Build a Culture of Excellence

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Have you ever tried to describe being in love?

It's an interesting exercise that involves an emotion with many facets and potentially encompasses a range of feelings. Some people believe it can also be subjective, considering one's unique beliefs, background, and how they experience the world.

"Customers will never love a company until the employees love it first." – Simon Sinek

Now, stop and think about the word "culture."

Culture is one of the most important elements of any high-performing team. Yet too many leaders don't stop to think about how to build a strong culture.

Or they can't quite articulate reasons why some are strong, and others are not.

Instead, they resort to canned words like "work hard, play hard," "get stuff done," or "take care of each other." Some others revert to their mission or vision statement or use bullet points from the set of values in which they operate.

It's like saying that you're in love with someone because they accept you for who you are. Yes, that's true, but isn't love so much more? Isn't it a combination of tangible actions and behaviors over time that create a deep connection and sense of longing?

This article is designed to outline specific components that makeup culture. It offers any owner, executive, or leader of people a framework to evaluate the elements within

their business and provides tangible strategies for improving this obscure concept that we can all agree matters tremendously in business.

Leaders have a responsibility to communicate a vision and create an environment that transforms this vision into a reality while generating meaningful outcomes. And doing this effectively requires culture.

While the concept seems straightforward in theory, achieving it requires intentional learning, practice, and mastery over time. Let's delve into three areas that are crucial for impacting organizational culture.

"Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results." – Andrew Carnegie

Trust

Creating conditions of trust is essential for building high-performing teams. Trust signals to employees that they are safe and fosters participation by encouraging them to express their unique abilities and input confidently.

1. **Mission, Vision, Values**

Mission communicates why an organization exists. Vision refers to a desired outcome that a company strives to achieve. Values are the working principles each member must operate within to accomplish a common goal.

These shared philosophies will lay the foundation for ensuring that each member of the organization understands the purpose, the

direction of the team, and how best to work as a cohesive unit.

Strengthening commitment to values begins to develop commonality amongst team members, cultivating an atmosphere where everyone is moving in the same direction.

"Become the kind of leader that people would follow voluntarily; even if you had no title or position." – Brian Tracy

2. Transparency

How decisions are made within an organization has a direct impact on a team's assurance that their best interest is being considered. This isn't necessarily whether decisions end up being correct or effective, but more speaks to how decisions are formulated within an organization.

Some organizations choose to adopt a more top-down approach, where senior leadership makes all strategic decisions for the organization.

Other organizations adhere to a more collaborative process where the decision-making process is entrusted to various levels within the organization by eliciting input and in some cases, transferring authority to make decisions to field leaders.

It can be helpful to know that both strategies can exist in the same ecosystem. The important component to building trust is ensuring that there is transparency around which philosophy you are adopting in certain situations.

By proactively communicating how decisions are made, the field is more likely to accept or at the very least, acknowledge the logic behind decisions that could be impacting their workflow and ability to perform their duties.

Imagine for a moment that you have been in a role for the past five years. You've never had any disciplinary action taken against you, your annual performance reviews have been above average to exceptional, your client feedback has been positive, and you have demonstrated consistent competence within the role.

You show up one day to learn that one of your counterparts was recently promoted to a larger territory. This colleague had been on the job for less time, had less experience managing complex issues, and arguably had been less consistent in producing quality outcomes.

You hadn't heard of any pre-existing criteria for this new opportunity and weren't even aware of an interview process that had taken place. How would you feel about this decision?

Chances are, not great.

Decisions like this happen every day in businesses of all sizes, so it is important to take a step back and identify the areas that have the most impact on your employees and clients.

I encourage all executives to take time to understand their approach to this important responsibility.

Implementing multi-dimensional feedback can be an effective way to understand the level of transparency that exists in your organization.

Hiring a leadership coach also offers a strategic sounding board to develop the best approaches to your unique situation.

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." – African Proverb

3. Information

In this hyper-connected world, information has become readily available at the click of a button or scroll of a screen.

Companies must recognize how information flows within the organization to make sure their teams are armed with the necessary resources and details required to execute their daily tasks.

There are larger, more obvious pieces of information. For example, a new operating system change, implementation of a client-facing software, changes in compensation plans, dissolving a product line, and acquiring a new business.

However, there are a variety of more subtle pieces of information that influence awareness and trust within an organization.

Consider, for example, a small enhancement to an existing platform, an upcoming social gathering for clients, a potential threat to the business, an emerging market opportunity, the recent discovery of significant customer feedback, and a change in personnel within a cross-functional department that interacts with your team.

Leaders must decide how information will be distributed, who will disseminate it, and how often.

In today's hybrid environment, they must also consider the mode in which information is delivered. Will communication be pushed down throughout the organization? Or will you empower others to manage the flow of information relevant to their cross-functional duties?

"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." – Benjamin Franklin

The important piece is to recognize the impact that information has on the organization. Fully informed teams will operate more efficiently because each member remains educated on the many factors that contribute to their performance.

