

corporate culture

beyond casual friday



ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR BRAND

BY TRISH BROCK

Corporate culture is a phenomenon discussed by nearly everyone in the workplace. Usually it is mentioned during a conversation describing their organization and what it is like to work there. And like many contemporary catch phrases, the term is often overused and less often clearly understood. Not many people can define it, but they know it when they see it.

The culture of an organization is a complicated and deeply rooted mix of elements. It should not, however, be treated as a superficial phenomenon that you can manipulate or change at will. And while culture helps identify how people relate to each other, it has more implications than one might initially assume.

WHAT IS CORPORATE CULTURE?

Simply put, corporate culture can be described as “how things get done around here.” It is a broad term used to define the unique personality or character of a particular company or organization. It guides how people think, act and feel. It includes such elements as core values and beliefs, corporate ethics and rules of behavior. It involves how decisions are made and how work flows.

Corporate culture can be expressed in Mission Statements, Vision Statements, Strategic Plans, sales materials, websites, architectural and interior style of offices,

what people wear to work, how people address each other, titles, and how people spend their free time. Existing staff “lives” the culture and transfers their experience to your customers. Think about your own experiences with enthusiastic sales people, rude customer service reps or companies that don’t deliver on promised claims. Descriptions can be clear and well intended, but do they match the reality of everyone’s daily experience in how things get done?

“How we get things done around here” quickly becomes “who we are.” Your company’s culture, whether it is a good one or not, is enormously powerful – it is about how you implement and about your identity (and brand!). It is a reflection of your values, beliefs and behaviors. It affects how those outside your company perceive you.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND YOUR CORPORATE CULTURE?

With talent wars raging, an ever increasing competitive environment, and customers who don’t seem to be as loyal as they used to be, the challenge to create a strong brand and differentiate yourself in the marketplace all hinge on the sort of culture that permeates your dealer.

Prospective employees, particularly the gen X and gen Y crowd, are urged to seek the right organizational culture – one that is aligned with their personal as well as professional goals. The right culture can be more important

to top talent than job descriptions, salary and benefits.

Prospective customers are also evaluating the cultures of organizations they choose to do business with. More than ever, companies want to be associated with like minded companies who share the same value and belief systems. Even though price and service will always be driving factors in their decisions, companies are also evaluating your values and goals, and how they are supported. Customer retention is also affected by your culture.

In reality, your culture is also the driving force behind your brand. Your brand is how your market experiences your organization, regardless of what you say. And since your culture is their experience, all the marketing materials and web sites are useless if they don’t tell a story that is meaningful and consistent with “how things are done around here:”

It is not uncommon for owners and top management to characterize the culture as being one way, and yet employees and customers can experience the culture differently. For example, one dealer principal took great pride when touring a prospective customer through his facility, carefully explaining that the culture of his dealer was very family oriented and focused on customer service. In reality, even though no questions were asked when an employee stayed home with a sick

child, there were high expectations to work long hours and on weekends well beyond the normal work week. He touted strong customer service as important and attempted to differentiate his dealer in the marketing efforts with this claim, yet in reality, the dealer found other priorities for staff and customer service suffered.

This example underscores the discrepancies between stated values and how the organization “gets things done” at an operational level. Gaps between words and actions create a culture in itself, and this does not go unnoticed by the competition, prospective new hires or anyone associated with the dealer.

When dealers are successful, it is not uncommon for the culture and identity to become steeped in the belief that their success is due to their expertise. The culture perpetuates and the leaders naturally work hard to preserve that identity.

The old adage of “our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness” can quickly be realized with a string of successes, and when leaders fail to keep the values and behaviors of the organization in check, the culture can morph dramatically. How things get done and an organization’s iden-

sciously created, but rather can be a reflection of the values of the top management or founders. The personal behavior of the leader is often the most important determinant of how the culture is shaped. Employees pay far more attention to the walk than the talk. So does your marketplace. They heed what the leader attends to, measures, gets upset about, rewards and punishes regardless of what is published in company communications. Employees’ behavior is often in direct response (or reaction) to the leader’s behavior.

Other dealers recognize the importance of clearly defined and shared (versus mandated) corporate values and their affect on the resulting culture. Top executives are vigilant about maintaining it. Developing a culture that is consistent with these values and hence, your identity is clearly important.

When attempting to understand your culture, here are some questions that, upon reflection, might give you a better understanding of “how things are done around here” (see sidebar). Even better, ask others to answer these questions as well and see how the answers compare.




tity can become out of balance and the result can be a downward spiral.

It’s not difficult to reflect and identify companies we are all familiar with who have experienced this sort of demise. Enron certainly comes to mind.

HOW DO YOU GAUGE, DECIPHER OR EVALUATE YOUR CULTURE?

The culture of many dealers is often not

PARTING THOUGHTS

Culture is more than casual Fridays and people who get along well. There are learning cultures, toxic cultures, dysfunctional cultures, sales cultures, trend setting cultures, etc. Making the effort to fully understand “how things get done” in your organization will put you in a better position to allow (or not) your culture to attract top talent, compete for new business and create a different, meaningful brand. 

HOW THINGS ARE DONE AROUND HERE

Understanding your culture

- What 10 words would you use to describe your dealer?
- What’s it really like to work here? Do you like it?
- Any “blame and shame” or “learning” when errors occur?
- How is bad behavior dealt with?
- Around here, what’s really important?
- How does the dealer show that employees are valued?
- What behaviors get rewarded?
- Communication – how do you learn stuff?
- How is conflict managed?
- Do you feel like you know what is going on?
- Is it hard to get things done here?
- Are promises & commitments kept?
- How do people get promoted here?
- Is there a high degree of trust?
- Is there role clarity among all members of the organization?
- Is it safe to question status quo?
- Why and how does the dealer celebrate? Or, why not?
- How are critical incidents or organizational crises managed?
- Is there deliberate role modeling, teaching and coaching?
- Are there defined criteria for the allocation of rewards and status?
- Are some people exempt from the policies and rules expected of everyone else?
- Are people respectful of each other?
- How are decisions really made?

Trish Brock, principal of Trish Brock & Associates, is a well-known industry consultant with over 25 years in the business. She specializes in working with dealers on branding, sales support materials, marketing plans and market assessments as well as leadership and sales development/training. Contact her at 720-277-3035 or tbrock@trishbrockassoc.com.business.