Denise Lee Yohn on the power of organizational fusion: An interview by Bob Morris

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Denise Lee Yohn is the go-to expert on brand leadership for national media outlets, an in-demand speaker and consultant, and an influential writer.

Denise is the author of the bestselling book, **_What Great Brands Do_**: _The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest_ and more recently, **_FUSION_**: _How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies_.

News media including FOX Business TV, CNBC, _The Wall Street Journal_, and _The New York Times_ call on Denise when they want an expert point-of-view on hot business issues. With her expertise and inspiring approach, Denise has become an in-demand keynote speaker and has addressed business leaders around the world.

Denise enjoys challenging readers to think differently about brand-building in her regular contributions to _Harvard Business Review_ and _Forbes_, and has been a sought-after writer for publications including _Fast Company_, Entrepreneur, Knowledge@Wharton, ChangeThis, Seeking Alpha, _QSR Magazine_, among others.

Denise initially cultivated her brand-building approaches through several high-level positions in advertising and client-side marketing. She headed Sony Electronic Inc.'s first ever brand office, where she was the vice president/general manager of brand and strategy and garnered major corporate awards. Consulting clients have included Target, Oakley, Dunkin' Donuts, and other leading companies.

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Before discussing _Fusion_, a few general questions. First, of all the films that you have seen, which – in your opinion – best dramatizes important business principles? Please explain.

The Pursuit of Happyness, starring Will Smith as Gardner, is one of the best movies on selling and achieving success. Gardner demonstrates such ingenuity, perseverance, and passion to get the job he wants — it's inspiring. It's also instructive because the way he interacts with people is so smart ("He must have had on some really nice pants" is one of the best lines!) He refuses to be a victim and sacrifices so much, and in the end, he achieves his goal. That seems to be how successful business people approach their work.

Here are several of my favorite quotations to which I ask you to respond. First, from Michael Porter: "The essence of strategy is choosing what *not* to do."

This is so true. Most businesspeople don't lack for opportunity; in fact, one of the biggest problems entrepreneurs have is too many opportunities. We can't do everything, we can't be all things to all people. We must have the clarity and discipline to know what to say "no" to so that we can say "yes" to what's important.

From Thomas Edison: "Vision without execution is hallucination."

This is one of my favorites too. Many people get too caught up on "the vision thing" and being visionary as a leader; but in my experience, effective leaders are those who translate a vision into specific strategies and tactics and who build up an organization to execute on them with excellence.

Most change initiatives either fail or fall far short of original (perhaps unrealistic) expectations. More often than not, resistance is cultural in nature, the result of what James O'Toole so aptly characterizes as "the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom." Here's my question: How best to avoid or overcome such resistance?

I don't think you can avoid resistance and be successful. To overcome it, you must diagnose the resistance clearly and carefully. Who is resisting the most and why? Often times people resist change because they fear the unknown. If that's the case, we must do two things: 1., make the current state intolerable (explain or create the burning platform), and 2., create more certainty around the future (use case studies and stories to show what the outcome might look like.) Sometimes resistance is more systemic or institutional — e.g., organizational design, lack of resources, outdated systems, etc. In that case, the diagnosis should reveal what barriers can reasonably be addressed and how.

What are the defining characteristics of a workplace culture within which personal growth and professional development are most likely to thrive?

There is no one type of culture where both thrive for everyone, but for each person, it happens when your values and passions align with the organization's.

Recent research indicates that, on average, less than 30% of employees in a U.S. company are actively and productively engaged. The others are either passively engaged ("mailing it in") or actively disengaged, undermining the success of their organization? How do you explain this situation? What's the problem?

Most organizations aren't engaging their employees in the right way. Most engagement efforts are designed to make employees happy, but employees don't only want to be happy. Employees really want to know they are doing valuable work, to be equipped and empowered to do it, and to be recognized and rewarded when they do it.

In your opinion, what specifically must be done immediately to increase the percentage of actively and productively engaged employees?

I recommend that business leaders develop employee brand engagement.

Employee brand engagement is achieved when employees are aligned and involved with the organization's brand. It requires the company to have a clearly articulated brand identity and its leaders to cultivate a positive, multidimensional connection between employees and that brand identity. The goal is to make sure employees know what the brand stands for and are committed to reinforcing it with their actions.

Employee brand engagement not only ensures that employees build the right customer relationships in the right way, but also it helps them feel excited about and satisfied by their work and emotionally connected to their colleagues, customers, and companies.

