Navigating Ambiguity, Toxic & Healthy Culture Makings, and Updates

Hi everyone. I'm Anese Cavanaugh I'm the CEO of Active Choices and a strategic advisor to business leaders and organizations around culture and leadership. So if you are new to this blog, then welcome. It's really good to have you here. If you're not new to this blog, then welcome back.

It's been a long time since I actually posted something on here. We have been deeply immersed in client work and just kind of being out in the world, both hybrid and in person again. Thank goodness, but we've been deeply immersed myself and my team and really leaning in with different companies and organizations around how do they navigate this time and how do they build their best IEP, their best intentional, energetic presence and sustainability and resiliency and all, all the good stuff that they can lead as effectively as possible.

So I thought what I would do today is... there are a couple questions we keep getting, and I just thought it'd be easier to come on and kind of do a quick little riff. I'm gonna talk a little bit about ambiguity. I'm gonna talk a little bit about some of the changes that have been made in Active Choices, this organization to support you in getting more support, um, and talk a little bit about the IEP work and how we're using it right now, as well as things to be really paying attention to some best practices, to be paying attention to in terms of what is going to support you and your culture, your retention of your current amazing players, as well as attraction, um, to new amazing players. And then I'm gonna show the five toxic, the five biggest things that are contributing to toxic culture right now.

So this is a quick little aside, you know, 24 million people quit their jobs last year between April and September of 2021. So between April and September, 2021, we had 24 million people quit. That's a big deal. And the number one reason why they quit was because of toxic work environments.

So there's a lot of reasons, but that was the number one reason that people cited. So the things that almost work backwards, the things that people talked about, they contributed to toxic work environments were five different things and the of things are number one, hands down was, uh, disrespectful, disrespectful culture. So lack of trust, lack of respect, lack of kindness, you know, people not being present with each other, people moving really, really quick people being really, you know, let's put some more things in there. People being really unclear about feedback or not kind with feedback or not clear about what was happening.

So disrespectful was the number one thing non-inclusive, that was number two that has to do with all the D and I work that's happening inclusion, um, diversity equity, obviously D and I, and really having an inclusive work environment and having the mindset and the attitude that are really inclusive of each other's human beings. Um, just as a little side note to that, if you've worked with me in a room before, you've probably heard me say that, you know, the three biggest needs that we have as human beings are to be seen for who we are to know that our work matters and to belong. So that number two is a really big deal. Number three was unethical behaviors or unethical practices in the organization. That was the number three thing leading to toxic work environments. Number four was a cutthroat attitude, you know, stabbing each other in the back and just a cutthroat, like, let's go, go, go, go, hustle, hustle, hustle, hustle.

Cut, cut, cut, cut. Cut. Um, that was number four for people quitting and number five was abusive, which kind of speaks for itself. So those were the five things that is from a study that was done, uh, MIT, Sloan management

review article by Donald, Donald and Charlie of culture act. So they shared that feedback, or they shared that report. They did a lot of good research around it, but those are the five things. So notice on those things, those all have to do with behaviors. They have to do with attitude, mindset, how we come to the table, how we're showing up, how we're honoring each other's human beings. Um, and what's also really lovely about all of those things is that there are things that are really within our control. So they're gonna take some intention, they are going to take awareness and they're gonna take a lot of truth telling.

So I just wanna honor that second thing I wanna look at is best practices for what you wanna be paying attention to right now in your culture for your team, for the people you lead, for your retention of your amazing teammates and players, and also for attraction of new ones. So, you know, there's a lot of things to be paying attention to, but I would say, you know, I just got back from the Small Giants conference, which is an organization of purpose driven and values driven leaders coming together.

We come together once a year and got to sit in on a lot of different companies, shares about what's been going on for them over the last two years. And I will say that over and over and over again, the five things that came up and the most important right now in really, really, really building a healthy culture and a culture that people want to stay in and come to we're, let's see five things purpose.

