MCQUAIG PRESENTS

THE QUICK GUIDE TO COMPANY CULTURE

Introduction

It's impossible to talk about talent management these days without bringing up company culture. From candidates, to recruiters, to hiring managers, everyone wants to discuss culture and how it will impact a role. Successful candidates are often determined by their ability to be both a good fit for a job and a good addition to the company culture. In fact, there's a growing fear of hiring poor culture fits and because of it, more time is being placed on understanding the motivations and behaviours of a candidate and how they will impact the team or business they join. This emphasis on who a candidate is, not just how they'll perform, is shifting the way businesses hire and how they operate. A positive culture is a powerful incentive to attract fresh recruits and a negative one can be a death knell to reaching top talent. With so much riding on striking that perfect balance between culture and productivity, it's worth exploring the 10 hallmarks of a strong company culture and what you can do to achieve them. From workspaces to community building, culture done right can make all the difference to your talent management strategy.

94% of execs and 88% of employees think a unique culture is important to succeed in business. [1]

What is company culture?

Let's start with a definition. What exactly is culture? **One of the best ways to look at it is as the personality of the company.**[2] It should encompass all the most important aspects of who the company is and why it's driving forward. Often that includes elements that are important to how the company was founded and what it's guiding principals are such as values, mission statements, and future vision. It will likely also cover regulatory aspects such as outlining all benefits, perks, and policies. And then there is a more creative element to company culture that is people-focused and considers how people work and interact as a community. All of this boils down to a shared cultural identity as employees at a given company. This culture then takes on a life of its own and impacts employee engagement, worker satisfaction, turnover and retention rates, and the employer brand. It's one of the first things job searchers try to discover more about and often something that is mentioned on review sites like Glassdoor. Culture often lives beyond the physical confines of a company and can become a beacon to attracting new hires who have heard about it and want to join the company that created it.

Who needs to be involved in creating culture?

If you need to give your culture a spruce, or if you don't really have much of one at the moment, then the best place to start is figuring out what voices need to be involved in creating a culture. The short answer is, everyone! But the longer answer is you'll need to think about collecting feedback from a few different groups such as:

- **Employees:** Feedback can be gathered as anonymous surveys, soliciting suggestions, or holding round tables. In order to understand what doesn't work, you need to ask the people who live day in and day out at all levels of your company. Pay special attention to the lowest level of an organization as they are usually the ones who feel the most pain from a broken or negative culture.

- **Managers**: Managers are often caught in the middle between trying to keep their teams happy and keeping up with deadlines and upholding the goals of the corporation. As such, they might also straddle two cultures, the wider company one and the more personal one they create with their team. Bringing managers and their opinions into the picture will help design a culture that can transition easily from the overarching company into individual teams in order to provide a consistent experience across all levels of an organization.

- **Executives**: While the other two groups are important to consider, at the end of the day if you want to change culture, it all starts from the top.[3] Change isn't easy and it won't be painless so if the top of the company isn't on broad, no one else will be either and any attempt to create culture will die. But while executives will have a better view of future objectives and where the company needs to move, they might not know much about the actual sentiment of their workers. That's why all levels of the company need to be accounted for when building a common culture.

What elements should a strong culture include?

Once you've done your groundwork and canvased the opinions of your current workers, it's time to come up with a plan to create that positive culture you've been dreaming of. There are many, many elements that a good culture plan should account for but 10 of the more crucial ones will be discussed in the coming pages. Ensuring these elements are taken into account when rolling out a new culture can be the difference between successful adoption and employees balking at the change. **Remember, one of the most important things to do will be to communicate how the culture benefits the average employee.** If they feel like these changes are going to increase oversight or add to their workload, the initiative is doomed to fail. But if they see how the culture shift can add real value to their work lives, employees will be far more receptive to the plan. So when creating your strategy, think about how to incorporate these 10 elements to help you succeed.

1. Values and vision

At its core, culture is about the vision and mission of a company and how they will get to where they're trying to go. Employees want to know they're on a ship that's actually heading somewhere and they also want to know how that ship is run. **Ethical business practices and the search for meaningful work are defining the younger generations of workers.** Building that information directly into the culture is crucial to ensure employees can work together to achieve company goals rather than waste time with misalignment. But keep in mind, values can be an ephemeral concept to pin down. In order to communicate them successfully and gain buy in, you need to find a way to fold your values into the everyday reality of your employee experience.[4]

2. Benefits and policies

The regulatory aspect of culture isn't as creative or fun to think about but it's a necessary part of the picture, especially for attracting new talent. **Clear, easy to follow company policies decrease stress and increase a sense of community.** It helps ensure everyone stays on the same page and as a bonus, forces companies to be more open and transparent about all the perks, benefits, or procedures employees should be aware of. And yes, benefits and perks are a huge part of attracting candidates. Given the rise of the importance of wellness at work, don't skimp on this step. Common perks to think about include profit-sharing, paid volunteer days, childcare allowances, student-loan repayment assistance, and, of course, flexible work options to name a few of the more popular ones.

