Company Culture & Workplace Clashes

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A key component of every employee satisfaction and organizational climate improvement project is the concept of company culture. 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 company culture and how do you create or improve it?

If you asked someone to name an organization with a strong company culture, companies like Google, Proctor & Gamble, and Southwest Airlines might come to mind. If you asked someone to describe what makes up the culture of these companies, or that of any other company, the answer is somewhat elusive and a bit more difficult to pinpoint.

The idea of company culture comes from the field of Organizational and Management studies. These studies define company culture as the mindset, attitudes, experiences, beliefs, and shared values of a company. Company owners and business leaders often assume that their company's stated vision, mission, and core values are synonymous with their company's culture. Unfortunately all too often, the stated vision, mission, and core values, become merely words on a plaque or printed on a poster in the lunchroom. Company culture can be the container for the vision, mission, and values but it is not synonymous with it.

Culture shows up in both visible and invisible ways. 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 and the attributes that are visible.

The far more powerful aspects of company culture cannot be easily seen. The core of the culture is composed of the beliefs, standards, perspectives, 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.

Culture is forced naturally, and automatically, every time people come together with a shared purpose. Culture has to be created in order to accomplish the purpose. The issue is the positive or negative nature of this forced culture. By bringing individuals with unique viewpoints, values and standards together and integrating them into one environment a company can experience growth, creativity, and accomplishment or disruption and challenges based on each person's accepted traditions. The cultural understandings of each demographic can, if not mediated, create clashes about how things are done and cause many misunderstandings.

Traditionally we have seen clashes based on age, gender, race, sexuality, and personality types. And for the first time in history we are seeing people from many generations (Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Millennials) working alongside each other. In today's business environment the days of the eldest at the top are gone the eldest may be doing the same job as the youngest. The youngest may be the person at the top. All these different experiences and backgrounds may be violating the cultural understandings of others in the team, department, or company and can lead to conflict if not resolved.

Since a culture is created every time a group of people come together to form a team, a company can also have many sub-cultures. For example, the marketing, finance, and technology teams may have different worldviews, jargon, work hours, and ways of doing things. A big challenge for today's businesses is to create a strong, cohesive company culture that pulls all of the sub-cultures together and ensures that they can work as a unified team with a common purpose.

Most companies try to "fix" perceived problems by addressing the parts of the corporate culture that are easy to see. Some quick-fixes include holding company picnics and golf scrambles or adding benefits and perks. None of

these actions will have a powerful or lasting effect on a company's culture. Creating and sustaining a healthy, vibrant company culture requires reinforcement of the values, purpose, and rules through daily and proactive conversations and communications. Here are a few tips for understanding and influencing company culture.

1. **Identify the Company's Culture**
First, define the current state of the company's culture. Administer an employee survey asking about company culture, or better yet conduct focus groups and interviews with your employees. Find out how decisions are made and by whom. Determine what the perceived values and accepted behaviors of your employees regarding customer service, teamwork, and communication. In many cases, the best way to obtain this information is to hire an external Organizational Development consultant to spend a few days within your company. The Organizational Development consultant can provide an unfiltered and unbiased view of your company without creating tension among your employees.

2. **Provide an Employee Feedback Loop**
It is important to have a forum for two-way communication. Provide your employees with constant communication of the company's goals, strategies, and vision. Arrange "town hall" meetings to share stories with employees, demonstrate the mission, vision and core values of the company, and hear what the employees say.

3. **Address Conflicts Quickly**
Flare-ups between or among co-workers may sound like pretty petty stuff. However, ignored, they can have disastrous consequences to overall company culture. Discuss root causes of the conflict while bringing the conversation back to the bigger picture. For example: The first shift and second shift call center supervisors appear to disagree on how much information a phone rep can give a client. Without determining and resolving the root cause (lines of authority), the phone reps are caught between two forces and uneasy as to what they are allowed to say. The tension escalates and the bigger picture of

an effective call center is lost.

4. **Leadership Coaching**
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 then to create and influence company culture from the onset.

5. **Define Ownership of the Company's Culture**
Who should have accountability and responsibility for building, maintaining, and influencing the company's culture? This actually should not be solely a senior leadership task. A cross-functional team works better. The owner is, however, tasked with monitoring and being in proactive engagement with employees.

If you believe that company culture is secondary to your product or service - you may be missing a great opportunity to align people's decisions and actions with the goals of your organization. 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.   Company owners and business leaders need a good definition of their company's actual culture before they can begin to understand how to influence any needed changes.