So really connecting people to purpose, you know, really getting them connected to the why of the company, what you're doing, what your work is all about. Um, they talked about the importance of the ripple effect. You know, there's the organizational charter, then there's the different divisions, their charter then in the different divisions. You know, if you look at the leadership teams and there's each individual team's charter and then

rippling that down, so that there's a through line happening from what the company, as a whole is up to all the way down to the employee, the individual employees, the individual employee is connected to that purpose. And so they can know how their work, how they're being involved in the organization is really creating impact. So we wanna really, really, really, really, really double down on this right now. I think that with the next generation of professionals that are coming in, that are already here, um, people aren't going to stand for not being connected to purpose anymore.

And maybe if they do, it's not gonna be for a very long time. So if you really wanna keep great players, if you really wanna create a culture of care and energy and enthusiasm and loyalty, and really of best performance and results and customer service, you want to make sure that your people are connected to purpose and that they understand how their role and what they're doing every day is directly related to creating impact for the bottom line. And also for the customers you're serving. So purpose was one of the core things. Another one is clarity and accountability. This has always been important. This I think is more important than ever. So lots and lots of shares about how important it's to be clear on roles, how important it's to be clear on what we're on, on expectations, like really clear on expectations, uh, to be holding ourselves and each other accountable, and to really make sure that we're following through on what we say we're going to, to do.

This also involves the leader holding employees accountable. So there was a lot of talk about, you know, meeting E even for 10 minutes, you know, once a month, just to check in with direct reports, how are you doing? Are you on track? What do you need? I see you <laugh>, you know, I see you, that's a big one. Um, and really just making sure people stay accountable to what they're saying to doing addition, in addition with that with accountability is accountability for behavior. So accountability, holding people accountable for how they're showing up, holding people accountable for if they're actually

contributing to any of those toxic work environment, things that I listed earlier, um, that kind of stuff. So the third thing was connection, connection, connection, connection, connection, connect, connection, connection. I'm not even listing these in order of importance. I think this connection piece, you know, we are human beings that are having a very human experience.

And I think if the last years have taught us nothing, it's the importance of how, um, how essential connection is to each of us and whether that's virtual or in real, in real life, you know, in person, um, this idea around connection and building relationships, and really seeing the other person really seeing your direct reports, really seeing your leaders, really seeing your peers. This was another piece that was super, super important in terms of building a healthy workforce positively, authentically, positively, and workforce. So we talk about that a lot in the IEP work, that the connection is really put the base of everything. And again, back to those three core needs, people need to be seen. People need to be seen. So connection just as a little side note connection, doesn't have to be this big, huge, difficult, tricky thing. Connection is getting present with another human being and really taking the time to say, please, thank you.

I see you. What do you need? I, you know, I can, I can, I can feel that something's off or I can feel that, um, you know, you're really killing it right now. Like whatever it might be connecting with that person. So the person feels seen that right there is going to get you. It's gonna take you so much further than some of the initiatives I see that are happening right now, initiatives around. I won't even say just initiatives, just, just like doing initiatives. Think about all the initiatives you might be doing to build your culture up right now and whatever that might be for you. I want you to look underneath it and are you actually

taking the time to be present with your people and to just simply see them, please. Thank you. I see you. Wow. Your workload is that of five people.

Let's see what we can do to support you there. Like that connection. Number four, psychological safety. Okay. Psychological safety is the big one. We have been working on this since 2002 in Active Choices, the psychological safety, which means is it safe for people to tell the truth? Is it safe for people to give feedback? Is it safe for people to say they don't know, or to call uncle when they're feeling overworked? Is it safe for people to disagree? Is it safe? Do people feel like they can trust you? The leaders in the organization, their peers and their organization. So psychological safety, this was a big one. Wanna really look at how are we doing this? I will give you the shortcut to that. And the shortcut is that that starts with being really present with another human being, in being very, very clear about your intentions, the energy you're bringing to the table and your presence and how you're showing up with them.

