

How To Fuse Your Brand With Your Work Culture

leadx.org/leadership-management/252-yohn-2

Kevin Kruse

March 26, 2018



Photo: Pixabay/ Raw Pixel

[The following is the full raw transcript for a LEADx Podcast interview, which has been lightly edited for clarity.]

Kevin Kruse: What happens when you fuse internal culture and external brand? Hello everyone, Kevin Kruse here, welcome to the LEADx Show, where once again we are helping you to stand out and to get ahead, at work and at home. Of course, what it means to get ahead at home, I don't know. I think it means awesome family life, great strong marriage, your kids love you, you love your kids, all is well.

Imagine for one second though, that you could generate massive employee engagement, at work on your team, and as a bonus, all your team members think that you are the best boss they ever had. Well, I personally teach the fundamentals of effective feedback, one on one meetings, coaching, goal setting, and I don't know like, six or seven courses or lessons on employee engagement. All of this is up in the LEADxAcademy. It's free for three days. Just go consume all this training and check it out for three days, and it's almost free after that. Check it out at [LEADx.org](https://leadx.org).

Our quote of the day? One of my favorites. "To win in the marketplace, you must first win in the workplace." That comes from the great Doug Conant. A friend of mine, fellow Philadelphian, gotten a chance to get to know Doug. Of course, he is the former CEO of

Campbell Soup. Great turnaround story there, and just a great example of, like wholehearted, heart-based leadership.

And another friend and guru who I respect immensely is our guest today. She's the go-to expert on brand building and an in-demand speaker and consultant. She's the author of the best selling book, *What Great Brands Do*, and she's here to talk about her new book, *Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*. Our guest is Denise Lee Yohn. Denise, welcome to the show.

Denise Lee Yohn: Hello Kevin.

Kruse: Alright, so we're gonna be talking about your new book in just a minute. But, I ask all of our guests the same first question, 'cause I love failure stories. I always think, you know, it's not win or lose, it's win or learn, and selfishly I want to learn from your failures, not just my own. So, give me one of your best failures.

Lee Yohn: It's nice to start off with a softball question Kevin, I love it, right?

Kruse: Right, right.

Lee Yohn: Okay, so I am an overachiever as you can imagine, being you know, an Asian female, straight-A student above all. Anyway, for my 40th birthday, I had set out my goal to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. And it was because I had wanted to do something significant. I had seen this movie where these young kids actually summited Kilimanjaro, so I'm like, "If those kids can do it, come on, I can do it. I'm in pretty good shape." So we plan this huge trip, my husband goes with me, we have this awesome experience, getting there, starting on the hiking trip and then kind of midway through, I started to get really sick. And I think it was a combination of altitude sickness and maybe some food poisoning or whatever, anyway it was not a pretty sight.

And so ultimately what ended up happening is this goal of summiting Kilimanjaro for my 40th birthday did not happen. I got up to like 16,000 feet, and then I was just like, "There's no way I can get up any further." And what was significant about that is that, because I'm an achiever, I didn't want to have to come back and tell all these people who I had said, "I'm climbing Kilimanjaro," to tell them that I had failed. But, that was actually the best thing that could have happened to me. I had to learn how to tell people and to own up to just the fact that I didn't accomplish something that I set out to do. And that was okay. You know we're not always going to succeed, we're not always gonna meet our goals but at least we tried. And I had a good time while I was doing it, despite being sick. So to me, that was the hardest thing to admit, that I hadn't succeeded in my goal, but it was probably the best thing.

Kruse: Yeah, that's an amazing story, and it's not one I realize that had happened. In the moment, like so you're sick, you're at 16,000 feet, were you just so physically sick, like you knew, "Like there's no way I can make it and just get me off this mountain," or was it, "Like oh my gosh, I can't leave. Like this is heartbreaking." What was it like?

