



Strong company culture fattens the bottom line

Variables to consider when planning company culture in the South African context.

IDEALLY, any organisation wants to create and maintain a culture that recognises and encourages the shared values, standards and attitudes that characterise the organisation's ethos. A good company culture suits the very best people in your organisation and makes a positive impression on others within or outside your business, including suppliers, customers and shareholders.

But how does one create a great company culture from scratch? Even more puzzling, how can one culture be efficiently replaced with a better one, especially in a context as diverse and dynamic as South Africa?

If you're going to design a great company culture, you need to be able to do it differently. Here are the three main variables to consider when planning organisational culture.

1 Is it practical?

The recent surge of publicity and importance placed on good company culture can be chalked up to Google. Google's well publicised and over-the-top efforts to instil a winning company culture are well known to almost any office worker today, but before you go investing in popcorn machines and indoor running tracks, remember one thing: Your company is not Google.

Maybe you don't have the budget, maybe it's inconsistent with your company's ethos or public image (you probably wouldn't want fireman poles in a law firm, for example), or maybe it's just not appropriate when you consider the diversity of people the average South African workplace contains. You also need to justify the allocation of additional time and

resources. Culture can be lucrative in attracting the right talent and getting the attention of investors, or even potential buyers for your company. It must be developed internally with your staff at all levels, but it must also be deployed externally when it comes to your suppliers and clients, as part of a holistic marketing strategy that can drive real value and a return on investment.

2 What are the cultural touchpoints within your organisation?

Customers, suppliers, employees, leadership and shareholders are all different audiences that have to be considered when designing company culture. It is important to consider what message your culture is sending to each of these groups, and tailor it to be consistent, holistic and widely appropriate. In the South African context it is vital to create an atmosphere of diversity, inclusion and cultural sensitivity, and it would be extremely unwise to fail to take our local legal, political and cultural climate into account.

3 Are you prepared to make tough decisions?

A culture change needs to start at the top – it won't work unless key decision-makers in the company are actively encouraging (not to mention funding) these efforts. An organisation-

SHARED VALUES

A winning company culture based on shared values can improve productivity and earnings.

wide mindshift is necessary, and inevitably some employees will show themselves to no longer be an ideal fit for the culture you are trying to establish. Are you willing to cut such people loose in your pursuit of a cohesive team?

Another tough decision is the allocation of funds and other resources to the company's culture-transition. It is important to make it clear why you are effecting a culture shift, and be prepared for people to criticise and challenge your plans. For example, while a popcorn machine or team building outing will be well received by employees, your shareholders will not see value, unless you demonstrate the effect they have on productivity and profits.

By honestly reviewing the current state of a company's culture, forward-thinking entrepreneurs can better judge the status of the organisation. An action plan can then be implemented based on the shared values of all involved, with an eye to removing dysfunctional, outdated or ineffective practices. Culture is a living and ever-changing entity that affects all aspects of business – from the way performance reviews are undertaken, to the way your staff deals with customers. It is a vital part of your infrastructure that no business can afford to ignore. **EM**

