Build a unified, not a uniform company culture

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By Denise Lee Yohn Published: December 16, 2022

(Image credit: Christina@wocintechchat.com/Unsplash)

If you're struggling to build a cohesive company culture, you're not alone. Where and how people work varies so much now that culture-building seems more difficult than ever.

Instead of trying to control or quash the different directions your culture seems to be headed, provide clarity and focus to the variations.

In this video, I explain what this new approach to culture looks like and how to implement it.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/_KmdvqSS7g8

Video transcript:

Has your workforce dispersed across the country or even the world — and your organizational culture seems to have dispersed as well?

Or, has your business recently undergone an acquisition and there are now two or more cultures in play at your organization?

Perhaps it seems the pandemic has divided your culture between frontline and corporate employees.

Or your organization seems to have a different culture depending on whether you're virtual or in-person.

Building a healthy, effective, cohesive culture has become a lot more difficult in today's business environment. For many leaders, your organization no longer seems to have the "glue" to hold it together across regions, business units and work environments. Your culture has become fragmented or diluted.

What's more, given that today's employees demand employers offer authentic diversity and inclusion, you can no longer prioritize conformity over individuality. And people want to play an active role in shaping the culture of their companies — many even expect to.

All these changes mean that your approach to culture-building needs to change as well. You can no longer seek to build a uniform culture; you must cultivate a unified one. Instead of trying to control the variation, provide focus. You still should ground everything everyone

does in a single purpose and a single set of core values, and develop a common understanding throughout your company of what it's going to take to reach your goals. You must also allow different expressions and experiences of that purpose, values and understanding. In fact, you should underline encourage them.

In other words, your purpose and values provide guardrails that prescribe the boundaries of your culture, but they need to be applied to each group's specific needs and context. And different norms and expectations must be developed within different groups.

Royal DSM, a Dutch health and nutrition company, views its culture as a flotilla of independently piloted ships rather than a single tanker. Co-CEO Geraldine Matchett described in a LinkedIn post how everyone in the company shares a clear destination on the horizon they are sailing toward, but each boat must determine how to get there, so they use their purpose and values as what they call their "culture compass."

In this approach to culture-building, your responsibility as a leader is to ensure absolute clarity and widespread alignment throughout your organization on your desired culture — and then to empower managers to determine how their groups will contribute to it. Allow them to discern how their groups will interpret and reinforce the company purpose and values. Encourage them to learn from and build upon each other's culture-building efforts. The diversity can make your organization more resilient and relevant.

Your employees may seem to be all over the place — sometimes literally — but that doesn't mean your culture should be too. Give your people the framework for your desired culture — as well as the freedom to explore within it.

To book Denise Lee Yohn to inspire and teach your people to become great leaders, see her website and YouTube channel.

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