

GROWERTALKS

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Cultivating the Ideal Culture

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The concept of work culture has become a cliché. It isn't just about creating a fun workplace or putting values on a wall, it's about building an environment that engages employees, encourages productivity and sustains a healthy level of morale. The challenge that many of us in the industry experience is crafting a work culture that resonates across the organization that's also attractive to the next generation. In fact, companies with poor work culture struggle to attract talent. According to Indeed.com, 77% of job seekers are unwilling to apply for positions in companies where negative culture is perceived, even if they're unemployed. Do you think this could have affected your last job posting?

Pictured: Mike Hoffman of Bailey (middle) engaging with two of his employees.

But what exactly is “work culture,” and how can organizations effectively shape and sustain it? At its core, work culture is a social contract, the unspoken rules about how people are expected to behave, interact and communicate within a workplace. It shapes every part of the employee

experience, from on-boarding to daily tasks to leadership interactions. Developing a culture that uplifts rather than drains requires intentionality, a deep understanding of human dynamics and (here's the big one) continuous effort.

Understanding what work culture really means

Work culture is often summarized in company mission statements, core values and branding, but that's only part of the picture. The true culture of a workplace is what employees experience daily, which may or may not align with leadership's intent. This disparity between intended culture and experienced culture is a major challenge. When an organization's stated values conflict with how things really work, disengagement and mistrust are almost inevitable.

Employees who feel connected to their workplace culture are more likely to contribute creatively, collaborate effectively and stay loyal to the organization. On the flip side, poor culture can be a source of disengagement and low productivity, driving away even the most talented employees. Thus, the goal isn't just to define culture from a leadership perspective—it's to ensure that what's designed matches what's felt and experienced by employees across the board.

The role of leadership in shaping culture

Culture starts at the top. Leaders are the most significant shapers of work culture, setting the tone for how employees interact, communicate and perform. It's crucial that leaders model the behavior and values they want to see in their teams.

Tim Jacobson, Chief Human Resource Officer at Bailey, said, "I have long been a student of the 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' philosophy, and I think the research is conclusive on how well companies do that prioritize culture (and its many elements). It's no mystery if you focus on building a positive work culture, employees will be more engaged, and retention, creativity and productivity will result. It's the right thing to do and it's good business. Simply put, culture matters."

First, leadership needs to clearly articulate what they care about. This involves more than just writing down values; it's about showing, through action, how these values will be executed.

For example, if transparency is a core value, leaders must lead by example, openly sharing information, admitting mistakes, and communicating honestly and frequently. Trust is built when leaders are transparent, calm and consistent in their messaging, and this trust lays the foundation for a positive work environment.

Equally important is creating a sense of accountability within leadership itself. Leaders who are accountable inspire their teams to act similarly, fostering a culture of responsibility. Leadership also needs to recognize the importance of listening. By gathering input from employees, addressing concerns and recognizing feedback, leaders demonstrate a genuine commitment to culture building.

Identifying core values and purpose

For culture to be uplifting, it must align with the organization's core values and purpose. However, simply identifying these values isn't enough; they must be integrated into every aspect of the work environment. Employees should see these values in action daily, in decision-making, in conflict resolution and in how leaders treat their teams.



Pictured: Kevin Northrop (far right) of Plant Development Services meeting with some of his marketing and operations team members.

Moreover, companies should strive to cultivate a shared purpose. When employees understand not just what they're doing, but why they're doing it, they're more likely to feel motivated and engaged. Organizations that embed their purpose into their culture see a significant boost in employee morale and productivity. Teams work better when they're aligned behind a common goal that feels meaningful.

Building a positive work environment

Culture isn't created overnight; it's an ongoing process that requires continuous evaluation and improvement. The first step is understanding where your organization currently stands. Without a deep understanding of your starting point, efforts to improve culture can easily miss the mark.

One useful tool for assessing the current culture is to gather feedback directly from employees through surveys, focus groups and feedback loops. Honest input from the people living within the culture will provide invaluable insights. Leaders should ask questions like: How do employees perceive leadership? What areas cause frustration or disengagement? What's working well that should be enhanced?

Along with internal feedback, external insights—such as from exit interviews or industry experts—can help shine a light on cultural blind spots. For example, what might feel like a small miscommunication to management could be a recurring source of stress for employees.

