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William Craig Contributor

I write about the secret of company culture in entrepreneurial success

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What Is Company Culture, and How Do You Change It?

Something occurred to me recently: after all of the writing I've done about different aspects of company culture, I've never actually taken the time to define precisely what it is, or why it's an idea that needs to be at the center of your company's identity.

So what is company culture? Wikipedia defines *organizational culture* as having to do with the "behavior of humans within an organization and the meaning that people attach to those behaviors." That's a bit unhelpful, so they go on to list a number of factors that contribute to company culture. Here's the full list:

Company vision, values, norms, systems, symbols, language, assumptions, beliefs, and habits.

Also slightly unhelpful. I feel the most important distinction to make here is that company culture is something that is pre-existing in your company's genetic code; it's not something that employees bring with them. In fact, a company with just one employee – a company with *no employees*, if we're being honest – still has a culture. That sole proprietor? They're the one with "vision, values, and assumptions." They don't wait around for employees to provide such things; instead, they seek out those individuals who they feel would be a good match with their existing vision for the company.

This creates a sort of give-and-take. You have your own plans for your company's development, and as your team grows, you'll find that it can change and grow in unexpected and rewarding ways.

Assessing Your Company's Culture

Not every business was blessed with the foresight to completely flesh out a long-term plan for company growth and culture. In fact, exceptionally few businesses do this, because it demands a certain confidence in your company's long-term survival – something that can be hard to come by in these uncertain economic times.

That said, if you've spent a lot of time recently focusing heavily on growth and bringing in new employees, it might be time to take a step back to see what kind of culture is emerging.

While there are plenty of companies out there that would love nothing more than to have you pay them for a "company culture audit," the far easier – and cheaper – method is to simply take a look around.

How do your employees act when they're on the job? Are there common behaviors – either good or bad? What does having this job mean to your employees, and would they go elsewhere if they had the chance?

These things are *not* your company's culture – but they're definitely *symptoms* of either a healthy or unhealthy culture. Remember: your company's culture was already being shaped before you even hired your first employee. So knowing how your employees are reacting to what you're building is tremendously important if you want your company to thrive.

Planning for the Future

At WebpageFX, our company culture is something we take very seriously. Right now we're in the process of refining each of our departments' mission statements, values, and long- and short-term goals. We also have a set of company-wide values and goals, but with several different teams that have very different roles, it makes sense for us to have a finely tuned and well-researched set of individual values for each department.

I've said that employees don't bring company culture with them, but that's not to say they don't – or shouldn't – have a role in shaping the future of their company. If you've done a good job of assessing your company's culture, then you'll be able to see pretty clearly if there are patterns emerging – areas where your employees seem regularly dissatisfied with how things are or where they're going.

The good news is, you don't need to start with a blank slate; you can focus on just a few key areas to see what kind of atmosphere your workplace has developed. Here are a few of them:

-       **Clarity of purpose**: This one is deceptively simple. It's not enough for you to merely *prescribe* a purpose for your employees; they also have to buy into it. They have to feel that what they do matters, and has a measurable impact on the success of the company.

-       **Employee engagement**: Engagement is part two of purpose. Employee engagement is how well you've prepared your employees to *fulfill* their purpose. Are there distractions or inefficiencies throughout the company? If your employees don't feel empowered to fulfill their roles to the best of their ability, you have an engagement problem.

-       **An environment of trust**: Trust is absolutely critical in the workplace. We've all had jobs where we thought twice before leaving personal effects unattended in the break room, or where we couldn't necessarily count on co-workers to pull their weight. Sure, you can hire people who seem trustworthy, but making trust a company value – with zero exceptions – falls squarely to you as a business owner.

-    **Continued learning**: My company wouldn't have lasted as long as it has if my employees didn't continually improve themselves. In fact, I'm frequently amazed at the culture of learning that's sprung up in WebpageFX. We do what we can to provide the right tools, but my employees have effectively taken on ownership of our learning materials, and as a team, they see that our library is kept both relevant and current.

Culture is Currency

I'd say that the majority of Americans don't have the luxury of choosing their employers based on the culture of the company; they take work where they can find it, and sometimes, if they're lucky, they manage to find something that fits well with their personality and their goals for continued growth.

Unfortunately, plenty of Americans simply have to take work where they can find it. One of our jobs as business owners is to make even somebody's third-choice feel like a place they want to be. Happiness may ultimately come from within, but job satisfaction begins with job creators caring about the people in their charge.

And if you happen to be a job seeker, and you've read this far, you should know that you can tell quite a lot about a company just from the interview process. Are your interviewers genuinely happy to be meeting with you? Does the office feel like a welcoming place? Do the employees seem as though they enjoy working together? This is your chance to make observations and ask questions.

It's pretty clear that employers want to get the best return on their dollar – or, in this case, the best return on a new hire. But think about the reverse of that: besides a paycheck, what are your employees getting out of this exchange?

It's a question well worth the asking once you realize that company culture is every bit as important as a paycheck.

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