

Culture Club



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What makes your company unique?

Many times, people say their company's culture makes them stand out. But what exactly is that? And in the daily grind of selling work, scheduling work, providing service and invoicing clients, who has time to focus on culture?

"One reason organizational culture does not make the priority list of leaders is that it is hard to define," explains Jamie Notter, a consultant, speaker and author who helps organizations perform better by strengthening their culture. "It's squishy. It's complex. Sometimes, it's even contradictory."

What Notter means is that even in organizations where culture seems well-defined, "employees will experience it in different ways and even describe it differently."

It turns out, however, that the complex nature of culture actually drives its power. Creating a culture is unlike any other business endeavor; it involves creating an intangible set of subtle rules and ideas that are often difficult to manage.

"Not everything that happens in a business is based on visible, objective and formal rules," says Mark Williams in his book, "Fit In! The Unofficial Guide to Corporate Culture". "Some things are more subtle; they live between the lines of the company manual. These informal rules are a powerful hidden force."

Unlike products and strategies, which can be copied, culture cannot be easily duplicated, so it can become a competitive advantage. This is why "whether your company employs three people or 300 people, in one office or five, every leader should constantly be working toward a singular company culture where employees feel aligned with the company mission," explains Eric Markowitz in

Inc. magazine.

Culture shock

I'm sure you've read about the cool organizational cultures that companies like Google, Zappos and Netflix have created. But a company can't create a culture like that if that's not what they are all about.

"Culture is not about being cool. It's about reinforcing what drives the success of the enterprise, and subsequently being able to adapt the culture (sometimes one process at a time) as markets and internal dynamics shift," says Markowitz.

Notter defines culture as "the collection of words, actions, thoughts and 'stuff' that clarifies and reinforces what a company truly values."

More simply, culture is consistent, observable patterns of behavior in organizations. "We are what we repeatedly do," Aristotle said so many ages ago.



"A strong and clear culture can give everyone a proper framework to work within," says Todd McKinnon, co-founder and CEO of Okta, an identity management services business. "As you grow it becomes harder to communicate everything, to get consensus on every decision or to create a process and procedure for everything."

Here are six key strategies that McKinnon learned when overcoming culture creation hurdles at his business:

- 1. Culture King.** Companies need someone who is directly responsible for culture, McKinnon says. This person can create a culture team, he recommends, to help continually move everyone in the right direction.
- 2. Set the Tone.** Culture is shaped by how company leaders act. The leadership team should embody the vision of the company. If a teamwork culture is ideal, then making sure the executive team works together is important, McKinnon describes. If transparency is vital, then the leaders must be transparent as well, even during challenging times, he explains.
- 3. Structure Culture.** Organizational structure drives culture. For example, Apple famously elevated its design group by having its members report directly to the CEO. An engineering-driven company, for instance, would have a hard time proving it values product design if its engineering teams are buried in the hierarchy, McKinnon says.
- 4. Meet Outside the Office.** Invite employees who exemplify the culture you want to build to an offsite meeting, McKinnon suggests. Ask them what they like and don't like about the current culture. Ask them to define culture. And ask them if culture matters. "Questions will go unanswered," he says. "There will be disagreement. You won't define culture by the end of the offsite, but you will know where you're headed, why and how to get there."

5. Maintain Focus. Every business owner wants to run a company where everyone is happy all of the time, but that is unrealistic, McKinnon says. Owners who keep changing things to meet everyone's needs will not have a focused culture. Decide what will really move the needle for your services and clients, and keep that focus.

6. Talk A Lot. "Communicate your values and culture explicitly and continuously, both internally and externally," McKinnon says. "Employees must understand your culture and why it's important. Reward employees who advance your culture and be open and honest with those who don't."

Focusing on culture can create positive impact on the business overall. "Done well, culture will bleed into employees who will spread your culture," McKinnon explains. "As your company grows, culture will help keep it on track, steer hiring decisions for the people who will maintain that success and safeguard your company from spiraling into something you don't recognize."

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