Lee Yohn: It was both, so what happens is the night, you start climbing the summit, you get up

around midnight so you can start climbing around two o'clock, and so we all had kind of gone to bed around nine or ten o'clock. I got up at midnight. They tried to feed me something and not to get to graphic, it basically just kind of went through my system, so you know we get all suited up and we start climbing and within like 20 minutes, I was exhausted. And I thought, "Okay, I have to climb another 10 hours to get to the summit, there's no way that I'm going to do that."

So I have this real internal battle of do I just push myself and maybe, you know this point about exhaustion, and you know I don't know what would happen up there, or do I just make the decision, this isn't going to happen, and I'm gonna have to live with it. I end up doing the latter, and I think the deliberate choice to say, "I'm walking away from my goal," again was kind of part of that learning experience of saying, "Be okay with that." You know, own it and be okay with it.

Kruse: Yeah and this is something that in my own life, I'm 50 now so I've mellowed out a little bit but as a former super high achiever, I did realize that so much of achievement is about external validation, where am I on that bestseller list or that Inc list or whatever it is. And it takes some wisdom to realize, alright it really is about the journey and the process, not the ultimate goal there at the end.

Lee Yohn: Yeah I think we all spend way too much time managing perceptions as opposed to enjoying what we're doing, and so that was a real turning point for me.

Kruse: Well, thanks for sharing that, and again your new book is, *Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*. And you say, in most companies, internal culture and external brand are very disconnected and actually operate in different silos, so tell us more about that. Like what is the dysfunction that is going on out there?

Lee Yohn: Yeah well if you think about it, I think you know most CEOs or top leaders in an organization when they think about culture, who do they think of? Human Resources, right? Okay we just need to get the HR folks to taking care of our people. And then when they think about brand building? Who do they think of? Marketing. And so, HR's off here doing something, Marketing's off here doing something else, and so the efforts really aren't aligned and integrated and so there is a huge disconnect that can form, when you don't have these two things aligned, integrated, or as I call, fused together. One of the disconnects is just your employees get confused about, "Well if my cultural values or HR is saying one thing, but marketing is saying our brand is something else, what's really important?" You know? So, there's some confusion internally.

But I think the bigger risk is confusion and disconnect externally. Quite frankly I think that's why we've seen something like the Wells Fargo situation happen. Where, with their employees opening false accounts and doing all these other unethical practices, that's bad in and of itself, but I think what was particularly surprising is that I think we all thought Wells Fargo was this very kind of wholesome, old-fashioned company. They've got the stagecoach, they've got the

holiday adds with the snowman, making sure that you know, you get your packages in time, and so there was this real disconnect for customers to say, "Well, wait a minute. You know, like we might have expected some other bank to be engaged in these cutthroat practices but not our good old Wells Fargo." So there is often this disconnect that has big consequences.

Kruse: Yeah and when I read your book, a couple things that stood out at me when you talk about this disconnect, it made me realize, so my background is more from that HR side, employee engagement side, and there are a lot of HR people I know, heads of HR, who get all excited about, like employment branding. So they're trying to attract candidates to hire employees, so now they start working on these branding and campaign things for representing internal culture. And yet they almost all go out and get their own ad agencies or separate agencies that are employment branding agencies, completely separate from the brand agencies that the rest of their company's working with.

But it did make me wonder, okay if we're supposed to fuse the internal culture or internal brand with our external brand, like which comes first? Because in existing companies, like they're both churning along, so like how do we get them in sync or what drives what?

Lee Yohn: Yeah I would say, either/or, or both. You know it really kinda depends. I think it depends on really, which is stronger for you as an organization, so the example I'll give is when I was at Sony Electronics. This is back in the late 90s, early 2000s. And we had undergone a real investigation of what the Sony brand meant and what should continue to mean to customers in the new digital age. And we had developed a newly inspired brand vision and values, etc., and as we started to engage people internally with that, I started to work at the HR department, and to your point, in the past they had gone to their own agency, developed their own ads for recruitment, but what they realize is that those ads that they had been creating were very generic. You know they talked about great benefits and a pleasant working environment, blah, blah, whereas when they started to see our brand is all about innovation and imagination, and yeah innovating to your engineers or designers hearts' content, they realized that was a really powerful platform that they could use for their employment branding.

