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The Leadership Cookbook

Your Culture *Is* Your Brand!

Business culture exists. It just is. Your culture is happening accidentally or it's happening on purpose. Which is it? Pay attention here. If your answer is, "its somewhere in between," I'd make the case your real answer is, "No we have not defined our culture." By default you've chosen "performance by accident." Do I have your attention?

Culture is all about behavior and the creation of norms. Each business environment is in essence a community focused on results. With a results focus, excellence can be defined and supported. Just like a community, we can define and track performance that is what I'll call either red flag or green flag behavior. As a member of the company, my job is to be conscious. At any given moment I get to be choiceful about my performance instead of being unconscious, on autopilot.

Ten **red** flags that scream, "Our culture needs attention!":

10. It's a common belief that "no one" is loyal anymore. You hear things like:
9. "I've only got 2 more years to go."
8. "Our policy is... (fill in the blank.)"
7. "We don't talk about that here"
6. "Forget it, *they'll* never listen."
5. In response to a big speech about cutting costs, wages and hours you hear: "Ya right, I wonder how much of their bonus *they're* putting back into the company?"
4. The Company mission is mentioned with a smirk.
3. Sarcasm is the primary humor in the company; followed by, "I'm just kidding."
2. "You catch yourself remembering the story, "The emperor has no clothes."
1. The real meeting happens *after* the meeting.

If you've never really defined your business culture, what a great time to begin! The exercise provides clarity. What if this step into *explicit* culture feels like a waste of time?

"We ought to slow down to define culture? In this economy?" Yes.
"Rudy are you *crazy*?" (Some will say, yes.)

If your story for years has been, "We all know what our culture is," from my experience you're likely missing real opportunity. Now *is* the time, more than ever. Why?

Here's a quick case having occurred in the last month, and a direct result of performance based on definitive cultural goals. If you've read my column for any length of time, you've heard me mention Pizza man, Nick Sarillo. Nick's Pizza and Pub is based in the predominantly blue-collar suburbs of Chicago. This company has a definitive sense of Purpose. Their culture is all about being a real gathering place for families in the community. While the rest of the restaurant industry is in real pain, down 10% or more, Nick's is sitting with 4% real growth, profitable with positive cash flow.

Nick's performance expectations are definitive, 220 team members are focused and aligned and their management systems are anticipatory. Company performance is anything but the norm for business performance in their community even without recession, let alone in the guts of it.

All said, 4% growth is still not their goal. What to do? Costs are cut as much as they're going to be, solution, raise sales. How? On Friday and Saturday the restaurants have a 1.5hour wait, five turns, and a \$16,000 night isn't uncommon. (Yes I said, pizza.) Obviously, even in recession, weekends were not the issue. In a brainstorming session using their Company Purpose and Values as a guideline, someone came up with the idea of "Half priced pizza on Monday nights!"

Wait a minute. There are certainly plenty of restaurants out there right now lowering prices to gain traffic, most with little or no impact. More so, if you went through the so-called burger or pizza "wars" in the 90's, lowering the price of core product is not the smartest idea, at least create a new product that provides a perception of value at a lower price. So how is idea different?

Remember Culture by choice? Here's the rest of the story: Half price pizza on Mondays is offered because the Purpose of this company is to serve as a gathering place for families. From the team, from the president of the company, came a sincere offering, "We" know that our community is in a world of hurt. "We" also know that regardless of how tough it is out there for you as families, you've been visiting us still as your gathering place of choice."

Nick went on, "We're pricing our pizza half off Monday's for two reasons: First, to say thanks! And more so, because we're *part* of this community. We realized we can do something to support you by providing pizza half price on Monday nights until the unemployment numbers are back to pre-recession percentages. We all feel the pain, and we're in this with you! This is one thing we can do to support you, in appreciation of the way you've supported us."

Results: 30 days later, Mondays are as busy as the weekends. Next step: ½ price on take out on Tuesdays. (The middle of June, a month into the ½ price pizza on Mondays, a letter to the editor for the local paper was printed that named Nick's Pizza as having done more to boost the attitude of the community and the local economy than anything being done in Washington D.C. Not bad press.)

You may say, this is just smart marketing. It's certainly smart; and it's more. This is an example of decision-making using purpose and values as guideposts. Nick's is a company that has explicit values that support of their business culture.

At Nick's and other client companies, constant attention is paid to anything closely resembling one of the red flag behaviors mentioned earlier. (Yes, we are human and those red flags show up. The choice is to act or don't when you experience them!)

At the same time, green flag behaviors are celebrated!

Ten green flags that signal, "We're awake, thanks to our Culture!":

In passing, you hear things like:

10. "I can speak honestly"
9. "Thanks for the feedback!"
8. "We made a difference today!"
7. Team members are more than loyal; they reach out to guests and customers anticipating needs
6. You hear talk about guiding principles as much as (or more than) policies
5. Sense of Purpose, and Values are used in language daily. Managers act as coaches instead of cops
4. Metrics are in place for any system or process which provide anticipated outcomes for *any* action
3. Potential Solutions are offered with complaints or any issue of concern by everyone
2. Accountability reigns: "I" own my actions and raise my hand for assistance with time to still achieve goals rather than miss them!
1. The real meeting happens in the meeting, truth is spoken with dignity and respect

The work to define culture is simple, not easy. Outcomes are unique each and every time, but the following map seems to work well:

Define and Celebrate personal Passion.. Explore how that passion shows up at work and turns into sense of Purpose, first as individuals, then as leaders and team, the company as a whole. From Purpose as a foundation, define values. Present tense, "I" statements; be explicit. From there with sense of Purpose as a foundation and values to guide, define Vision. What is it you really, I mean *really want*. Be explicit, and have metrics on everything. Then create mission teams to achieve the vision, on purpose using your values. Objectives and tasks will show up that support mission.

Culture just is. And choiceful Culture is very achievable. Take the time to define the culture you want. If I can provide you more clarity on this journey, please call or email. This ride is big fun AND has the ability to bring a sense of ethic back to "being in business!"