3. Work environment

How often do you think about the physical space of your office? Turns out, how you layout your workspace can have a big impact on employees' success.[5] Dull offices with rows of desks will impress no one in this day and age. In fact, it can send both your candidates and employees running for the hills. With more research suggesting open offices may cause stress and health issues it's important to think about how employees will engage within a given space.[6] If you have an open floor plan, consider adding additional spaces for employees to work quietly or relax and brainstorm in. **Changes of space and encouraging breaks can help employees increase their productivity without increasing their stress.** And when your new candidate walks in for an interview, they'll see happy employees in an engaging space.

4. Community

The biggest benefit of a strong culture is the sense of community that's created when it's done well. Instead of office silos, employees should be encouraged to interact with people outside of their immediate teams. Events and gatherings can help bring the whole office together to further cement this sense of community. There are many approaches on how to develop this sort of connection, but many companies are finding success by tying community building efforts to giving back.[7] This can be done either by joining forces with a local charity or providing employees with opportunities to volunteer or help their local neighbourhoods. **Any activity that brings the company together on a common goal (beyond daily work ones) can help bond them together.** And bonded employees are more likely to stick around longer term and refer their network to open positions.

5. Management style

Remember when we said it all starts from the top? That includes the top of every team, too. When building your culture, take how teams are currently managed into account. **Once your culture is fully in place, all teams should be treated fairly and equitably regardless of which manager an employee might have.** There will be individual differences between managers, of course, but you want to avoid a workplace where, for example, one team might be required to work overtime every night while another never is. Employees and managers alike should know the expectations, and limitations, of what can and can't be asked of workers and that message should be clearly expressed as part of your culture.

6. Interpersonal connections

It might seem like interpersonal relationships would roll under community, but this aspect is more about what happens at the personal or team level of a company, rather than a more sweeping initiative. A strong culture should encourage office friendships or connections beyond the daily grind of what needs to be achieved. **Employees with at least one close friend at work report a stronger sense of belonging and company loyalty.**[8] They are also less likely to quit if their work friends are going to remain behind. Creating space for friendships to develop or programs such as mentorship initiatives can go a long way toward improving job satisfaction and culture adoption.

7. Wellness and burnout

Another element the modern workers are balking at is working for companies that negatively impact their physical or mental health. With entrepreneurship and the tech explosion giving new grads a different path away from traditional workspaces, it's harder to find workers who will put up with a high degree of stress or too heavy a workload. Now it should be pointed out that salary has a lot to do with this, of course, so if you're at a company that needs to push your employees hard, make sure they're appropriately compensated. **Regardless, employees are becoming savvier about maintaining a work-life balance and healthy approach to wellness.** Companies can support these needs by creating a wellness program and helping within the office. No overtime rules, a ban on work technology beyond office hours, gym memberships, healthy meals at lunch, and flexible scheduling can all help tackle wellness and keep your employees healthy.

8. Learning and development

This concept is on the tip of everyone's tongue these days. Millennials and Gen Z are becoming more notorious for demanding professional development and walking away when it's not provided. And it makes sense. **Skill requirements are changing faster than ever before and younger generations want to stay ahead of the future of work coming their way.**[9] Companies without a strong focus on reskilling and learning will find themselves increasingly left out in the cold as younger candidates pass them by in favor of companies where they can grow their abilities more quickly. Luckily, in the age of AI and technology, there are a lot of ways to provide development opportunities to your employees without breaking the bank.

9. Employee appreciation

This should be a cornerstone of all business but certainly of a positive culture. Make sure you are taking the time to appreciate your employees and the work that they do. This can be in a tangible way through incentives or bonuses or it could be intangible like calling out a colleague's good work or even just taking the time to say thank you. **When employees feel seen and appreciated, they are more likely to work harder, be more loyal, and stay in a position longer.** Everyone likes to be praised and encouraging ways for management or companies to provide that feedback with more structure can benefit the whole company. And remember, community wide events like family picnic days, winter galas, off-sites, or contest and games can all help employees feel valued and important at work.

