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6 Tips to Build Company Culture

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One of the key challenges that face any business owner is how to build a business that is independent of themselves. In other words, how can they build a business that isn't reliant on them being there every day to solve challenges or put out fires.

Obviously sound systems and intelligent internal controls are two major ingredients to build a company that is independent of the founder.

But what happens when novel situations come up that you don't have a system to detail out how you want your team to respond?

This is where your company's culture can save the day.

Your company's culture is the sum total of the absorbed values and unstated "way we do things around here." If it is built wisely, it will help your team handle novel situations that you have no system to outline. One way to think about culture is it is the invisible hand that shapes your team's behaviors when no one is looking.

Here are six tips to help you and your leadership team establish and reinforce your company culture.

1. Concretely write out a vision of what you want your company's culture to be.

Before you can establish, let alone "reinforce", your company's culture, you need to get clear on what you want your culture to be.

So over the next 30 days, set aside a few 45-60 minute blocks of time to just journal on paper what you want your company's culture to look like. What values would they internalize? How would these internalized values show up in their behavior? What would an outside observer notice about the feel of your company if they spent the day in your offices?

Gut Check: How does your company currently line up on your vision of what you want your culture to be?

Imagine you were an outsider looking in, where would you notice things aligning or not aligning between the observed culture and your desired culture?

Take this feedback and use it to refine your written vision of your company culture. Talk with your team about this vision. Get their thoughts and input. This is a process that unfolds over several months, not just a "sit down one time" event.

2. Celebrate victories and behavior in alignment with your core values and brand immediately.

Highlight the great behavior; celebrate the story of the success. The closer you make the celebration to the behavior the more you reinforce the desired value. Over time it is these small steps that accumulate into your culture.

Send out a company-wide email retelling the story of the victory.

Highlight it at a meeting. (Up the ante by creating a memorable physical totem or symbol of this victory, one that you can pass on to the next person to celebrate the next victory.)

Stand up and gather everyone's attention in the office for a standing ovation (or bow down to the excellence that your team member showed -- literally!)

You get the idea -- reinforce key behaviors that you want other people to internalize.

3. Look for small stories that symbolize deeper meaning.

You don't need to only highlight victories. Instead, also look for small occurrences in the company that symbolize deeper values you want the company to absorb.

For example, if Carol came in on Saturday to double check that the Acme redesign was still running smoothly, and you want that same degree of diligence and care to be core values, then publicly thank Carol for it. Ask her how it went, what did she learn, and then share those insights again with your whole team (which lets you again subtly retell the underlying story of Carol caring enough to check on the redesign on Saturday.)

4. Intentionally make the hard decision that shocks your team into learning how seriously you believe in your values.

I remember the surprise on my team's faces when I announced we were firing one of our largest clients who was pushing us in a direction that we just didn't want to go in. The client was high gross revenue but low and shrinking margin. What's more, they took some of our best people to keep them happy, people that the company needed on other projects. That decision to fire that client helped reinforce that in our company, we acted on our strategic plan and took the long term plan very seriously.

5. Start from the point of recruitment -- bring your values and culture front and center into your hiring, selection, and orientation of new team members.

Build into your hiring process checks for personality and values fit with your company's. Make sure that when you bring on a new hire that explaining the company values isn't just a 10 minute talk, but it is something you share by having multiple people share stories and experiences to make those values and the culture real.

6. If you want high performance and personal responsibility to be an integral part of your company culture, you've got to cull out your low performers -- now!

Every company has them. Those team members who everyone know is just marking time and sliding by. If you give them a pass by not dealing with the situation, the message you're sending to the rest of your team is that poor performance and excuses are acceptable.

High performers find a team with dead weight de-motivating. Cull your lower performers now and replace them with better and better people. Yes this might cause some short term pain, but the long term rewards merit it.

There you have six suggestions to make culture real in your company. Is it easy? No. But it is worthwhile.

Remember, culture is what empowers your team to deal with novel situations that your systems and controls just don't cover.

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