

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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What Does Your Culture Eat?

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Everybody talks about “culture.” It eats “strategy” for lunch. It scrambles “forecasting” like an egg for breakfast. It licks the icing off of “leadership” and then tosses the crumbling remains of the cupcake in the trash. Or something like that.

But none of us is any good at defining culture, much less diagnosing or changing it. It’s a lot like personality: We sort of know what it is, but we’re pretty helpless to change it or even to reliably influence it. We might have a feel for it, but, like Jell-O, we can’t hold it in our hands.

Sometimes, however, we get a sudden glimpse. When we least expect it, we see our company’s culture clearly. Something happens and we immediately recognize: “This is us. This is who we really are.”

It happened to me at a wedding reception.

The groom was an employee. It was a lovely service, a beautiful day. My employees and their spouses made up maybe a quarter of the invited guests. This was a bit like a company party (and I wasn’t paying!). We were having fun. But then, slowly, the wheels came off. “Where’s the bridal party? What’s taking so long?” I could see it in my employees’ eyes: a cold, serious stare. It felt as if I could read their minds, “This ain’t no deal.” Everyone else? They were just happy to be there.

Finally, after what seemed like more than an hour, the happy couple arrived and then began the buffet line ... from hell. The family members went first, followed by the couple’s closest friends and relatives. I’d never seen a slower line in my life and I sensed my employees shared my impatience. After a long wait, the Lancaster Farms crew finally had their turn.

And that’s when the magic happened. Imagine watching an 85-year-old with a walker do the 100-yard dash. Then imagine an Olympic sprinter flashing past her. This was what that buffet line looked like when my production crew and their families arrived. It was beautiful. It was the most elegant choreography of food-serving I’d ever seen.

What made the difference? Were we hungrier? Had we practiced this? No. It was our culture—a culture of productivity and speed. Here’s what we did differently:

1. We planned ahead. We didn't have to meditate in front of each dish wondering if we wanted to add it to our plates. We looked ahead and acted decisively.

2. We did “pre-work.” In a buffet, you may not know what the person behind you will select, but you do know one thing for sure: they'll need a plate. So why stand in front of the plates for two minutes waiting for the idiot in front of you to finally get out of your way? Pass the plates down the line.

3. We didn't get distracted. We didn't check our text messages while in line. We didn't chit-chat. Seriously, what's up with those people having full-blown conversations in the buffet line? Do they think it's polite to pause over the asparagus and ask, “So, did Harold get the tests back from the doctor?” Save it for when you sit down, lady!

4. We eliminated repetitive motion. How many times do you need to scoop the potato salad? Any more than one scooping motion per dish is waste.

5. We served each other. If we scooped a second time, it was for our partner. “You want potato salad, honey?” Many of us already knew the answer; we didn't even need to ask. Listen, once you're holding the serving spoon, it saves at the very least 20 seconds to serve another person. Putting the spoon down just for the other person to pick it up and scoop their own is massively wasteful.

6. We left things ready to roll. We ignored those little plates for the serving spoons. Leave that spoon in the food! Placing it on the plate and picking it up again takes several more seconds. And why put the top back on the dish if the next person—right behind you—is just going to have to spend the time to lift the lid again?

7. We didn't block each other. Even the way we stood in the buffet line was peculiar. We stood sort of diagonal to the table. We took a minimum of space, allowing others easy access.

Honestly, this doesn't even scratch the surface of all the little things that were going on. In reality, it wasn't that we were faster like an Olympic sprinter is faster than an old woman; we were simply more purposeful. We cared a whole heck of a lot more about everything we touched—and what impact it had on the people behind us—than anybody would ever think was reasonable to care.

I could write a short book on the efficiency lessons I saw firsthand in that single afternoon at a buffet line. Before this moment, I'd never considered it. And it's not like the Lancaster Farms team ever practiced this. It may have looked like a fire drill, but it's just what came naturally to us—and to our spouses. “This is how we live,” I realized. “This is who we are.”

And that's when it hit me: In my company, culture eats “buffet lines” for lunch. And I know it sounds silly, but I've never been prouder in my life. **GT**

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