Culture Matters

Because at the end of the day, culture isn't just a buzzword—it's the heartbeat of every successful organization.

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We're All in This Together: Taking Ownership of Company Culture

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Multiple studies prove that a dynamic company culture is one of workers' top criteria for evaluating their employers and jobs. The numbers also indicate that a poor culture is one of the leading factors in why so many people quit over the past several years. Further evaluations show that a strong culture significantly impacts a business's bottom line.

Leaders got the message. Consequently, most tried to bolster their culture to build employee engagement, reduce turnover, and cultivate a high-performing team.

However, not all culture initiatives are successful. Workers are especially suspicious when they feel like they're being manipulated like chess pieces. While leaders should spearhead culture, they must have employee buy-in for it

to take hold. And for it to flourish exponentially, it can't be relegated to a designated Chief Culture Officer or the HR department.

Instead leaders should foster the belief that culture is every staff member's responsibility.

A Leader's Role in Establishing Culture

Neil Barman and Sarah Jensen Clayton are senior partners at Korn Ferry. In an article for Quartz, they make a case for leaders to take charge of company culture, noting that not enough CEOs see it as their responsibility. They write:

"Assigning culture exclusively to an individual—or even to a team or function—is the surest way to limit its potential as a value driver."

Barman and Clayton cite joint research with Fortune Business Insights™ that revealed almost two-thirds of leaders of the World's Most Admired Companies attribute 30 percent of their market value to culture, and one-third attribute 50 percent or more. They assert:

"Recognizing that value requires that every leader become a chief culture officer."

CultureWise CEO David J. Friedman concurs. In his book *Culture by Design*, he writes that the single most significant factor in developing a successful culture is "CEO sponsorship." He explains that a leader's commitment to developing their company's culture is essential because they carry the most political and emotional clout.

"While the CEO doesn't have to do everything, they must be the biggest driver of the culture. They must be the one who is most passionate about the culture and works to ensure it is one of the company's biggest corporate priorities. That's why I describe the CEO as the Chief Culture Officer."

Barman and Clayton write that after CEOs assume the lead role in building their company's culture, they should deputize all staff members to be culture officers. To succeed, they recommend that leaders do three things:

- **Be the culture carriers.** CEOs should embody the organization's values and be hyper-aware of how their

behavior affects employees. As David Friedman writes,

"As a leader, you obviously don't have to be perfect and, in fact, never will be. However, you should at least be an excellent example of the culture you're trying to promote, or you'll be undermining your own efforts."

- **Be culture coaches.** Barman and Clayton note that leaders must determine the values and behaviors to normalize in their companies. Friedman further specifies that CEOs must describe with great clarity what they want their culture to be. And then, they must enlist their leadership team to effectively and consistently coach the behaviors that will form the culture they want to see.

- **Be movement makers.**

The authors of the Quartz article write, "The return on culture is greatest when leaders go beyond themselves and their teams to create shared identity, norms, and expectations at scale. They need to nurture a culture movement that captures team-level momentum and translates it into an organizational tipping point."

Building Culture as a Team

People become vested in a movement or goal when they believe they can make a difference and are integral to its success. SunOpta CEO Joe Ennen talks about establishing a vibrant culture in Entrepreneur Media:

"Good leaders push and challenge their teams, often believing in their team members more than their team members believe in themselves. Motivated professionals rise to the occasion, and in turn, feel more connected to the company, regardless of their position or tenure, resulting in significant outcomes."

Navalent cofounder Ron Carucci writes about helping employees thrive in a Forbes article. He observes:

"No matter how well-defined your organizational strategy may be, if it neglects the people that bring that strategy to life, it is going to fail. Most leaders inherently know this to be true. But I'd love to have a dollar for every time a

leader called me and said, 'Our culture is getting in the way of our strategy.'"

Carucci explains that leaders should aim to build a culture that allows everyone to flourish and achieve their full potential. This includes entrusting their employees to be ambassadors of the culture. He quotes PurposePoint Consulting CEO **Davin Salvagno**, who observed:

"**People need to discover their own sense of agency. Micromanaging people dilutes their confidence and makes them weaker decision makers. A passionate culture is one where empowerment is balanced with connection. People know how to take action guided by clear direction and values.**"

Barman and Clayton suggest adding culture to every job description. They stress that this leaves no doubt about the joint ownership of this crucial part of the organization.

In an article for Harvard Business Review, author and leadership consultant **Denise Yohn** describes why relegating the responsibility to manage culture to one person or a select group is a tactic that no longer works. She relays that many companies are already embracing an approach in which everyone is responsible for this vital aspect of the organization.

She says that in these businesses, "Organizational culture has become less a code established by leaders and more of a toolkit for all to draw from and input to."

But she specifies that "this model doesn't relegate culture-building to an amorphous concept that everyone influences but no one leads or is accountable for." Yohn outlines each staff tier's responsibilities in sustaining culture.

She echoes the leadership responsibilities mentioned above and, if applicable, explains the role of a board of directors and a compliance, risk, and ethics department. She also details how middle managers and employees can be culture torch bearers.

Yohn points out that middle managers are pivotal in molding culture because they have the most influence on employees on a daily basis. She says they should cultivate the culture by:

- Ensuring the tools, environment, and intangible aspects of employees' day-to-day work-life represent the company's employee experience strategy
- Applying the organization-wide culture-building objectives, strategies, and key results to the context of their group or function
- Conducting coaching and training with employees to cultivate their engagement with the desired culture
- Communicating and role-modeling the desired culture

Employees are the eyes and ears of the culture, and it is their responsibility to provide feedback on how it impacts operational outcomes and staff, customers, and vendor relationships. It is also crucial that employees at every level not only strive to reflect the culture but encourage their teammates to live up to this ideal.

This positive peer pressure is a critical layer of horizontal support needed for companies to reap the benefits of a dynamic organizational culture. It helps create shared accountability for upholding and preserving the culture and reinforces the pride each team member can take in it.

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In the realm of business leadership, there's a vital aspect that often gets overlooked: The intentional cultivation of company culture. Studies are clear: a vibrant company culture isn't just a part of the business strategy; it's a cornerstone of market success and employee satisfaction. But who holds the key to this powerful tool? The answer is unequivocal: CEOs and business leaders. As leaders, you carry a unique responsibility. Your actions, your decisions, and your vision set the tone for the entire organization. It's not enough to assign the task of culture-building to a team or an individual. The drive, the passion, and the commitment must start with you, the CEOs and business leaders. David J. Friedman, in his book 'Culture by Design', underscores that the single most significant factor in developing a successful culture is CEO sponsorship. We're not just administrators; we're culture champions. Our engagement and dedication to culture shape our organizations' future. We challenge every leader reading this: How are you embodying the culture you wish to see? Are you actively shaping the norms and values of your organization? The journey to a thriving culture begins with you - the leaders. Let's dive deeper into the nuances of leadership-driven culture transformation in our latest blog below 👇 Join us in redefining leadership, not just as a position of authority, but as a commitment to cultural excellence.
#leadershipmatters #companyculture #ceo

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Denise Yohn • You   1s •••
Brand Leadership Expert, Keynote Speaker, and Author of the bestselling
books "What Great Brands Do" and "FUSION"

thanks for the shout-out in this terrific piece CultureWise!

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