

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Culture is Your Business!

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Every year, I create a “year in review” for clients to recap wins, accomplishments and create the focus for next year. A common theme emerged in all of the companies this year—a focus on culture and engagement. The leader would ask, “People are leaving—how do we engage them? Does my culture need fixing? What can we do now?”

The fact is culture is your business! This will be a recurring and evolving theme in the life of your organization. And culture shifts over time; what worked before may not work now.

So what is culture?

Culture is present in everything you do in your company. At times, culture may be taken for granted. It's like the water you swim in or the air you breathe—you don't pay attention to it. Culture isn't what your organization builds or delivers; it's how your organization builds and delivers. It's the personality that allows you to deliver. This personality has an impact on employee engagement.

Engagement is a result of culture and consistency ... do you “walk the talk”? It's easier to have happy and engaged employees when the business is going well. You can do more and give more.

Culture and engagement are tested when “it hits the fan.” Consider how the company handles a win, a loss, a mistake or drama. When a customer complains about their experience, the supply chain is slow or a goal isn't met, what's the reaction? Do your leaders represent the desired culture? Are employees aligned with company values? These are important questions, as everyone and everything is a reflection of the culture and leadership.

A client recently asked, “Should I hire a person to implement culture in my company?” My response was, “Save the money—culture is everyone's job!”

When you proactively plan, communicate and implement what you want your customers and people to experience, you have an “intentional” culture. When you react, and then have to clean “it” up, you have “accidental” culture.

How do you know the difference? One is often followed by the thoughts, “OMG, what was I thinking? How did we miss that?” (or other more unsavory phrases).

Accidental culture evolves over time based on inconsistent communication, practices and a lack of leadership. This can result from:

- Lack of teamwork
- Inconsistent practices and processes

- Response to mistakes
- Unclear expectations
- Treating people differently

Here's an example: An organization outwardly says people are treated with respect and dignity, but they overlook a "performer" who's a bully. Not dealing with the reality of the situation indicates the organization is not "walking its talk" and this could impact employee engagement.

Do you have an intentional culture, accidental culture or a combination? Some areas work really well and others may have opportunity. This is true in most organizations. How do you make the shift toward an intentional culture?

Be clear about your values—don't assume employees know how the business operates or how you expect them to behave. Communicate in simple, straightforward statements, like:

- We treat each other with respect.
- We have integrity and do what we say we will do.
- We assume the best in others.

Once developed and examined, the leader must ask the question, "Is this us?" If you're getting a little "itchy around the collar," great! An intentional culture requires you look in the organizational mirror to determine the gap between cultural reality and cultural desire. The gap allows you to assess, modify, communicate and implement. Here are additional points to consider:

Be clear and direct. Tell your employees your cultural values and expectations—be real! If you don't tell employees, they don't know. Employees do what they've done, which may not be aligned with desired behavior. This isn't a one-time event; it's a conversation in every meeting, program introduction, etc.

Train and coach. Once you identify a culture gap, clarify and retrain. You may have to retrain a policy or process, go back to the basics, implement and reinforce expectations.

Walk the talk. Ensure the leaders/managers embrace and model desired behaviors. Employees see everything! If they sense the company isn't "doing what they say," they start to question all actions, mistrust, become less engaged and may eventually leave.

Culture matters—it impacts your business, employee engagement and the bottom line. **GT**



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