More complex organizations with interlocking departments and geographical challenges must be even more diligent in producing tangible outcomes in this key area of trust.

Proper information flow also ensures there is a sense of inclusion within the organization. It creates reliability and confidence within the workforce that resources and knowledge are made available for their success.

People

Promoting an effective team environment is essential for achieving sustained performance.

By creating a cohesive workplace, leaders can combine the necessary ingredients to unlock the hidden potential within the organization.

The following principles outline three key aspects that contribute to developing a team.

"There is almost no limit to the potential of an organization that recruits good people, raises them up as leaders, and continually develops them." – John Maxwell

1. Recruiting

Bringing top talent onto the team is one of the most critical elements of a successful culture.

Leaders who don't have a consistent window into the organization's talent pipeline are at risk of falling behind.

Especially as technology continues to advance, the need for high-caliber people will become increasingly more difficult.

Executives should start by creating alignment within the organization for the competencies required to be effective in each role.

Communicating these attributes broadly helps in two specific ways. First, it helps reinforce each ability with existing employees. Secondly, it provides a framework for every member of the team to share within their personal and professional networks.

This can serve as a complimentary strategy to your talent acquisition manager and can often lead to employee referrals which typically result in stronger retention and overall production.

While each opportunity might require a different set of competencies, I would encourage every leader to consider the value of "attitude" within their hiring practices.

Hiring for attitude can be an effective strategy for building a powerful culture. Each person you select to bring onto the team will make an impact on how the team operates.

Ensuring good teammates is vital to collaboration, support, and managing conflict within the workplace. Great attitudes help build resilient teams and produce positive working behaviors during difficult times.

"None of us is as smart as all of us." – Ken Blanchard

2. Diversity

As companies strive to innovate and stay competitive, it will become increasingly important to assemble teams that include a variety of perspectives, abilities, and approaches to carrying out a common vision.

Cultivating a diverse team ensures an opportunity to bring forward the best ideas and strategies for problem-solving by tapping into the unique experiences and styles that exist in the world.

Building a diverse team strengthens a team's ability to consider a wider range of options,

leading to more effective decision-making, improved creativity, and better innovation for delivering value to clients.

By 2030, all baby boomers will be 65 years or older, and companies must also position themselves to attract high-quality talent from younger generations.

Prioritizing diversity ensures that organizations can attract the best candidates and appeal to an evolving client base. Consider, for example, extroverted people, deep thinkers, natural problem-solvers, highly creative minds, broad experiences across cultures and industries, communication tendencies, and learning styles.

Assess the various strengths that exist within your team. Identify additional backgrounds that would enhance your team dynamics.

Have a plan to onboard talent that can complement and expand the team's capabilities.

"If we are to preserve culture we must continue to create it." – Johan Huizinga

3. Coaching

Gone are the days of top-down management approaches where authoritative command and control styles are valued.

Coaching refers to a developmental process where more experienced and skilled individuals provide guidance, feedback, and support to employees.

Unlike traditional management styles, coaching focuses on empowering individuals to discover their unique talents and develop their abilities through active listening, thoughtful questioning, and encouragement.

"Managers help people see themselves as they are. Leaders help people to see themselves better than they are." – Jim Rohn

Implementing a culture of coaching offers organizations an effective way to cultivate talent by improving their influence amongst employees, thereby improving confidence, skill sets, and overall commitment to the organization.

Coaching helps individuals grow professionally which creates stronger engagement and improved productivity.

Organizations across the globe are investing heavily in developing leaders at all levels in areas such as communication, emotional intelligence, feedback, and managing conflict.

Companies can benefit from hiring executive coaches or leadership consultants to assist their teams in developing these key leadership traits and providing ongoing counsel for improving their effectiveness.

While this article is not intended to unpack the many nuances of coaching, I have included a simple model for communication that can have a tremendous impact on any team's ability to work more effectively together.

Communication is thought to be the single biggest obstacle within team dynamics. Far too often, leaders fail to deliver a clear message.

Employees are often met with vague comments about their performance, or a long list of subjective topics for them to improve.

This lack of clarity can leave employees feeling lost and often frustrated with not knowing exactly what is expected of them.

Taking an eyes, ears, and heart approach to providing feedback can be an effective and easy way to share valuable perspectives that help people clearly understand the path to improvement. Using your eyes helps you say what is seen. Ears help you say what is heard. And the heart helps you say what is felt.

"Communication works for those who work on it."
– John Powell

Consider, for example, giving an employee guidance on becoming a leader in the organization.

Below is a comparison between some common mistakes people make, followed by a more effective way to communicate.

Common mistakes

"John, I'm excited that you want to be a leader in the organization and be considered for the next promotion. To do this, I'd like you to…."

- Be a team player
- Help other people
- Lead by example
- Speak up
- Become our 'go-to' person

Do these sound familiar?

