



10 steps to cultivate the right culture in your Startup

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In this increasingly networked environment, your organizational culture has become an integral part of your brand. Simply put, culture is how your employees treat the customer when you are not around. It is what happens when manager leaves the room. It is the shared beliefs, values, assumptions that manifest in behavior. Culture need not be good or bad but it definitely is strong or weak. An innovative company allows its employees to fail without repercussion to build a culture of risk taking but a medical clinic cannot allow this and can still have a strong culture of patient care.

Culture, crux of Startup business model

Though there are enough statistics to prove how a strong culture influences company performance, the most compelling reason for making culture as the crux of your business model can be found in the visuals of the terrorist attack at Taj Hotel in November 2008.

There was no policy or handbook to tell the hotel employees what to do in the wake of a terrorist attack. These were people who knew all back entrances and exits of the hotel. They could have easily saved themselves and no one would have blamed them. Not a single Taj employee left the guests. In fact, they kept coming back calmly after escorting guests out till the last guest left the premises. 11 of them lost their lives. This was organizational culture manifested at its very best.

TAJ APPROACH TO BUILDING CUSTOMER CENTRIC CULTURE

HIRE : Fresh recruits from small towns who have the right attitude (integrity & devotion to duty), not necessarily right skills

TRAIN : Train for 18 months, not 12. All training done by managers not external consultants. Teach people to improvise rather than go by the book. Ensure employees can deal with guests without consulting supervisor.

REWARD : Insist on employees to be “ guest ambassadors”. Recognize customer appreciation for an employee within 48 hours. Ensure recognition comes from supervisor not top management.

But where does all of this start. How do you begin to cultivate a strong culture that will bind your organization as it grows, diversifies and evolves? Here are ten steps that can get you started.



Cultivate the right culture

1. Assess

Entrepreneur needs to know what kind of a manager she is. It is essential to recognize your strengths and weakness. Whether you like it or not, your organization's culture is going be an extension of your own behavior. It will stem from your reactions to challenges as well as opportunities. A short-tempered manager ends up creating a team that is incapable of taking decisions. Weed out your weaknesses or at least hire a capable right hand that reigns in your negatives.

2. Define it

Create a compelling vision and purpose. A great culture starts with a simple yet powerful vision or mission. These simple turns of phrase guide a company's values and provide it with purpose. Google started with a simple motto, Don't be evil. In the times when Microsofts of the world were making money of users, Google decided that users need not be exploited to make money.

Clarify your values. Values offer a set of guidelines on the behaviors and mindsets needed to achieve that vision. Determine your Organization's uniqueness/ Wow factor. Any organization has a unique story. And the ability to unearth that story and craft it into a narrative is a core element of culture creation.

3. Hire for it

Hire the right person for cultural fit. A highly skilled person who is a cultural misfit is bound to fail. Hire people smarter than you who display the values that you want to cultivate in your company.

4. Live it

BUILDING BLOCKS OF CULTURE

VISION: A great culture starts with a vision. These simple turns of phrase guide a company's values and provide it with purpose.

VALUES: While a vision articulates a company's purpose, values offer a set of guidelines on the behaviors and mindsets needed to achieve that vision.

PRACTICES: Of course, values are of little importance unless they are enshrined in a company's practices.

PEOPLE: No company can build a coherent culture without people who either share its core values or possess the willingness and ability to embrace those values.

NARRATIVE: Any organization has a unique history — a unique story. And the ability to unearth that history and craft it into a narrative is a core element of culture creation.



When money is tight, how do we act? When a staff member is ill, how do we respond? When a good customer can't pay their bills, what do we say? When someone makes a mistake, how do we act? Your every day decisions and practices have the most lasting effect on culture. Observe them and align to your values.

5. Teach it

Communicate, create narratives, cite examples of acceptable behaviors and curate organizational anecdotes that portray your culture. There is no such thing as over-communication. From induction, writing of HR manual, team meetings and appraisal discussions, always talk about the values you hold dear and the vision that drives the organization.

6. Set Expectations

Clarify strategic priorities for the company. Articulate them in a way that everyone understands their role in it. Engage your team in defining SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) goals. Clarify and track key measures. Have at least 1 unifying metrics. To encourage a culture of helping at IDEO, employees are assigned as helpers in at least one other project in addition to their regular work.

7. Get out of the way

Define boundaries of operation but do not micromanage. It easier said than done especially when you are nurturing your startup as your own baby. But culture, as I said earlier, is what happens when you are not around. Allow it to develop.

8. Show Appreciation

Recognize culturally appropriate behavior. It is easy to reward achievement of goals, but rewarding on upholding company values sets the tone for everyone. Are you only rewarding the overachiever in sales or also giving recognition to the guy in support who resolved customer issue in the middle of the night? The answer is forever etched in the organizational psyche.

9. Get used to tough decisions

Zappos offers new hires \$2000 to leave the company at the end of four weeks of induction. Around 3% of the candidates take it and leave. What Zappos is successfully doing is weeding out misfits without any ensuing drama. It's an unusual expense but the returns in terms of productivity and work environment are immeasurable. Letting people go is a painful, yet necessary step. Get used to it.

10. Evaluate and correct



Culture evolves continuously, you can't leave it alone. As the leader of the organization, one of your prime responsibilities is to sow values that reflect the realities of your business and the spirit that you work with. Culturally inappropriate behavior by anyone in your team needs to be nipped in the bud. Ask for feedback from your employees, customer or suppliers on regular intervals and evaluate your performance on set cultural parameters.

Your startup is a living, breathing organism that will continuously evolve. These steps will help you give it the right shape and solid foundation.

About the author

Protima Sharma is Managing Partner at PeopleWiz Consulting. She has notched up 12 years of valuable industry experience in Thermax, Citigroup, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) as OD & Change Management consultant.