collective insight

By Jessica Matthysen

WORKPLACE INNOVATION

Culture and why it matters

Many employees and companies dismiss the concept of culture as unimportant and irrelevant. But, if taken seriously and properly incorporated, it can unlock great potential in your organisation.

Over the past few years I have developed a taste for books that touch on employee/employer dynamics, organisational culture, personal development and psychology.

These books (see sidebar) are all trying to offer answers. Some of them take you for a walk alongside the author into their personal journeys – most of them into the world of frustration. It's a frustration that many people experience in trying to not just survive, but to make the leap to thriving at their employers, or making their businesses happy places for their staff.

I too, have felt the frustration and I have felt powerless. Let's be honest, there are always problems, and there always will be. But what is fundamentally wrong? Is it me? Was it the job itself? Was it the environment, the salary, the commute to work? A list of endless questions plagued my mind.

To boot, it's not like companies themselves aren't aware of the problems. And hats off to them, they try, and a lot of them try really hard. But, it just seemed that no matter how many rewards programmes, team-building efforts or engagement surveys there were, something just didn't feel right.

Culture can be the key to unlocking the potential of organisations and the humans working there. Every company has a culture, whether you like it or not. The fact that the organisation exists and that humans work for it means it has a culture. Companies put together a multitude of reward programmes, policies, ceremonies, rituals and rites of passage. You could argue that their hierarchy and management system is similar to that of a tribe's kinship. Company values are plastered on everything sent from the human resources (HR) office, to email signatures, and the wall in the reception area.

In its online *Benefits Barometer* 2017, Alexander Forbes looked at the changing world of work and touched on the importance of seeing an employee holistically: "The more holistically employers can understand these needs, the better they will be able to structure policies and benefits that make sense for their employees – and this process starts with understanding employees in context. What are their responsibilities outside work? What are their attitudes and behaviours towards money? Understanding the history, values, psychology and responsibility lens of our individual employees is the right starting point for a meaningful discussion about a viable employee benefits framework."

How do we get the ball rolling on re-imagining our workplaces? Let's go back to what makes us human, and touch on a few things I believe are currently misunderstood, and challenge our beliefs about the power of culture.

Mistaken belief 1: Culture is not important, it's just the warm and fuzzy stuff

One afternoon a couple of years ago, I found myself in a beautiful, 40-seater boardroom, beginning the discussion on the importance of culture and trying to elicit resources to focus on this project. And I could see my efforts were stalling.

Then a comment was made about culture not being important: "It's just the warm and fuzzy stuff HR does, like putting chocolates on your desk when it's Worker's Day. Why is that our problem? We have far more important things that we should focus our time and resources on."

Which made me ask myself: Is there a mistaken assumption that culture *is simply* the motivation used by HR to make you work harder, faster, better? Or even just the pretty picture an organisation paints – the shopfront – to entice people into a company? Culture as internal marketing perhaps? A very one-dimensional practice.

Unfortunately, for many companies, this is exactly the perception. From start-ups to Fortune 500s, culture is viewed as a set of programmes, rituals and ceremonies that are mostly devoid of purpose and passion – a lot of them unimaginative and, at worst, boring. In many cases, HR policies are often in direct conflict with the values and culture of a company.

For example, do you tell employees and your customers that your organisation values sustainability – "We make every effort to go 'green'", yet you have mountains of paper piling up on every floor and insist on contracts being physically signed rather than accepting digital signatures? Maybe it's because it would cost too much to buy the software, or maybe you just don't trust digital signatures, or it could even be that in your industry it's not legal yet to do so.

So, while it is the prerogative of an organisation to make decisions and create its own policies, it is important that those decisions and policies are married to the core values

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you plaster on the walls of your halls.

Moral of the story? Be aware and be authentic. No point trying to be something you are not. Your employees and customers will sense it.

Mistaken belief 2: Employees and customers should be treated differently

"Clients do not come first, employees come first. If you take care of them, they will take care of your clients," wrote Sir Richard Branson in a piece published on the Virgin website in 2016.

Another colloquial way to describe culture is to describe it as "the way we do things around here". Did you ever notice though, that the way we do things for our staff versus the way we do things for customers is different?

Why do we have different ways of handling customers and employees? Isn't it obvious that by treating your employees like you would your customers, you create massive and, might I add, free marketing and public relations? Just imagine all your employees singing your praises...

Let's take a moment to consider the impact of spending the same time and effort on creating beautiful websites, campaigns, user experiences, products and services for people you don't know intimately (your customers), as you do on your employees. Your employees are like family, they are the people you can trust. Who better to tell you the truth (if you create the environment to do so) than your employees? And the risk is far less.

Mistaken belief 3: Culture is just another tick-box exercise with an end date

I don't know how many times I've heard some version of, "Don't worry, all we need to do is implement this programme by X date and then it will all be fine."

Hard truth here... No! It won't be. Believing that culture is something you can manage, like a project with an end date, is setting you up for failure. That's because culture is an ongoing movement:

■ There's a constant ebb and flow of human beings who join and leave your organisation.

■ Hopefully, people are not stagnating, but growing, developing, learning and maturing within your organisation. When this happens, their priorities, needs and wants evolve too.

■ There are external factors out of your control, such as the economic climate, regulatory requirements, customer spending habits and, of course, the biggie: technology.

All these factors will affect both your culture and your strategy, two sides to the same coin (see mistaken belief 4).

Think about it like this: Culture is like a software programme for the human working condition within an organisation. For people to thrive (note, thrive, not survive), culture requires the same attention and dedication, and

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the same methodologies as, say, app development, agile methodologies and throw in some *Lean Startup* (a book by Eric Ries). Constant reiteration. (But remember to replace 'customer' with employee – see mistaken belief 2).

Mistaken belief 4: Do you believe your legacy is your culture?

My mother did her MBA while I was still in school. I can remember one of her stories very clearly from one of her classes. "Are you selling drills, or holes in the wall?" Legacy says... you sell drills. It's been your product offering for years, maybe even decades. But really, what you are doing is selling a hole in the wall.

This is the problem with legacy. It's a mistake to assume that just because something has been done for generations, it must be right. Most people never question those assumptions, they never question the "authority", especially when there doesn't seem to be any overt harm in continuing the practice. Flipping the script from product offering to solution offering opens a whole new world of possibilities.

But if you want innovation, if you want creativity, if you are looking for continuous improvement, if you want to survive automation and digitisation, then you need to give your people the freedom to question everything, and the culture to make the change happen. Flip the switch and commit to 'legacide' (as written in Richard Mulholland's book) – constantly.

Mulholland says: "You need to understand that innovation is not limited to doing something new. In fact, more often than not, innovation should be about stopping doing something that's old – even if that thing is what made you succeed in the first place."

And the same can be said for culture. ■

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