So that in that case, because the brand seemed to be stronger, more unique, more compelling, we worked together and this was one of my greatest points about working at Sony, was HR and the brand probably worked together to create this whole employment brand that was in sync with our consumer brand. But I will say that there are other companies where the culture is stronger than the brand, and one of the examples I talk about in the book is REI, the outdoor retailer. And they were started with these values of the love of the outdoors, and everyone who works there definitely embraces that mission of getting outdoors, and so a few years ago as the company was thinking about, "Well how do we commemorate our culture?" They decided for Black Friday, you know the most critical day in retail sales, they were actually going to give their employees the day off, and to encourage employees instead of working inside, go outdoors.

And then that turned into this Opt Outside campaign, which ended up being such a strong brand campaign for the company, but it started with the genesis of their culture being so special. So I think it can really be either or, or maybe sometimes it's a matter of bringing them both together.

Kruse: Yeah and it's, it's almost now an overused word now, but I think if it does come from culture and then goes out, it does feel like a more authentic brand. I mean it really is true, like REI, you walk in, and the people that work there love to be outdoors. They love, they know the stuff. And it's not because they've been trained in it or they passed a product knowledge quiz. So that whole, cutting through all of the fakeness to get an authentic brand, it does seem like it can come from inside out and strengthen that way. You mentioned Sony, you mentioned REI, you have another company or two you can share some insights about?

Lee Yohn: Well I open the book talking about Amazon, which I think is probably one of the most fascinating companies when you talk about brand and culture, especially in light of the New York Times expose that was written a few years ago. I don't know if your watchers and followers will remember but there was this article that was written in the New York Times about how horrible the culture was at Amazon. I think it was painful, bruising, relentless, all these horrible attributes. You know there were reports of people crying at their desks, and just succumbing to the stress of trying to meet their manager's expectations. And I think that a lot of people's reaction to that article was you know, Amazon sucks. Their corporate culture is horrible. Jeff Bezos as a CEO is a workplace bully, etc. etc., but what was interesting is that there was a subsegment of responders that said, "Wait a minute, I work at Amazon and I love it here. I love the competitive nature, the push to always be better. I love having a challenge that seems to impossible and then meeting it, all in service of becoming earth's most customer-centric company, which is Amazon's mission."

And I think that Amazon shows that, your culture doesn't have to be right for everyone. But it has to be right for the people who are working in it, and you need to give them a reason why you're operating the way you do. In Amazon's case, it was all about innovation and service of this extraordinary customer experience and customer service. And so it really makes sense that their brand and their culture are tightly woven together. They're mutually reinforcing, and I think that's a big part of the reason why they've been able to produce such phenomenal results.

Kruse: Yeah I mean really incredible company. Bezos and what he's done there. I'm fascinated by him, and with that example, I can remember when that article came out. I mean it was an interesting reaction from me because I read the article and I didn't have a negative reaction to Bezos or the culture. With my CEO hat, my entrepreneur hat, I just thought like, this is a high performance, high achieving, driven culture. And it had such a negative backlash, that I was like, "Wow, there's a real disconnect here," and then to your point, it took a little while but there was a counter-argument saying, "No, no, we're here because we want to be here and we're doing great things and they're not easy." And it reminded me of when you hear a lot of people who work for Steve Jobs, they're

not apologists for his worst moments, I mean everyone acknowledges there are some things you just shouldn't do at work, or you shouldn't treat people a certain way, but they're quick to point out, "I did my best work while working under Jobs. We put a dent in the universe during that time."

So I think this is a sign of good culture. Like it expels more people than it attracts, right, it's very unique, and if you don't want to work there, don't work there.

