Clear Roadblocks to Employee Retention From the Top Down

By Mary Hladio

PR professionals, like most businesspeople, often default to what they know best when it comes to strategy, planning and growth. Is new business in a lull? Send a direct mail, e-mail and social media blast. Considering adding a new service? Let's rebrand and send out a release announcement. Need a way to stand out from competitors? Design all new company collateral.

However, in an uncertain job market and constantly changing business environment, it is fundamentally important to also be in tune with your organization's culture and identity at a deeper level. That culture and identity need to be consistently evaluated, adapted to the business environment and improved to succeed.

The following is a deeper look at organizational culture and some ways to influence and align it with operations and goals, including red flags and thought starters in identifying and influencing company culture.

A Definition of Culture

Culture is something that everyone sees, but most often cannot verbalize. PR pros are in tune with some aspects of culture, because it often is reflected in a company's brand. What our expertise does not necessarily recognize is that culture is a key component of employee satisfaction and organizational performance. Whether the definition of company culture is coming from direct survey questions or uncovered in anecdotal stories, the definition does not answer the real issue. The real issue is what is the operating company culture, and how do you improve it?

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tion with a strong company culture, companies like Google, Procter & Gamble and Southwest Airlines might come to mind. While any in our field could rattle off how we see culture in the brands of these companies, if you asked someone to describe what creates their culture, or that of any other company, the answer is more elusive.

Company culture is not wrapped up neatly in the stated vision, mission and core values, but is a combination of both organic and influenced characteristics of a company and its staff. Company culture can be the container for the vision, mission and values but it is not synonymous with it. Some expressions of corporate culture are easy to observe. They can be seen in the dress code, work environment, work hours and hierarchy of a company. However, these are only the surface layer of culture.

When most companies perceive there is a culture problem, they try to fix the problems by addressing the parts of the corporate culture that are easy to see. Some quick fixes include company-wide events or

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from possibility to results

adding benefits and perks. In reality, none of these actions will have a powerful or lasting effect on a company's culture. Just as in marketing, a company can tackle every tactic on the scene but, if there is something inherently wrong with the campaign, product or from an operation perspective, it will be difficult to create change.

The far more powerful aspects of company culture cannot be easily seen. The core of the culture is composed of the true beliefs, standards, perspectives and attitudes, as well as the internal and private conversations of the company's employees. These attributes become the foundation for all actions and decisions within a team, department and the company itself.

Creating and sustaining a healthy, vibrant company culture requires reinforcement of the values, purpose and rules through daily and proactive conversations and communications.

Employee Retention

One key indicator of company culture is employee satisfaction and retention. When culture is not clearly defined, or a disconnect between the stated and practiced cultures exists, issues with satisfaction and retention often crop up. Employees want to feel connected to their organization and work environment. When their picture of the organization culture is unclear or negative, a gap between their daily tasks and the greater mission grows.

Also, a lack of protocol and standards creates an appearance of dishonesty or indifference in leadership, which is often cited as a reason for dissatisfaction among workers and a reason for leaving a position.

Leadership

The CEO and leadership team of a company have a powerful impact on corporate culture through their conversations and behaviors. In many cases, business owners and leaders never formally learn how to properly influence company culture. Many business owners and leaders focus on profitability and strategy and forget that company culture can affect the bottom line and the potential for company growth. It is much more difficult to change a company culture than to create and influence company culture from the outset.

Leadership has to define the current state of the company's culture. Leadership can administer an employee survey asking about items related to culture, or better yet, conduct focus groups and interviews with employees. It is critical to find out how decisions are made and by whom. Leadership must determine what are the perceived values and accepted behaviors employees have regarding customer service, teamwork and communication.

Additionally, leadership must provide plenty of opportunities for two-way communication and feedback. The two-way communication will involve and engage employees in living out the vision, mission and goals on a daily basis. Once communication is open, should any new challenges to company culture arise, they will be overt. Thus, they can be addressed quickly and effectively.

In many cases, hiring an external organizational development consultant to spend a few days within your company is the most effective way to address these initiatives. The consultant can provide an unfiltered and unbiased view of your company without creating tension among your employees.

Innovation

Another topic buzzed about in the business world, especially in PR, is innovation. Companies and clients in every industry want the newest, fastest, smartest, coolest ways of doing and communicating things. More and more companies are making claims about innovation in their stated culture. And again, PR pros are likely to think: How can we convey an image of innovation for our company? But they may be less likely to take a look at what the company is doing foundationally and operationally to support an innovative culture and image. Innovation is normally an innate quality of company culture and not something that can be influenced either artificially or easily.

The focus on innovation of any kind should be directly connected to the needs of the company in the economy and competitive environment. Furthermore, leadership has to determine if the organization has the talent to support an innovative culture. A portion of this decision will be based on the needs of the company: Is problem-solving a core value within the company? Are risk-takers, innovators and forward-thinkers rewarded by earning leadership roles?

These are all organic indicators of an innovative culture that, if they do not already exist, are either not important to the company's success or will require

very complex overhaul from the top down in culture.

Innovative culture, like the economy, is an example of something that becomes more important as a reaction to external circumstances. The most successful companies in each industry have cultures that allow for innovative results. The results exist regardless of what name the company uses for innovation, what systems are in place or what challenges they face. The old adage "necessity is the mother of invention" is as true today as it was 60 years ago—and the best companies can make it work.

The Role of Business Owners

Defining ownership of the company's culture is crucial to success, no matter what type of culture exists in an organization. While business owners are important in defining and guiding culture, responsibility for building, maintaining and influencing the company's culture is not solely a senior leadership task. A cross-functional team works better. The owner is, however, tasked with monitoring and being proactive in engagement with employees.

If company culture is secondary to product, service, marketing or anything else, great opportunities to align people's decisions and actions with the goals of your organization are being missed. In a thriving, profitable company, employees will embody the values, vision and strategic priorities of their company. What creates this embodiment (or lack of embodiment) is the real company culture that pervades the employees' minds, bodies, conversations and actions. This is the level of engagement PR professionals dream about—an organization where from the top down, the leadership and staff are brand advocates, engaged in communication with one other and others about their company in a positive way.

Most importantly, PR pros need a good definition of their company's actual culture before beginning to understand how to influence any needed changes or improvements. Understanding these topics strategically, operationally and cohesively will make their job more effective. **PRN**

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5 Indicators of an Employee Retention Problem

1. **Employee attendance can be an indicator of a lot of problems—and retention is one of them.**

- Employees don't take their normal summer or holiday vacation because they are saving it to be "cashed out" when they quit.
- Poor attendance or employees working bare minimum of hours.

2. **Workforce is lethargic. If your employee base is no longer vested in the company's performance, this is definitely an item that deserves a closer look.**

- Employees do not demonstrate a sense of urgency to complete day-to-day tasks.
- Project deliverables are late or of poor quality.
- Employees stop asking questions in meetings and generally shut down.

3. **Employees ask many questions about benefits.**

- Employees are overly concerned with when annual bonuses will be paid.
- Employees ask about COBRA and/or retirement plans often and out of the ordinary times for those discussions.

4. **Changes in overall socialization.**

- Employees spend a lot of time on the phone making personal calls or texting people outside the company.
- Employees don't smile or seem to be having fun or "water cooler socialize" with people inside the company.
- Employees receive "constructive criticism" or negative feedback, and they don't seem to care. They neither acknowledge nor defend.

5. **The issues are prolonged.**

- Time to fill open positions is increasing, because applicants are hearing from your employees that your company is not a great place to work.

—*Mary Hladio*