Now please shift your attention to *FUSION*. For those who have not as yet read it, hopefully your responses to these questions will stimulate their interest and, better yet, encourage them to purchase a copy and read the book ASAP. First, when and why did you decided to write it?

In some ways I have been writing *FUSION* for years. When I wrote my first book, ***What Great Brands Do***, back in 2014, I explained the first brand-building principle that "separates the best from the rest" is Great Brands Start Inside. I showed that great brands don't start brand-building with external communications such as a clever name, cool logo and tagline, or big advertising spend. Great brands start by cultivating a strong brand-led culture inside their organizations. ***FUSION*** picks up this one principle and explores it further.

But I also recently reached a point in work with clients on building and repositioning their brands where I had to write FUSION. I had become increasingly frustrated that my efforts were sometimes held back because of cultural issues inside the organization. I found that some leaders didn't want to include culture as part of brand-building or they didn't appreciate the need to tight align and seamlessly integrate their brand and culture — to create brand-culture fusion — and that prevented them from realizing the full potential of their organization and their brand.

I also have grown increasingly concerned about the state of culture-building in business. By now, most business leaders know that culture is important, but most don't know how to cultivate culture. Most of existing rhetoric on culture either overstates the impact of the trappings of culture (like free beer on Fridays) or suggests that all companies need to have warm and friendly cultures where managers are nice and nurturing (completely untrue.) I wanted to set the record straight on what a "good" culture is and how to cultivate culture.

Were there any head-snapping revelations while writing it? Please explain.

I personally didn't have any revelations but I've heard from many that the importance of cultivating a unique culture is revelatory to many.

Many business leaders think there is one "right" kind of organizational culture that works in all companies — but that's just not true. Beyond a certain baseline, there is no universal definition of a good culture. Every organization is different, so its culture should be too. A warm and family-like culture might fuel one company's growth but might backfire completely at another's which must be more competitive and driven by standards.

Imitating another company's brand leads to a weak and unsustainable business; imitating someone else's culture does as well. Each organization needs a distinctive culture that expresses its unique purpose and core values, orients everyone in the organization to the unique challenges and opportunities the business faces, and develops the mindsets and behaviors that enable its employees to deliver on-brand customer experiences.

What specifically does brand-culture fusion involve for those primarily responsible for achieving it?

Brand-culture fusion is primarily a leadership responsibility. Leaders at the top of their organizations must cultivate it. They can't delegate it to HR or marketing leaders. They—and everyone else in the organization—needs the top leaders to champion it.

Leaders must align their communications and behaviors with their desired culture. They must ensure that leaders in the middle layers of the organizational hierarchy are thoroughly engaged in cultivating the culture — they're often overlooked but they wield tremendous influence on the rest of the workforce. And leaders must understand the importance of leadership decisions about people—such as hiring, firing, and promoting them—in laying the groundwork for brand-culture fusion. Not only must they get the right people on the bus, but also they must demonstrate important it is to make decisions in line with the desired culture.

You recommend five strategies for aligning/fusing/integrating brand and culture. What is the ultimate objective for each of the strategies? First, "Organize and operate on Brand"

Implement an organizational design and run your operations to give your organization the structure and processes necessary to operationalize your culture.

Next, "Create Culture-Changing Employee Experiences"

Deliberately design and manage your company's employee experience—just as you would customer experiences—so that every facet of an employee's journey throughout his or her connection to your organization encourages and enables your desired culture.

Then, "Sweat the Small Stuff"

Ensure even the most mundane or minute aspect of your organization—from its "rituals" and "artifacts" (things your organization regularly does and creates to commemorate or symbolize important achievements or events) to its policies and procedures—advances and supports your desired culture.

Also, "Ignite Your Transformation"

Use employee brand engagement tactics—stage employee brand engagement experiences, launch creative communications campaigns, and develop and deploy employee brand engagement toolkits—to kick-start the fusion process and then to regain focus and momentum when necessary.

Finally, "Build Your Brand from the Inside Out"

If your culture is so powerful or established that it doesn't make sense to try to change it to achieve brand-culture fusion, leverage your existing culture to define or re- define your brand identity.

Which of the five strategies seems to be the most difficult to execute effectively? Why?

Employee experience is a relatively new discipline so some leaders are only now learning how to design and manage it, so it might seem most difficult but you can apply the same methods and tools that produce successful customer experience to the design of your employee experience.

