

'Company culture is like a vine that needs a trellis'

Your organisation shouldn't be designed in a way that's typical of your industry, **DENISE LEE YOHN** tells Sangeeta Tanwar

According to you culture building is often misunderstood. How does this lack of understanding as to what constitutes "culture" hamper a leader's ability to build a strong organisation?

A lot of the existing rhetoric on culture today suggests there is one right type of culture—a benevolent and supportive one. So business leaders think they must be warm and friendly and treat employees like family members. Or they waste a lot of time, money and energy offering generous perks and throwing parties because they think that's how you motivate employees. But beyond a certain baseline, there is no single right culture for every organisation. And leaders shouldn't only aim for employees who feel good and like working at the company—they should also produce the specific results the company needs.

Business leaders need to understand there is a unique culture that's right for each organisation, a culture that is aligned and integrated with the company's brand identity. They need to identify the kind of culture that will support and advance their brand aspirations and then deliberately cultivate that culture.

How best can businesses go about identifying and creating a unique organisational design to stay ahead?

Your organisation shouldn't be designed in a

way that's typical of your industry or that produces a merely functional organisation. Your organisational design should support the unique ways you want your people to work.



DENISE LEE YOHN

Author, *Fusion: How integrating brand and culture powers the world's greatest companies*

Consider your structure—if you want to encourage individual freedom and responsibility, do you have a flat organisation in which people have a lot of autonomy and accountability? Consider the roles in your organisation—do you need to create positions to increase your capability in certain areas, or eliminate ones that are holding you back from changing? Consider the organising logic of your design—if you want to facilitate more collaboration between groups, have you eliminated functional silos?

Adobe Systems, the makers of Photoshop and other popular software, created a new role that combines customer experience and employee experience into a single function. The company made this change to achieve a more customer-focused culture that would support its shift to a more direct-to-customer business model.

Your culture is like a vine that requires a trellis to provide support and structure to grow in the right

direction. The right organisational design can serve as that trellis.

Can a ruthless workplace culture and customer excellence go hand in hand?

It depends on what you mean by "ruthless." If you're referring to a challenging, hard-driving, performance-oriented culture, then Amazon proves that such a culture can actually be the key to customer excellence. Being "Earth's most customer-centric

company" is the single, unifying driver of Amazon's culture—it's also what drives its brand identity. Its distinctive organisational 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 has led to its tremendous growth and success.

In times of increasing political and economic instability how can big corporations move ahead to future proof their businesses?

You must fuse together your brand and culture, creating an interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two. Brand-culture fusion produces the power you need to face increasing challenges.

The war for talent is going to escalate and corporations will have to offer more distinct and sustainable cultures to attract and retain in-demand talent. The need to unify and align diverse and dispersed employees with a singular purpose and values will grow as companies continue to globalise, separate entities continue to consolidate through M&As, and the pace of business continues to accelerate. Brand differentiation and power is becoming more important in the fight against commoditising product categories, shrinking attention spans, and consolidating channels. And customers are going to demand more authenticity and transparency from the companies they do business with. By integrating your brand and culture, you make them even more powerful drivers of sustainable competitive advantage.

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