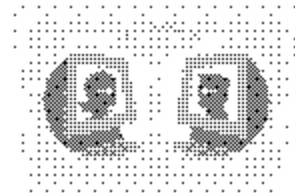


Culture: What Does It Mean to Your Company's Success?

by Mary Bresnahan

Culture is created from the moment the doors are opened for business. Part of it comes from how you envision your company. How will you work and relate with your clients? It's sort of like thinking of your family as an organization. We know families are all different and operate differently. For example, who is responsible for what tasks?



Often I have heard company owners say they are too small to consider issues about culture or employee relations. Not so. Maybe the way employees are treated is different from one company to another, for example in a large corporation versus a small company. Nevertheless, they are still employees, hired for a purpose and important to a company's success.

Because of our experiences in our family culture, we might have different ideas about what is normal or functional. For example, the family that is together for all meals or at least most of them in a week versus the one that is never together. Or, the family that never spends time together as a group talking about the events and experiences of each member. Either way, what the members experience is "normal" for them.

Now, carry this over to the workplace. Have you ever heard the complaint, "They (management) never tell us anything." Well, maybe management does and just isn't heard or maybe they don't and either think they have or don't have to. What about the reverse: employees never fill management in on day-to-day events. Suddenly something happens (an angry customer or missed shipment) and management is surprised and scurrying around to fix it.

In either of these situations, the size of the company doesn't matter. In a large company, it is easier for communication to break down because it has to go through more channels and interpretations. It also takes a great deal more effort to communicate with everyone. Therefore, errors can, and do, happen more frequently.

This is an example of why creating a functional culture is so important. When a company is small and just beginning, there is no culture. The first employees of the company create it. It will receive its direction from the president. Sometimes the leader gets so busy doing what s/he is good at and likes to do that s/he forgets to talk to his/her employees because s/he assumes they are taking care of the day-to-day tasks of running the company. It is also safe to say that the longer communicating with the employees is put off, the harder it becomes. Additionally, it is harder to have an honest and respectful conversation because anger and hostility have built up.

While it is important to trust and rely on staff to take care of operational matters, it is foolish to be too far out of the loop and therefore not know what is happening.

Communication is a critical element in every culture. If the leader makes an effort to be available, and emphasizes the importance of communication with his/her employees, then an effort will be made to make this part of the culture. (This assumes that when hiring, the leader has looked for this trait.)

It is not uncommon when a company is growing that some errors are made in choosing the right people. Often the leader or the person doing the hiring is not clear about what traits and skills are needed for the company. Additionally, little thought is given to what will be needed in the future. (We just want help NOW.) Just as a company has a business plan, there must be a plan for the human side of the business. It should include:

- What will be delegated?
- What specific skills are needed?
- What talents are needed?

- What type of personality is needed?
- What orientation will be provided?
- What relationship and role will the new person/people have?
- How will the new person have a sense of ownership/pride in the business? Is the goal clear?
- Will you/Can you trust your new hire?

These factors will be the basis for your culture. You are building the foundation upon which your business will grow and prosper - or not. Think of it like the familiar children's story, "Three Little Pigs."

Even if you are a company that has been in business for a while or has several employees already, the culture you have has been/will be critical to your long-term success. We know that the business world has changed tremendously in the last ten, or even five, years. Therefore, the way we manage or run our business has to change too, for long-term success.

You can make changes to achieve a more favorable culture if you are not pleased with your current state of affairs. It will take some effort, just as when you started your business; but as you know, it can be well worth it.

Consider making an investment in your people and the future of your company for both you and your employees. In addition, you will also be able to keep your really good people and attract more like them.

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