Organizing and operating on-brand is probably the least common, because most people don't realize how much impact organizational design and operational processes can have on culture. It might seem like they're unrelated, when in fact, they have so much influence on culture because they determine how employees work together.

After your readers absorb and digest the material in Chapter 2, why do you urge them to complete the *Brand-Culture Fusion Assessment*?

The Assessment walks you through the steps for determining the kind of core values and culture you should be cultivating to successfully support your brand identity, understanding how far that desired culture is from your current culture (i.e., how much brand-culture fusion you have today), and diagnosing the existing state of brand-culture fusion at your organization so you can pinpoint the areas that need the most improvement. It's online, free, and produces a personalized report for every person who takes it, so it's a valuable tool for all leaders.

Dozens of your observations caught my eye. Please respond to the question that follows each of these. First, "Brand-culture fusion is a never-ending responsibility — a leader's responsibility." (Page xxvi)

Brand-culture fusion is a journey, not a destination. It's not a box to check off or a task to complete. Any culture change requires ongoing leadership because culture depends on people and people change, forget, veer, and turn over. Brand-culture fusion requires an even-longer-standing commitment
because as the market, your competitors, and your customers' needs and wants change, so do the requirements for your brand and therefore your culture. If you want to fully integrate and align your
brand and culture, you will need to constantly evolve both.

Rely on your core values when making decisions about whom to hire, fire, and promote." (71) To what extent (if any) do any of the values change over time?

For most organizations, I recommend revisiting core values every 3-5 years to ensure they are still serving the people well. As noted above, as your context changes, your culture might need to change too. The key is to make changes to your values clearly and deliberately. If you don't clearly articulate why they're changing and what the new ones are, you'll either confuse people or cause them to think that they're not important.

Employee experience "is more a mindset than an initiative." (116) What are the defining characteristics of that mindset?

One aspect of the mindset is recognizing that the employer-employee relationship has changed and that employees must be actively engaged in the right ways. Another is understanding that employee experience can and should be designed and managed as you would customer experience, since it's just as critical to your organization's success — and that EX extends beyond recruiting and onboarding — it involves every interaction employees have throughout their relationship with your organization.

"When you engage your employees with your brand deeply and completely, you cultivate a culture that is so intertwined with your brand that they become inseparable." (147) At what point does it become "our brand" and "our culture"?

Ultimately they become one and the same, but only when they are fully aligned and integrated…when your brand and culture are interdependent and mutually reinforcing…when together they define what makes your company unique and valuable.

I am among those who cannot recall a prior time when the business world was more volatile, more uncertain, more complex, and more ambiguous than it is today. That said, change really does seem to be the only constant. In your opinion, how best to recognize the "early warning signs" of major change and then make appropriate adjustments of brand-culture fusion?

Watch out for the following:

• You're being outperformed in your category — particularly after holding a leadership position.
• Your brand value seems to be declining.
• You're experiencing high turnover or low recruitment success.
• Your employee or customer surveys show lots of room for improvement — even if it's not clear what needs to be improved.
• Your financial performance is shaky or unpredictable.

Which of the material you provide in *Fusion* will be most valuable to those now preparing for a career in business or who have only recently embarked on one? Please explain.

It's critical that all leaders understand the importance of purpose and values (Chapter 2), since they form the foundation for everything an organization does.

To first-time supervisors? Please explain.

I suggest you attend to EX as explained in Chapter 5, since what you do on a daily basis for your employees helps them understand your culture better than anything else. As a first-time manager you probably won't be involved in designing EX for the entire organization, but you can do it for your team. Also you can use rituals and artifacts as discussed in Chapter 6 to support and advance your company's culture in your group.

To C-level executives? Please explain.

The entire book is geared toward inspiring and equipping those in the C-suite so it's difficult for me to point to one section of material, but as noted before, top organizational leaders must understand and accept responsibility for cultivating culture so that makes Chapter 3 the most important.

Which question had you hoped to be asked during this interview – but weren't – and what is your response to it?

You've asked such great questions, Bob. I would only like to add that many people view culture as "soft stuff" but it's not. It's hard because it produces concrete results. It also requires hard work; it can't be taken for granted.

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Denise cordially invites you to check out the resources at these websites:

For more informatio, please click **here.**

To purchase the book, please click **here**.

To take the *Brand-Culture Fusion Assessment*, please click **here**.