If you take that IEP, then you add to that your, your actions, which are gonna include things like accountability, honoring your word, clear expectations, you know, how you receive feedback, how you act upon that feedback. All, all of these things are contributing to psychological safety or not. So think about that one. And then the last one was communication. So especially in a hybrid world, as we are moving into all these different ways of working, you know, some people are still a hundred percent in the office. Some people are back to the office. Some people are hybriding it. Um, you know, the communication is key communication. The way that I always grew up hearing this in business was that people need to hear things sometimes up to seven times to really have it stick. I think it's the same idea here. So a lot of talk about communication, um, communicate, communicate, communicate.

When in doubt, communicate a little bit more. This does not mean ad nauseam. Communication does not, does not mean long-winded communication. This means clear communication. So people know again, what to expect. People know what's happening. People again, feel seen, cared for and championed in your company. So those are five things. Now, those things I saw come up again and again and again, last week when I was in Detroit. Um, but they also come up everywhere. These are the things that we're seeing in companies. When we go out and we work with an organization, you know, we're often doing, we're doing, we're always doing the IEP training, always. That's just where we start. We start with the IEP methodology to get them really grounded in how they're showing up, uh, what their intentions are, how they're taking care of themselves. They're not totally exhausted when they're doing their work.

Um, and then also their presence and how, and how they're actually, um, coming to the table and how present they actually are. So we're always doing the IEP work as the core base. Then what we'll do is we'll build feedback training on top of that leadership training, communication training, um, you know, conflict navigation, all these different things to support people, but it always starts with the IEP. So if you look at those five things that I just shared with you, if you are tending to your IEP and you're really present to your people and you're present to yourself and you're taking care of your, it's gonna be easier to see how you can up level those five things in your organization. Uh, if you can't do it for your whole

organization, right. For bat it's okay, do it for yourself, do it for your team. What's the smallest thing you can personally do to really start to bring, um, those five things up. You know, you put the good IEP, you put all those five things under really, really solid action. And, um, watching my pup, you put those under really, really solid action. And now you're gonna be moving

forward in a way that's more sustainable. It's more real, and it will be more engaging for people. So those are just some things to think about. Um, let's see.

So just a couple updates on our team. I'll be really quick with this one. We built our team out even more. So we now have a team of coaches and trainers that can lead this work with you. So, um, I love leading this work and what I have found after 20 years of doing it is that there is only one of me and there are other people in the world who lead this work really, really beautifully. And what we've done is we've devoted the last eight months to really training up a team to get ready to do that. So if you are interested in working with us and having, um, either an organizational wide integration or just something for your team, or even just something for yourself in private coaching, please feel free to reach out. You can reach out at, let's see, we'll put the links below here, but you can reach out on the [contact us page](#).

It's probably the quickest way to reach us. And we'll set up a call to, to talk about what's going on for you and how you do it. We have a whole process now, which includes a diagnostic. We have a Positive Energy Workplace™ Initiative assessment, a diagnostic to kind of see what's happening in your team. What's happening in your organization, where at their 55 points we look at – 55 bits of content and data to help us determine where you're at on the scale. There's five different levels of cultural health from a positive energy workplace standpoint. We use that then to kind of figure out what initiatives would serve you best. So if that's of interest to you, [please absolutely reach out](#). We are in a position now to support many, many more people in a way that's really fun.

And, that leaves me with a ton of energy at the end of the day to keep doing stuff like this. So we hope to hear from you. Okay. Last thing I want to

address is a question that came in around an ambiguity. So, and this one, I gotta take a breath for, cause this is a big question right now. There is so much stuff going on in the world. There's so much ambiguity, alone, period. There's ambiguity in our personal lives. There's ambiguity. You know, there's ambiguity politically, there's ambiguity everywhere. And there's a lot of ambiguity in our organizations. You know, organizations are really changing what people will tolerate is changing. So the question that has come up to me has been, you know, how do we navigate ambiguity?

And also how do we support our peers, leaders, employees, and others in navigating that ambiguity. You know, there's a big look at Chip Conley's work with emotional equations. He talks about the emotional equation for anxiety is your ambiguity times your perceived lack of control. So the amount of ambiguity there is in an organization or a person has in their life multiplied by their perceived lack of role is going to equal the level of anxiety they have. So one of the best things we can be doing for people is lowering that ambiguity or lowering their perceived lack of control. So we can lower that anxiety. If you are

running an organization and you have people running around super anxious all the time, you are not getting the best work out of them. You're not getting their best energy and ultimately they will burn out.

