

3 Lessons All Leaders Should Learn From The Letter To Shareholders By Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos



Denise Lee Yohn, CONTRIBUTOR

I write about brand leadership. [FULL BIO](#) ✓

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

TWEET THIS



Bezos's shareholders letter conveys how unique Amazon's company's culture is and how it's not for everyone.

Continuing an annual tradition, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos used his recent [letter to shareholders](#) to do more than convey the generic platitudes that most other annual reports contain. He pulls back the curtain at Amazon and explains some of what drives the extraordinary performance of his company (in the most recent quarter profit more than doubled and sales continued to accelerate). Bezos describes what makes the workplace culture at Amazon so unique and, in doing so, provides valuable insights about culture-building.



Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has cultivated a unique, valuable culture in this organization. (Photo by Michael Kovac/Getty [+])

All leaders can learn at least three things from Bezos's letter:

Culture should be linked to customer experience. Bezos writes that staying ahead of “ever-rising customer expectations” is why he insists on the “high standards” of performance that is enforced at the company. Linking culture and customer experience ensures that culture is cultivated with the customer in mind. Without a critical link between the two, it's quite possible to end up with a workplace culture that makes employees happy and engaged, but those employees don't do the same for customers. A leader should ask herself, "what are the specific attitudes and behaviors that my employees need to produce the customers experiences we want to deliver" and then groom the culture accordingly.

A unique culture is a valuable one. Bezos describes the “unrelenting customer obsession, ingenuity, and commitment to operational excellence” of Amazon's employees, which reflects how strongly the company's culture is oriented around performance. Moreover, his comment that "high standards are fun!" clarifies how positively high standards are viewed at the company. While employees at other

companies might find such a strong performance culture too intense or see it as a conflict with a more nurturing environment, it's clear that Amazon's employees relish it.

However the leadership lesson is not that every organization should have a performance culture like Amazon's. Every organization is different, so every culture should be too. Bezos's shareholders letter conveys how unique Amazon's company's culture is and how it's not for everyone. 🐦 That's what makes it so impactful and valuable. It attracts the right people, repels others, and guides those who choose to be in it toward results. Leaders should seek to cultivate a unique culture that fits its unique goals and priorities.

Culture-building should be driven by leaders but shared by all. Bezos also admits not having high operational process standards when he started the company. He explains that that he had to learn them, saying, "my colleagues were my tutors." These comments convey an important nuance about culture-building that is often overlooked by leaders: Culture can -- and should be -- nurtured and reinforced by everyone in the organization. While leaders must prioritize culture-building in their organizations and set the right conditions for the desired culture to thrive, they must also empower employees to cultivate the culture as well. And they should even be open to receiving input on how to better align their own attitudes and behaviors with the desired culture. Culture isn't built through top-down efforts only -- culture-building must pervade the entire organization.

Underlying these three lessons about culture-building from Bezos's letter is perhaps the most important take away from it. He reminds everyone that Amazon is staying committed to the core values they set at the inception of the company, writing, "This year marks the 20th anniversary of our first shareholder letter, and our core values and approach remain unchanged." Few leaders have the discipline and commitment to remain as steadfast to their culture as Bezos has -- especially through turbulent times such as those of the past 20 years -- but that's what great leaders do.

Denise Lee Yohn is a brand expert, speaker, and author of [What Great Brands Do](#) and [FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies](#).