10. Transparency and trust

This can sometimes be a scary word for companies but it's not a trend that's going away anytime soon.[10] We live in an increasingly interconnected world and getting information about salaries, working conditions, and company ethics isn't that hard anymore. This might be a tough reality for companies that like to keep things close to their chest, but it can be a good thing for your culture. **A company who is transparent builds trust, and a culture based on trust will be far stronger in the face of adversity than one without it.** Again, this is about walking your talk and really investing in a company culture. Lip service will kill a culture shift faster than anything else. So if you want employees to trust you, make sure you trust them back.

What are the steps to launching a new culture?

Now that we know what elements need to be included in a strong company culture, how do you actually go about building it? To get you started, try following these 7 steps.

1. **Take stock of where you are and where you want to go:** Try to be objective about the failings of your company as well as the successes and use that as a guide to what needs to be addressed.

2. **Survey stakeholders:** As we mentioned, get the opinions of every level of your organization so you have a good sense of what their pain points are and what to do about it.

3. **Come up with a plan:** Be creative. Cultures are meant to be fun and energizing so your plan should be too. Keep in mind the 10 elements we've already discussed and what role they should have in your strategy.

4. **Communicate the plan:** Go public! This can be done all at once in a town hall setting or in stages as the culture rolls down from the top. Make sure you're communicating what employees should be expecting to see and what they should do if they don't.

5. **Gain buy in:** This process can be long because people intrinsically like the status quo. Especially since being a culture supporter might be more work upfront (especially for managers) adoption might be slow to start so stick with it and provide support.

6. **Build checkpoints into your plan and monitor it:** Once you have a culture up and running, don't forget about it. Maintaining a company culture isn't easy. If you don't invest in keeping it going, your culture might die a slow death when you're not looking and send you back to square one.

7. **Hire for culture fit:** Once you have a strong culture, hire people who will add to it, not detract from it. One way to do this is through the use of personality, cognitive, and behavior assessments that will give you a deeper look into who a candidate really is and how they'll likely interact on a team.

Conclusion

Creating a positive company culture is a task every business should be thinking about as the war for talent rages on. Employees and candidates are benefiting from the variety of choice now available to them in terms of where they want to work. With work-from-anywhere positions gaining popularity, startups and tech companies booming, and a generational attitude shift away from the "work is life" mentality, attracting great talent can be a real effort. Your work is made even more difficult if your culture is weak or worse, negative, as your current employees will feel less loyalty and be more prone to job hopping and new candidates will pass by without pausing to fill in an application. With so many examples out there of companies who have gotten this right, there's more pressure than ever before to create a positive culture. And keep in mind, the bells and whistles are nice but at the end of the day, it's more about building a community with a shared sense of values and goals that appreciates and celebrates each other. When employees look forward to coming to work, everyone benefits.

So next time you find yourself wondering if your culture needs a boost, think about some of the elements explored here and what you can do to work them into your own approach to company culture.

Notes

1   CultureIQ. Company Culture and Employee Engagement Statistics. (2017). Retrieved from https://cultureiq.com/blog/company-culture-employee-engagement-statistics/

2   Doyle, A. (2019). Understanding Company Culture. Retrieved from https://www.thebalancecareers.com/what-is-company-culture-2062000

3   Freeland, G. (2018). Culture Change: It Starts At The Top. Retrieved from

4   Nathanson, E. (2018). Building Company Culture: 7 Steps for Every Small Business. Retrieved from https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/company-culture/2018/build-company-culture-small-business

5   Heitzman, A. (2018). Why Workspace is So Critical to Employee's Success. Retrieved from https://www.inc.com/adam-heitzman/why-workspace-is-so-critical-to-employees-success.html

6   Hay, M. (2018). We Looked Into the Health Effects of Working in an Open-Plan Office. Retrieved from https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ev8ae7/does-working-in-an-open-plan-office-affect-your-health

7   Patterson, K. (2018). The Rise of the Caring Companies: Building Corporate Culture and Community by Giving Back. Retrieved from https://hrdailyadvisor.blr.com/2018/03/30/rise-caring-companies-building-corporate-culture-community-giving-back/

8   Knerl, L. Here's Why Having Work Friends is Better for Your Bottom Line. Retrieved from https://convene.com/catalyst/work-friends-better-bottom-line/

9   Poague, E. (2018). Gen Z Is Shaping a New Era of Learning: Here's What you Should Know. Retrieved from https://learning.linkedin.com/blog/learning-thought-leadership/gen-z-is-shaping-a-new-era-of-learning--heres-what-you-should-kn

10   Gorman, C. Workplace Transparency Is a Boon, If Your Company Culture Is Built on Trust. Retrieved from https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/240084