So if you remember the seven P's, I'm gonna just do the four P's, the four P's of burnout are:

1. lack of connection to purpose,
2. lack of connection to presence in the pause,
3. lack of connection to people and
4. lack of connection to pleasure and also pain.

So those are four P's. There's another P in there, which is lack of connection to personal power and personal power is where anxiety often lives. So when we're in a state of anxiety, we lose connection with our personal power. So what you wanna be doing as a leader, as an individual is you wanna be doing everything you possibly can to reduce that ambiguity, to reduce that anxiety. So if you're the individual experiencing anxiety, because of all the ambiguity, the first place to start looking is what's the little thing you can do to increase your personal control.

So there's a lot of things that we can't control, a ton of things we can't control, but what are the little things you can personally do to increase your control so that you bring that side of the equation up a little bit. So for example, you know, you have absolute control over your mindset. You have absolute control over, um, how you show up, how you decide to show up, you have control over how you decide to eat, how you decide to take care of yourself. You have control over what you say yes and no to in terms of, for example, saying yes to a bunch of social media and TV or saying yes, to getting a little bit more sleep and taking really good care of yourself. So there's a lot of things we do have control over a ton. You have control over how you show up, you control over, um, the boundaries you hold, you have control over the feedback that you give.

So I want you to, I wanna invite you if you're feeling anxious right now, this is all the ambiguity in the world. I wanna invite you to the quickest place to go, which is to double down on increasing your own control and increasing your relationship with yourself in the places where you can control things more and control is a big word, so control or influence. Um, you know, we don't have control of a lot of things, but we sure have influence from the IEP standpoint. If I am showing up clearer, if I'm coming to the table in service of my people, if I am cleaning my energy, I am gonna have way more influence

on leadership and my people and my team and customers and whatever. So again, that could come back to me, I have control of my IEP.

So therefore I'm going to now have more influence to help shift things in a different direction. I'm now more influenced with any kind of feedback or requests I make about that ambiguity. So that's one thing to look at. The other thing you can do if you're in that space of ambiguity and you're feeling anxious about it is you can really start to look at what would decrease ambiguity. So what's the littlest amount of

information you could get. What questions could you ask? What feedback could you give? You know, if something is happening and, um, people are just being really, really vague about it. You can ask for a little bit more clarity. Uh, it doesn't mean you're gonna necessarily get it, but to take control, to really start to get curious. Now the energy you bring to the table is gonna make all the difference in the world of how that's received and how much influence you have.

So if you're coming from a place of agitation and frustration and make wrong, and that's the energy you're coming from, when somebody's not clear about something, it's not gonna go very far. So instead, you know, we always talk about it as a reboot, get really present with yourself, get really clear about your intention for the feedback you're about to give or the questions you're about to ask and come from that energetic state of, um, service, you know, contribution and curiosity. So, there's, you know, reduce, reduce the ambiguity, reduce the control you have, or increase the control. You have more power to increase control of the things you control. You also have a lot of power around getting curious by ambiguity. So that's, if you are, that's for you personally. Now, if you're leading people, which most of you are, I mean,

we're all leading people. If we have, if we're leading lives, we're leading somebody.

So, you know, regardless of applies to anybody watching this, regardless of how many people you're leading or what level you are in the organization, if you're leading people, you have a responsibility as a leader to do everything in your power to reduce that ambiguity as much as possible, even if you don't know, right? So this isn't, this isn't pretending to be clear about something. This is just getting really curious about where can you be clearer and where can you give people a little bit more grace if they're feeling anxious because, um, things aren't clear, you know, let's face it things, things aren't clear. We see it in our company all the time. Like a lot of things we don't know what's gonna happen. So there's the personal responsibility. We all have to make sure we're taking care of ourselves to navigate that. But then I'll use myself as a leader of the organization.

