



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

3 ways to ensure your culture supports your brand

Leaders play a critical role in shaping their company's real values.

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Independently, your culture - the way the people in your organisation behave and the attitudes and beliefs that inform them - and your brand - how your organisation

is understood by customers and other stakeholders - are powerful, often unsung, business drivers.

But when you fuse the two - when you create an interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between how your organisation thinks and acts on the inside and how it is perceived and experienced on the outside - you create new growth that isn't possible by simply cultivating one or the other alone.

Organisations must identify the culture that best aligns with and enhances their brand identity and enables them to achieve brand-culture fusion, the full integration and alignment of external brand identity and internal organisational culture. The next step is to take leadership responsibility for cultivating it.

It all starts with the example you set for others with your words and your actions.



COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Most business leaders don't communicate well. At least that's what their employees say. According to talent management firm Aon Hewitt, only 46% of employees feel management communicates effectively. And human resources firm Towers Perrin has found that just over half (51%) of employees believed that their leaders generally tell them the truth.

These findings are not entirely surprising if you consider that most leaders don't receive formal training in communications, so often they don't know what to say or how to say it in a way that effectively engages their people.

The keys to successful leadership communication, especially as you are trying to cultivate a culture that aligns and integrates with your brand identity, are consistency, simplicity, storytelling, and relevance.

Consistency. It's not enough to talk about these foundational elements of your culture when they're first being set or on an annual basis. You must regularly weave messages about your purpose and values into your presentations, memos, and conversations with employees and other stakeholders.

Simplicity. Strive to make your communications simple and accessible. Some leaders try to be charismatic or come across as impressive whenever they speak or share information, so they get caught up in conveying a message that sounds exciting or that is full of jargon or complex terms instead of one that has substance and can be easily understood by everyone.

Storytelling. Illustrate your message with engaging stories. Giving examples and telling stories helps people relate to abstract ideas like culture and values. For example, stories about great successes achieved in the face of great odds or of people who have pushed through challenges will cultivate values like perseverance and performance.

Relevance. Make your communications relevant to your organisation's overarching purpose and core values. Carefully choose what to talk about because it can speak volumes about the kind of culture you're trying to cultivate.

If your desired culture is one that is familial and casual, you'll want to talk about your employees in a personal way and reference the things going on in their lives outside of work. If you're seeking to cultivate a culture of innovation and creativity at your organisation, you can infuse your communications with references to cutting-edge ideas and iconic geniuses.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

Sometimes even a leader's seemingly small actions speak volumes. After Marvin Ellison took on the task of turning around JCPenney in August 2015, he chose to wear clothes bought at the company's stores, signaling to employees, customers, and the public at large a strong endorsement of the brand's quality and style. Moreover, to reinforce the solidarity that the company would need to pull off such a dramatic turnaround, he instituted a rule requiring all executives to wear JCPenney-made clothes whenever they visited the stores.

While actions - big and small - speak louder than words, a lack of action can be just as powerful. You can't expect your employees to act in ways that you don't or won't.

Once, while I was facilitating a brand engagement session for a client, one of the employees pulled me aside during a break. I had just taken the group through an exercise to reinforce safety as the primary core value for the company. The

employee told me he appreciated the focus on safety but he had a favor to ask: could I talk to the CEO about his personal engagement in safety training sessions - or rather, the lack of it.

You see, over the years the CEO had never once attended a safety session, and his absence was noticed by employees, who took it to mean that the training was unimportant. It didn't matter that the CEO had declared safety as a core value and made it part of the company's tagline, nor that he had hired a dedicated safety trainer or built the very facility we were meeting at exclusively to be used for onsite safety training. Without walking the talk and making safety training sessions a priority on his calendar, his credibility had been shot.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO FIRE PEOPLE

One reason it's critical to empower leaders at all levels to cultivate your desired culture is that leaders are responsible for the most important tasks in any organisation: hiring, firing, and promoting employees. People decisions are perhaps the most visible way leaders can build their culture and align it with the company's brand identity.

When you rely on your core values to make choices about not only whom to hire, but also whom to fire and promote, you make sure the right people are on your bus - and you send a powerful message to your organisation about the importance of its values.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, is known for having executed 'public hangings,' the term he uses to explicitly call out executives who do not align with the company's values. In a *Fortune* article, Welch and his wife and business partner, Suzy Welch, explain, 'If your company's culture is to mean anything, you have to hang - publicly - those in your midst who would destroy it.' They go on to explain that leaders should classify their people into one of four categories and decide their fates based on the classification:

- Employees who produce good results and behave in ways that align with your company's values should be promoted.
- Employees who are not a fit with your company's values and perform poorly should be fired.
- Employees whose behavior aligns with your company's values, but whose performance is mediocre deserve a second chance and coaching.
- Employees whose actions don't align with your company's values but who produce great results should be let go.

The Welches believe that the employees who most threaten their organisations - who most undermine the culture of the company - are those in the fourth category. And yet managers typically give employees in this category a pass because of their great performance.

Keeping these employees, they argue, sends 'a big fat message to every other employee: Our company's values are a joke.' The Welches' language may be harsh, but it describes spot-on why a leader's decisions about people are critical.

"Values drift" is pervasive in companies of every ilk,' they write. 'Employees either don't know their organisation's values, or they know that practicing them is optional. Either way the result is vulnerability to attack from inside and out.'

BRAND-CULTURE FUSION STARTS WITH YOU

Leadership is critical to a thriving culture. But leadership is even more important if you want to transform that culture either because your current one is not serving the company well or because it has never been shaped in a deliberate way in the first place. Building an internal culture that is aligned and integrated with your external brand, therefore, starts with you. You must prioritise brand-culture fusion and take responsibility for achieving it. You can't take it for granted, you can't delegate it, and you can't take a day off from it.

*Denise Lee Yohn is a speaker and consultant. This piece was adapted from her book **FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies**, published by Nicholas Brealey Publishers, 2018. All rights reserved.*

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