we treat people when we're going through tough times and good times. So thanks for being here with us today, Khalil. I really enjoyed this conversation.
Khalil Smith: Thank you so much, Chris. And thank you to everyone who's listening.