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Culture Club: Creating a firm employees love

Being flexible and focusing on the little things can help build a strong and inclusive culture...

The benefits of devising a sustainable and attractive business culture are very significant. They range from fostering greater innovation to instilling pride in your workforce and everything in between.

After all, the majority (88%) of jobseekers say culture is important to them, according to Jobvite research. Implementing the 'right' business culture is far easier said than done, however, and requires the entire organisation to pull together, driven by leadership from the very top.

Challenges will inevitably arise for everyone involved, from start-ups forging an identity to scale-ups evolving theirs. Large corporations, lumbered with bureaucracy, may even struggle to reignite the spark that led to their initial success.

COVID-19, meanwhile, has derailed livelihoods while introducing new workplace dynamics like mass remote working.

It's never been more important for businesses, therefore, to ensure they can make their employees feel valued.

The building blocks

Making sure employees feel listened to lies at the heart of building the 'right' business culture.

As for how to achieve this, business leaders may look to psychology for the answers, with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offering a pathway, asserting that satisfaction stems from addressing one's physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation needs.

Theory aside, it's perhaps easiest for the smallest companies to forge the 'right' culture than larger companies, with the process becoming increasingly difficult as businesses expand, grow, and evolve.

To counteract this, ContactEngine's CEO Professor Mark K Smith recommends business leaders always bear the future in mind when making decisions.

"The best advice I could give to any budding entrepreneur is to always think about the shape of the company three years ahead and keep some powder dry," he says. "Recognise that start-up is different from scale-up and ease the right people in at the right time."

Flexibility is key

Brightstar Financial, founded a decade ago, is a good example of a small company that's cultivated a strong culture as it grew.

With a mission to build an inclusive environment for its 50 employees, the business now leads *The Sunday Times*

rankings of the best 100 small companies in 2020. Part of the reason, according to its profile, is that the company prioritises employee mental health, and offers - in addition to other services - a full wellbeing programme.

Big gestures and company programmes aren't always necessary, though. Indeed, for Matt Crook, managing director at Wolters Kluwer Tax and Accounting UK, the key lies in businesses showing flexibility, with decisions made while taking people's lives into account.

How this manifests day-to-day includes, for example, scheduling 50-minute instead of hour-long meetings, allowing people that all-important 10 minutes to grab a coffee or just take a break.

"As organisations grow in size, employees and leadership alike may feel that it's difficult to make a difference, but in fact, the opposite should be true if there's already a foundation of positivity ingrained in the company culture," Crook says.

"Even little things, like taking the time to ask how people are doing, remembering details that make them unique, and saying a heartfelt thank you, can make a real difference. It's about always listening to people and openly showing your appreciation for the work that they do."

All the small things

Failing to appreciate the little things can often be where big businesses falter, claims Moneypenny's CEO Joanna Swash.

The UK communications provider employs more than 750 staff, and has itself been previously recognised in *The Sunday Times*' best companies to work for rankings.

"Saying thank you, random acts of kindness and thoughtfulness: these will have more impact on the wellbeing and engagement of your team than corporate gestures and fancy policies." Swash says.

"Our philosophy was simple - to create a culture where you would want to work yourself.

"It is vital never to lose sight of this objective even in a crisis or when business isn't doing that well. It takes determination to ensure the culture doesn't wane but it reaps rewards in

the long term."

Toby Mildon, a diversity and inclusion architect - who's helped organisations like the BBC - concurs.

He stresses the importance of paying attention to 'the little things', which will, in turn, make it easier to build the sort of culture grounded in the principles of diversity and inclusion.

"Culture is the sum of behaviours," he tells *The Business Briefing*.

"If these behaviours are not inclusive then you create a culture where people feel that they do not ultimately belong. It is the responsibility of a chief executive and their senior leadership team to model inclusive leadership behaviours and set the tone for the rest of the organisation."

In times of need...

As Swash alludes to, a business can easily lose sight of its aims and wider mission during times of crisis. This is certainly the case for COVID-19, which has brought economic damage and permanently altered workplace dynamics.

Remote working, for example, makes it trickier than ever to foster a diverse and inclusive environment where employees feel valued.

Simon Paine is CEO of PopUp Business School - a firm that claims to have abolished the office, CVs, and the nine-to-five working day.

He believes communication is key to resolving such challenges, but, by his own admission, it was an area the business initially struggled with.

"In the post-pandemic workplace,

we will have to be deliberate to create the time and space for exploration and innovation, but working relationships, rather than innovation, are the more likely casualty of increased remote working," he says.

"Sometimes branded as the soft and fluffy stuff, maintaining excellent and trusted working relationships is one of the hardest things to do in business, especially when we are under the pressure to deliver.

"We understand how important it is to include natural human interaction when working from home.

"We take inspiration from the formats of radio shows, team podcasts and livestreams with comments. We like to introduce a sense of play at the workplace because, sometimes, great ideas come out when colleagues are having a lot of fun with each other."

Building a vibrant and positive culture without putting the needs of people - both customers and employees - at the heart of matters is a fool's errand. Companies really need to pay more than lip service to the idea that people really are their most valuable asset.

This is particularly pertinent right now. In the midst of a global pandemic and economic slowdown, some people are - understandably so - feeling more disconnected than ever.

A strong, and supportive, workplace culture has never been more important. For business leaders hoping to achieve the 'right' culture, building reliable and trusted channels of communication will be crucial to this end in a post-pandemic landscape.