COMPANY CULTURE: THE SECRET SAUCE FOR SUCCESS

A successful company culture can provide a strategic advantage for practices looking to stand apart from the competition.

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We have all seen it before: Two companies are selling the exact same product in similar places, but one of them succeeds and the other fails. Why does this happen? Is success dependent on how the companies market their products, the accounting systems they use, or the way they manage their supply chains? In reality, success is a combination of multiple factors that influence one another, but there is one driving force that governs them all. Although it may be hard to believe, company culture truly runs the show (Figure).

Figure. Various aspects of a business funnel back to its guiding principles, which are dictated by the practice culture.

A SENSE OF DIRECTION

Many people dismiss culture as a soft term thrown around to make a business sound more sophisticated than it is, believing that a company's success truly lies within a complex financial plan or a unique marketing strategy. But it is important to take a step back and consider: *What provides a business with a blueprint or a sense of direction? How does a company know which marketing strategy or financial analysis to use?* It turns out that company culture is the map, and the leadership that supports the culture is the compass. All of the operations within a business use this map and follow this compass. If the map is inaccurate or if the compass is broken, the success of the entire journey is in jeopardy. However, a well-drawn map and an accurate compass can carry a company to success.

When the different arms of a business are unsure of how to address a problem, they will always refer to the accepted culture and leadership. This is where the difference between great companies and average-to-below-average companies becomes obvious. The best businesses think ahead and deliberately prioritize the creation of collaborative and value-driven cultures. The less successful companies never consider the importance of developing the right culture and simply let it default to its natural state. In these cases, culture often defaults to the wrong map because the goals of the individuals who create it do not align with the company's desired state.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE RIGHT CULTURE

A simple test for determining whether a company has the right culture in place is to ask: *Does the value of the whole organization seem to be more than just its constituents? Is there some synergistic force linking everything?* If the answer is yes, then take the time to study this example well, because this is what a winning culture looks like.

> **"COMPANY CULTURE IS THE MAP, AND THE LEADERSHIP THAT SUPPORTS THE CULTURE IS THE COMPASS ... IF THE MAP IS INACCURATE OR IF THE COMPASS IS BROKEN, THE SUCCESS OF THE ENTIRE JOURNEY IS IN JEOPARDY."**

How do you implement the right culture? The culture of an organization is dictated by its leaders. As leadership pioneer John Maxwell says, "Leadership is simply the ability to influence others." For companies that are attempting to create their preferred culture or for those that want to change their existing culture, below are some guidelines to achieve those goals.

Develop the culture. Take time to carefully consider the vision and mission statement of the organization. Identify your goals—these will become the foundation of the desired culture.

Announce the culture. Bring your team together to publicly declare and define your company culture. Your emotions in the delivery of this message should mirror the culture you are trying to create—so smile and be energetic, if that's what your company culture is all about.

Model the culture. After you talk the talk, you must walk the walk. Exemplify the culture. Illustrate to others that you are serious about the expected behavior by practicing it yourself.

Expect the culture. Hold your team accountable for behaving in a manner that is consistent with the company culture. If you witness your team members demonstrating the right actions, then acknowledge this behavior and reward them. If they act in a manner that conflicts with the company culture, then alert, retrain, and monitor them to make sure that they understand the expectations.

COMMON STUMBLING BLOCKS

If establishing and maintaining a winning culture were easy, then every organization would do so. Given that this is not the case, it is helpful to consider what successful businesses do to maintain their desired culture. They anticipate and bypass pitfalls that can damage their attempts. There are two specific areas where organizations can fall short and derail the pursuit of a winning culture: leadership and accountability.

Everything rises and falls on the shoulders of leadership. Therefore, the presence of effective leaders is crucial to having a successful business. But this doesn't just happen by waving a wand. The best way to ensure good leadership is to have an underlying company culture that promotes, identifies, and cultivates it. When leadership development is stressed, you are more likely not only to develop talent from within but also to attract skilled individuals from outside the organization. Remember, the law of attraction states that you will draw in those who are most similar to you. Businesses that create the right culture and value the growth of leaders will eventually benefit from those efforts.

Once an organization has effective leadership and the right culture in place, there must then be accountability throughout the company to ensure that everyone helps to maintain it. This includes everyone from the top of the organizational chart to the bottom—no one gets a hall pass. At first, it is easy to assume that individuals who are lower on the organizational chart are most likely to stray, and thus are the ones who need help with accountability. In truth, the real challenge typically comes from convincing leaders and those high up in the organization to follow through with their pledge to maintain the culture. If those individuals don't follow the rules, then others will believe it is acceptable for them to follow that misguided behavior. Senior buy-in and accountability are requirements for success.

CONCLUSION

In a competitive marketplace where similar products or services are sold, the ability to stand out may mean the difference between staying in business or closing the doors. Strong buildings are constructed on well-planned foundations. Without a clear plan for how the building will be supported by the underlying pieces, the whole structure will fail once tested. Organizations attempting to succeed in a competitive landscape are constantly tested to see if they can withstand the pressures of the marketplace. The best practices depend on a strong company culture to help them face challenges. Therefore, it is imperative to carefully consider, craft, and implement your practice's culture. ■

Author's note: To purchase a copy of Essential Business Fundamentals for the Successful Eye Care Practice *by Savak Teymoorian, MD, MBA, visit bit.ly/EBFEyeCare and use code EBF20 to receive 20% off and free shipping.*

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