Lee Yohn: That's a great quote, Kevin. You said that you know the sign of a good culture is that it expels more people than it attracts. I think that's so true, and I think that there's often this myth, that in order for you to have a good culture, it needs to be kind of warm and fuzzy, everyone needs to get along and kumbaya, and to your point, we're talking about two of the most valuable brands, two of the most successful businesses on the planet. And they both don't have those kinds of cultures, so I think that alone shows that there is no one right culture. There's the right culture for your organization, and that is uniquely tied to what your brand is all about. The value that you're creating for your customers and the universe that you wanna make.

Kruse: Now, this is just geeking out on this culture point a little more. I was talking to **Patty McCord** recently. Now she was the former head of HR at Netflix, and co-author of the Netflix culture deck, and it sort of surprised me, she says that when she and **Reed Hastings** were growing Netflix, they asked her like, "What's your vision?" She says, "I want this to be a great place that you've come from. Like she fully intended people would go there for a few years and leave. She was upfront about that. And to a lot of people again, it's like none of this like, "Oh we're a family, and we're in it together forever, and here's our 100 year together plan," they were upfront and said, we're a team, not a family, and we're gonna consistently put the best players on the field. And she had her day come, you know after a dozen years where they decided to part ways. She says, "Yeah, it stung, but it was a great place for me to have spent some time and it was very unique.

Now Denise, I got a tough question for you, one you're not prepped for either, which is, a lot of our listeners are going to be, they're gonna say, "Well, I'm a front-line manager in this big company. I don't work in the marketing department, I don't work in the HR department, I'm not a VP of HR." I'm just wondering, to a frontline leader out there, what do we tell her that she can do on her own team level to try to make brand and culture align a little bit better?

Lee Yohn: Yeah, I would say two things. One is just to communicate and try to connect the dots. Assuming that your organization has some degree of fusion or you know, you don't have a dysfunctional culture or a broken brand, I think a lot of it is just education and helping your employees understand that connection. The reason why we ask you to do this is because it's helping us deliver this to our customers or it's because we want to be known as this. Communication is I think really key.

But I also think and this is one of the things I talk about in my book is being responsible for the daily employee experience is so critical for these frontline managers because sure there's a lot of design elements that happen at the kind of C level or you know kind of HR level where they're designing the experience but you know every day when your employees walk in, are you going to reinforce your core values? Are you going to engage them? Are you going to be proactive in training them and developing them and helping them understand customers and helping them understand the brand?

There's so much that you can do just because you're interacting with your employees on a daily basis. And you know there's been so much work that's been done on customer experience design you know, taking a look at all the different steps in the customer experience journey and figuring out how to make them more valuable and unique.

The same opportunity applies for your employee. So think about you know the first day they show up for work. What kind of experience are you going to have, and what is that going to communicate to them about what they can expect from the company and how the company values them? So you know there's a lot that's really in the hands of these frontline managers. And you know I think it's just a matter of prioritizing it.

Kruse: Yeah I love that. And realizing it really is their job, even if they don't want to hear that. You know, like I said, HR can do what HR does, marketing can maybe share their internal brand guidelines and all those things. But the frontline manager whoever my boss is, they're the ones that are the filter of all this stuff. Do we give these things, respect and time and attention, or do we say, "Oh, more junk from HR. Just toss it away. So everything goes through that filter.

Lee Yohn: Yes.

Kruse: I love this idea of employee experience design the same way we've been doing customer design. And if I were to ever have another professional services firm, which I don't want another one of those, it would be in this area. I think it's so interesting and high potential and so for any other consultants out there you know, who are tired of just doing traditional engagement, I mean I think, that's a hot area. So Denise, thank you so much. Tell our listeners, so how can they find out more about you? And of course, your new book, Fusion?

Lee Yohn: Okay, great. My website deniseleeyohn.com is probably the best place. From there you'll be able to click on links that link you to my new book, [Fusion](#). And also through social media. Everything pretty much is my name, Denise Lee Yohn. You'll be able to access great content, as well as download tools and materials, that will help you get started working on Fusion right away.

Sign up for the Daily Leadership Challenge!

Get a new leadership challenge each day from the world's top leadership experts delivered right to your inbox.