Aligning Teams, Building a Strong Culture

Every organization has a culture, whether it's created intentionally or grows organically. A positive culture increases engagement, productivity and innovation, so the challenge for leaders is to nurture their culture in the right direction, encouraging employees and other stakeholders toward a more successful future.

What is Culture?

Culture is a vague concept and is too often relegated to words on a wall or in the employee handbook. But culture is real and it has tangible impacts on employees every day.

"Culture is the set of unwritten rules and norms that an organization operates within," says Lisa Cavanaugh, Vice President of Leadership Development Experiences for FCCS. "It's the water we swim in, and it's typically understood implicitly by long-term employees, rather than communicated explicitly."

A strong, inspirational culture is essential for aligning your teams toward a common goal, so conveying and embodying the culture by leaders at every level is essential. All employees should be encouraged to embrace the culture, and new employees especially should be educated about organizational expectations – things as simple as the importance of meeting timeliness or internal email etiquette.

Building Team Alignment

To achieve this alignment, this sense of unity among employees, some organizations assign a peer "buddy" to help new team members identify and navigate the culture. Others take the time to formalize unwritten rules, being intentional about the culture they want to create and having open conversations about disruptive changes the organization is experiencing. Part of this process should be identifying when cultural artifacts are no longer useful and being willing to let them go. All of these tools can be effective with dispersed or remote employees, when used consistently.

One of the most powerful tools for creating and strengthening a corporate culture and establishing team alignment behind it is by instilling accountability at every level of your organization.

"People need to know their roles and what tasks they're accountable for in reaching the organization's goal," says Michele Padilla, Director and Senior Consultant in FCCS' Learning and Consulting Services practice area. "This helps build individual and team purpose, aligned behind the organization's culture and toward the organization's goals."

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> **— LISA CAVANAUGH**
> VP, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES, FCCS

Empowering Employees to Join the Culture

Instilling the organizational culture begins to some extent with the hiring process and being very clear about cultural expectations and non-negotiable values.

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Once onboard, employees need to feel a part of the culture, which means being able to talk about it and any other business topic without fear of retribution. This willingness to share thoughts, ideas and opinions requires a sense of psychological safety, which needs to be established and nurtured by leadership. In short, new ideas or conflicting opinions should be met with curiosity and appreciation rather than resistance and derision. For optimal results, the culture needs to be communicated consistently and reinforced regularly.

Feedback is also an important step in acclimating employees to the culture, and the mechanics of delivering feedback are worthy of entire courses about the when, where and how. Topmost is being candid with compassion, specific as to the situation, behavior and impact, and respectful of privacy and the individual's communications preferences. *[Please see related Customer Spotlight article.]* Comments on performance are expected, but feedback on communication style and other "soft" skills can also help homogenize and align a team.

"All leaders, from executives through functional managers, need to demonstrate their support for cultural values every day, and especially when recognizing performance and making promotion decisions," says Lisa. "Doing this consistently, demonstrating cultural values in real-world decisions, goes far to aligning a team toward a common goal and within a common culture."

External Impacts of Culture

There are dangers to the organization if alignment behind the culture isn't consistent or strong. Between individuals, it can cause conflict and lessen engagement and increase turnover; within teams, it can delay processes and confuse decisions, increasing operating expenses. Departments can become siloed and collaboration decreases. It can also impact how customers are viewed and treated by different areas of the business, which can in turn impact a customer's experience with your organization.

Culture can also affect an organization's public image. Simply put, people talk, and social media platforms like Glass Door make sharing and finding opinions about employers easy. No organization will retain all its employees, but a negative cultural experience can lead to emotionally driven public comments that can reduce your future applicant pool. Comments can also reach your customers, who may alter their opinion of you based on what they learn about how business is conducted and employees are treated.

Of course the opposite is also true: a strong, empowered culture will lead to employee engagement, productivity and retention, and enhance a positive image with both customers and potential employees.

> **Click here** for the full Q2 FCCS Program Guide to increase your employee engagement, encourage innovation and develop your teams.

For more information about building a positive culture and aligning your teams, contact Lisa Cavanaugh at 303.721.3270 or via email, or Michele Padilla at 720.939.7182 or via email.

Listen to Lisa Cavanaugh's podcast, *Leaders Leading*.

Listen to Michel Padilla's podcast, *Driving Success Through Accountability*.