Once you understand the current culture, the next step is to make deliberate changes. This might involve tackling biases, shifting behaviors or rethinking how your team communicates. A focus on emotional intelligence, the ability to recognize, understand and manage emotions can also help foster better interpersonal interactions, reducing conflict and promoting more collaborative work relationships.

The power of recognition

One of the most effective and often overlooked tools for reinforcing positive culture is recognition. Recognition, when done right, reinforces the behaviors that align with the organization's values. When leaders take the time to actively recognize and reward employees who embody the culture, they send a powerful message to the rest of the organization: These are the behaviors that matter here.

The key to effective recognition is authenticity. Leaders should strive to acknowledge meaningful contributions rather than default to superficial praise. Publicly celebrating achievements—whether through team meetings, newsletters or peer recognition platforms—helps reinforce a sense of community and shared success.

Moreover, recognition shouldn't be limited to leadership. A culture where peers recognize each other for their contributions creates a more supportive and positive environment. People who feel appreciated are more likely to stay engaged, motivated and loyal to the organization.

Sustaining and measuring culture

Building an uplifting work culture is one thing; sustaining it is another. Just as businesses need to track metrics like sales or revenue, culture needs to be regularly measured and assessed to ensure it's on track. This can be achieved through continuous feedback mechanisms like employee surveys, pulse checks or one-on-one meetings.

One method to measure the health of your culture is through cultural assessments. These evaluations provide measurable data on key cultural metrics, such as employee engagement, satisfaction and alignment with company values. Organizations should also look to more qualitative methods, like observing how teams interact, listening for patterns of miscommunication and using exit interviews to understand why employees may be leaving.

Someone that's implemented and succeeded at this is Arianna de Ona, SVP, Chief People Officer at Costa Farms.

"We developed the Costa Farms Strategic Plan in 2019 and highlighted the creation of a 'Love Where You Work' culture as one of our priorities," she explained. "We have been tracking the results of our efforts, comparing our company to trends across the country. We measure using engagement surveys that look at metrics like satisfaction with teams and leaders, retention, development and participation rates, and even exit interviews to determine how we can improve."

Arianna said that they saw an increase in their engagement survey numbers, going from 77% back in 2021 to 90% today. They're pleased with those results, but it also makes them sit back and think about how they can make those numbers better.

"It's been a great journey that we've been on and I love that even though our engagement survey results are so high, nobody is backing off the pedal," said Arianna.

Measuring culture isn't about achieving perfection, but creating a framework that allows leaders to make informed adjustments. Whether you discover that employees feel disconnected from the company's purpose or that communication styles need improvement, these insights offer a road map for refinement.

Building a cycle of improvement

Sustaining a positive work culture requires a cyclical process of building, implementing, measuring and revising. Start by identifying the specific areas of culture that need improvement. From there, create actionable steps and put those ideas into practice. Once implemented, gather feedback and measure the success of those initiatives. After assessing the results, revise your approach as needed.

The culture-building process should be seen as dynamic, evolving with the needs of the organization and its people. Leadership, accountability and consistency remain at the core, but openness to change is equally important. A culture that can adapt to new challenges and opportunities will be one that continues to uplift employees in the long run.

A continuous journey

An uplifting work culture doesn't happen by accident; it requires intention, effort and leadership at every level. By understanding the current state of your culture, aligning it with core values and purpose, fostering a supportive and emotionally intelligent environment and recognizing the contributions of your team, you can lay the foundation for a thriving work environment.

When asked what he wished he could have told himself years ago when they first began their leadership journey, Kevin Northrop, VP of Marketing and Operations at Plant Development Services, Inc., said, "When we started, we knew this was something we needed to dedicate time and effort to, so we kind of jumped in and just started doing it. We knew it needed to be better and we knew it was important. If I could go back and give myself advice it would be spend time defining what you want the culture to be, what you want it to look like within your company. Take into account your company history, the markets that you serve, the employees in your company. Spend time self-assessing, where you are and where you want to be."

Culture building isn't a one-time project; it's a continuous journey that requires measurement, feedback and refinement. As long as organizations remain committed to evolving and adapting their culture, they can create workplaces that are not only productive, but also places where employees genuinely want to work. And that's the ultimate goal of any uplifting work culture: to inspire, engage and elevate everyone within the organization. **GT**

Rayne Gibson is a horticulture graduate from Louisiana State University and brings extensive experience in the green industry, serving in various capacities helping businesses across the southern U.S. He also served on the boards of the Louisiana and Texas Nursery Landscape Associations.