I also have a responsibility to do everything I can to make sure that I am proactively as clear as possible. Even if that clarity is communicating guys, I don't know exactly where this is gonna land. Here's my intention. Here's what we're working towards. Um, and I actually really just need us to all be on the same team and really work through this together. Can we work through this together? So just naming that there's ambiguity, that's actually going to release some of these anxiety. Um, the other piece is I don't wanna come from a place of toxic positivity where I just tell everyone, um, things are ambiguous, ambiguous. It's no big deal. Let's just get on it and go. It's gonna be really, really great. I actually really wanna acknowledge, Hey, things are ambiguous. It's tricky right now. There's really good opportunities that are coming out.

It's ambiguity. I trust that really good things are gonna happen. But I'm not gonna sugarcoat it and pretend like it's not hard. So I think that that's one of the greatest things we can do for the people that we're leading right now is to speak truth to how challenging ambiguity can be to speak truth to it, to not gloss over it, to not, you know, use it as a bat and pretending to <affirmative>, you know, just, you know, we always, you know, bubble up and pretend like nothing's wrong and just work through it and, you know, embrace ambiguity. I know that's a big one. People love to say. Um, I think there's a really beautiful place to embrace ambiguity. I think there's also an equally beautiful place to acknowledge that it's tricky and to do everything to, um, everything possible to alleviate as much of that as, as, as you can.

So speak to it, speak up. If you're in a position where you are feeling like things are really ambiguous around you and you're feeling really confused, then I would say go back to what can you control, take care of your own IEP, get really curious and then go and give of feedback, go ask your leaders, ask your teammates, ask whatever the source of ambiguity is. Ask for more clarity and, you know, maybe make a request if, if you're getting the sense that it's kind of just being brushed off where it's being held really lightly and that's not working for you or your team or whatever might be happening. Maybe just speaking truth to that. Like, Hey, we could really use a little bit of, um, we could use a real, some, some real authenticity here. Yes. There's great opportunity in ambiguity. Yes. It's an exciting time.

And it's all also a challenging time for some of our people. So let's talk about that. If you do not address what's really happening in your organization or on your team, if you don't address it, if you toxic positivity it, pretend it's not there. Try and, you know, gaslight people into thinking that it's not happening or things aren't hard right now, if you do that, you're invalidating the people that you're leading and you are missing a huge opportunity to meet them

where they're at and to build an even stronger re workforce where we all work through this together. So embrace ambiguity, absolutely. And also speak the truth around where it can be tricky. Do as much as you can to alleviate the ambiguity, to give as much structure as possible, name the ambiguity. If you don't know then name it. If you don't know where you're going.

I think one of the most powerful things I've ever seen working with an organization was when a leadership team stood up in front of their workforce and said, you guys, we don't know what is gonna happen with this. We don't know. And we wanna have all the answers for you and we wanna give you the perfect template and we don't have it. So right now we really need to have a coactive conversation on how we can navigate this time together. And I'll tell you the sense of relief in the room. And the truth that got spoken in the room will, is incredibly powerful, powerful when the rest of the workforce, um, on that, in that particular location kind of led out a sigh of relief because what had been happening before that was that people were pretending that it was fine and they were embrace change and it's hard and it's good and we're gonna get through this, but they weren't actually speaking to the truth of what was happening.

So speak to the truth. And then a, of course, circling back, take really good care of yourself, do everything you personally can individually as a leader, as an employee, as whatever, do everything you personally can to really take care of yourself and to reduce your, um, ambiguity and increase your control and influence. And then somewhere in the middle there, you're gonna have a different equation and it's gonna support you in moving forward. So, uh, I think that's it. I think this is a very long video. I don't even

know where we're at on time. I wasn't timing it. So I'm gonna close up. We'll put this on the blog. I hope this is helpful to you. Uh, if this is helpful, please let us know. You can send a note to info@activechoices.com. If these are helpful, I will always do more. Um, and if you want, yeah, if you want to talk with us, if we can be helpful to you in your organization, please do reach out. I'm happy to have a conversation with you. If you'd like to, um, start to integrate some of this work and some of this methodology into your company or into your personal leadership. All right. Take care of yourself. And we will be in touch with you soon. Bye.