

Interview with Deborah Ferro Burke, MBA, PhD, about her upcoming 6/10 workshop - Using the Mysterious Forces within a Company

- Why did you choose to focus on mysterious forces within companies including culture and office politics for your upcoming WEST workshop?

The clichés are true, success comes more from how you do things than from what you do. Cultural forces are mysterious until you can recognize and understand them. It's the norms ("the way we do things here") and values (what we care about, protect and advance) that really drive strategy, resource allocation and even definitions of success. I want to help women who are strong at WHAT they do to understand HOW they can navigate for success.

- Aren't a lot of cultures the same from company to company in the same industry?

Not really. They may have similarities, but they are always specific and unique, a non-replicable set of characteristics born of history, people, markets, technology and the times. If you can understand the subtleties of a culture, you can choose whether you want to belong and, if so, how to flourish there.

- Give us a teaser of what you will be covering in the workshop.

I have a simple model you can use to peer through activities to the underlying culture of the place you work. It's like a kaleidoscope of pieces that can suddenly snap into a meaningful pattern, when you poke around a bit and know what you are looking for.

- What can I do to understand my culture before I come to the workshop?

Observe how people use time, interact with others, raise questions. Look around. Are some places or things "sacred?" Is it messy or neat, bland or vibrant, homogenized or individualized? Think about who has power, who gets listened to, who sets the agenda. What's the pace? If you come with some examples, and with questions they provoke, you will have a head start on understanding your culture. Bring pictures or things as examples if you can.

- Is this why I can like the purpose of my work but not my job?

Yes! If that's your situation, you should do some detective work. Figure out what you value and see how those values are being expressed, or ignored in your work organization. You may be able to make some adjustments that will bring things into better alignment. Or, you may want to look for a place that is a better fit.

- What will I be able to do differently after the workshop?

It's just a short workshop, but it should give you some new ways to look at your environment, which should lead to some insights about what is really going on there. Awareness leads to understanding, leads to behavior change. The workshop will provide a base from which to learn more.

- What's the best piece of career advice anyone ever gave you?

The best piece of advice I got was from the Executive in Residence at Columbia Business School, Bob Lear. He told me to get on task forces and committees that would take me beyond my specific job. That style really fit me and served me well. Doing interesting, usually cutting edge work and meeting people in different parts of the company was fascinating. My most fun and best promotions came from outside my own job.