Now, let's look at a few statements that can have a more meaningful impact on this employee.

"John, I'm excited that you want to be a leader in the organization and be considered for the next promotion. To do this, leadership looks like…"

- You consistently deliver quality outcomes
- Being on time and prepared for all internal meetings
- Conducting 1 team training per quarter
- Giving everybody your full attention in conversations (not being distracted by your phone or checking emails)

"Leadership sounds like…"

- Sharing best practices in team meetings
- Giving praise to your colleagues in group settings
- Asking questions in a respectful way
- Highlighting the benefits of new initiatives

"Leadership feels like…"

- Showing support to your colleagues when they have lost a big deal
- Offering encouragement to the team when things get difficult

- Being humble about your personal accomplishments
- Genuine interest in other people's success

Notice the difference? Try implementing this model. It works.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." – George Bernard Shaw

Systems

The last element of building a strong culture is designing systems.

Systems refer to processes that create the environment for great teams to work effectively together.

Here are the top 3 systems high-performing teams can integrate into their business.

"Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." – Henry Ford

1. Collaboration

Having a strategy for collaboration ensures that leaders create guidelines around the creative process.

This should include scheduled time and a clear agenda.

Consider, for example, identifying objectives, assessing needs, selecting the right tools and resources, gathering feedback, giving voice to each participant, promoting a no-judgment zone, and a collective measurement of effectiveness.

Outlining these principles will build workplace safety and is a great step toward enhancing the spirit of partnership.

Leaders should aim to create a repeatable process and consider selecting a captain to facilitate these sessions and include an executive summary that can be shared with all stakeholders.

This serves as an opportunity to develop future leaders within the organization while permitting others to think creatively about generating business outcomes.

2. Problem-Solving

Even the strongest teams face struggles. Consider, for example, a mistake from a cross-functional department, significant client issues, or a failed product launch. Each of these examples can derail a team's culture if handled poorly.

"You are what you do, not what you say you'll do." – Carl Jung

The best leaders can identify and anticipate these undercurrents and have strategies for addressing them appropriately.

I'd encourage you to cement a simple plan that includes who, what, when, where, and how.

When an issue arises:

- Who will be informed of the issue? Who will be involved in developing the solution?

- What is our desired outcome?
- When will we meet about this problem?
- Where will we meet?
- How will we manage the issue while honoring our mission, vision, and values?

Incorporating your company principles during times of distress is critical. This reinforces your leadership integrity and signals a broader importance to the problem-solving process and the solution itself.

Having a consistent "call to action" throughout this process can ensure that your team is moving toward an exceptional outcome.

"Who is doing what, by when?" is a great question you can ask each time for the team to walk away with clear action steps.

Scheduling routine follow-up meetings until the issue is resolved will be necessary to ensure an exceptional outcome.

"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership." – Harvey Firestone

By implementing a shared process to tackle issues, your team is less likely to expend energy blaming each other and move quicker toward solutions.

Your team will appreciate having a plan and have more confidence in knowing exactly how to handle situations as they arise.

3.   Learning

Promoting an environment for continuous learning takes effort.

This isn't simply quarterly training on new products and services or delivering great customer service, although these standard approaches serve a place within a business.

Continuous learning starts with the belief that all success and failure come with lessons we can use to be even more effective the next time.

Separating accountability from the learning process will improve your team's ability to grow and develop. Constantly reminding the team of this separation will also help reduce anxiety about making mistakes which can lead to improved accuracy and execution.

Applying this approach to the above outline for problem-solving is also a great way to reinforce an atmosphere of learning.

"The beautiful thing about learning is nobody can take it away from you." – B.B. King

One other strategy is to implement AARs. After Action Reviews is a tool developed by the U.S. Army in the 1970's (credit: The Wharton School, The University of Pennsylvania). This was designed to help soldiers learn from both their mistakes and achievements.

It is a simple process of actively discussing the following questions:

- How did we do (relative to our strategy)?

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- What did we do well?
- What can we use to be even more effective next time?

individuals together to unlock potential, inspire growth, and build a high-caliber team that produces sustained results.

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast." – Peter Drucker

Implementing this tool for individual and team success is a great way to invest in the group's collective knowledge, confidence, and skill sets.

These questions are designed to reinforce great execution by highlighting what specifically was done well and can be replicated.

It is an effective way to spark development and shout-out recognition for a well-done job. This improves learning and boosts morale.

Creating a space to review mistakes will also help people reframe this lesson as something they will take into the future instead of dwelling on the past.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit." – Aristotle

By now, I trust that you've gained a much stronger grasp on culture. The tangible actions and behaviors that over time create a deep sense of connection, development, and progress toward a common outcome.

Ultimately, the businesses that can cultivate leaders who can skillfully manage trust, people, and systems will have the greatest advantage within any marketplace.

By consistently managing culture, leaders can create an environment that brings talented