

Company culture doesn't need to be "warm and fuzzy" to be effective

work.qz.com/1227352/amazon-proves-company-culture-doesnt-need-to-be-warm-and-fuzzy-to-be-effective

"Bruising."

"Relentless."

"Painful."

"Frequent combat."

"Burn and churn."



No one would fault you for thinking a company with a

workplace culture described in these harsh terms is destined for failure. Yet, one such company recently nearly doubled its operating income, increased its annual revenue by 27%, and turned in its eighth straight quarter of profitability. What's more, the company tops the lists of many customer service awards, holds the second spot on LinkedIn's Top Companies to Work For list, and added more than 85,000 employees in 2016.

That company is Amazon—and the scathing comments I quote above were part of a 2015 [New York Times article](#) examining its workplace.

The piece reported on the "sometimes-punishing aspects" of Amazon's culture and its "purposeful Darwinism" approach to managing staff. It shared stories of employees crying at their desks, suffering from incredible stress, struggling to keep up with the intense pace at Amazon—or being fired for failing to meet the exacting standards and metrics set by management.

Not surprisingly, the article stirred up an emotional response. Some readers and former employees called the retailer a workplace bully. But others came to Amazon's defense, notably some existing employees. Many commented on the thrill of working in such a fast-paced environment, on how much they learned in a short time, on how grateful they were to be pushed to excel, and on the pride they felt achieving innovations once thought impossible.

Amazon's workplace culture is not for everyone—that much was exposed by the article. But its own employees' response revealed something else: a company's culture does not need to be "warm and fuzzy" to be effective.

Most of the existing rhetoric on culture says all companies should have managers who are nice and friendly and treat their employees like family. The common notion is that every workplace should be nurturing, encouraging, and inclusive. That's simply wrong.

Every organization is different, so its culture should be too. Beyond an obvious baseline, there is no universal definition of a good culture. There's a unique culture that's right for each organization. A benevolent and supportive culture might fuel one company's growth, but might backfire completely at another company that should be more competitive and driven by standards.

If you look beyond the attention-grabbing elements of the New York Times article, you see that Amazon's constant drive for innovation, rooted in a competitive, demanding, exacting organizational culture, has a lot to do with its success. What some describe as a "gladiator culture" is the very way CEO Jeff Bezos and other company leaders ensure Amazon managers clearly define their goals and meet them. Standards that seem unreasonably high are the tools by which Amazon managers drive their teams to deliver ever-increasing levels of service to customers.

But Amazon doesn't succeed simply because of its supposedly "brutal" or high-demanding culture any more than a company would succeed by promoting a culture that coddles employees. The company succeeds because it has a single, unifying drive behind its internal culture and its external brand. Amazon's distinctive organizational culture fosters a performance-driven environment that fires up employees to innovate in pursuit of an outstanding, continuously-improving customer experience. Its brand identity is based on delivering that same disruptively innovative customer experience.

It is the fusion of Amazon's culture and brand that powers the company. Everyone is singularly focused on one thing: excellence on behalf of the customer. No one needs to expend extra energy figuring out what to do or how to behave to achieve what Amazon wants its brand to stand for in the world. Customers have rewarded the organization's single determination with their esteem, loyalty, and more importantly, dollars. And employees have recognized Amazon's distinct culture by making it one of the most desired companies to work for.

Amazon is a perfect example of what I call brand-culture fusion—the full integration and alignment of external brand identity and internal organizational culture that explains the success of the world's greatest companies.

This article has been adapted from [FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies](#).