

Company Culture

Build a successful business through these attributes

by: Dale Stein, Technology Assurance Group (TAG)

While most 10-year-olds are busy trying to remember the correct spelling of “Wednesday,” how to handle a first crush or what the state capital of New Mexico is, entrepreneurs at that age are just wired differently. In fact, I distinctly remember making a promise to myself at that age that every entrepreneur eventually makes to himself (or herself): I swore I would never work for someone else.



I refused to work for a moron. I refused to work for someone I did not respect. I refused to work in an environment where my contributions were meaningless. And according to almost every adult I knew as a 10-year-old, bosses were those people.

However, decades later, something funny happened. Once I was the one in charge of building and scaling my own businesses, I quickly realized I needed to offer something more than high wages to attract top talent to my teams. While it is true the money may motivate someone to join your team, company culture will dictate whether or not he will stay, perform or care about actualizing your vision.

Over the years, thousands of business owners have asked me to solve the culture riddle for them and the answer I tell all of them is simple, but incredibly challenging: “You have to build a company that you’d actually want to work for.”

Employees Want to Escape Poor Company Culture

So many business owners I talk to who are suffering from turnover issues are scratching their heads and saying things like, “How come nobody wants to work anymore?” While many people would point to buzzwords like “COVID-19,” the “work-from-home (WFH)” movement or “quiet quitting” as reasons why so many individuals are refusing to work, those are all just surface-level excuses for the underlying issue: Employees are using whatever trend they can latch on to in order to escape poor company culture. The “great resignation” is merely a response to how bad most company cultures have become.

Even though many business owners are quick to assume

they do not have any culture issues, you would be stunned to hear how many of them view their employees in private conversations. I cannot tell you how many times they have considered their employees to be a “necessary evil” or another problem vector they simply have to deal with. Just as you would expect, these companies typically have the highest turnover levels and struggle to retain talented individuals be-

cause they need to adjust their core philosophies. Your employees are supposed to be solutions, not problems.

Would a Younger You Work For Your Company?

If you are having a difficult time retaining employees or getting peak performance from your team, the first question to ask yourself should not be, “What’s wrong with this generation?” but, instead, “Would a younger version of me want to work at this company?”

We often assume that company culture is a nebulous goal, but after deeply examining and advising hundreds of managed IT services companies over the past 25 years, we have distilled company culture into seven attributes that will make your company one of the “best places to work.”

Before we start, the first thing to realize is employees are not looking for a job, they are looking for *the job*. The members of Generation Z are actually leading a revolutionary transition in the workplace where they are expecting their employers to be mentors, they expect their companies to be contributing something positive to the world, and I would even go as far as to say they only want to work for people who are enlightened.

Just like all entrepreneurs, they want to know they have the potential to make a real impact on the world through their work. They want their creativity to be valued and they want to be surrounded by talented individuals who can clear obstacles from their paths to achievement instead of placing them in the way. Here is how you can accomplish that with your company culture.

Seven Attributes of a Successful Company Culture

There are common traits among companies that build strong company cultures. You can transcend the little tips, tricks and hacks that everyone studies frenetically by mastering the following seven core attributes. They will inform all of the little things that create a positive company culture.

(1) Your company must be a vehicle for constant learning — Growth is a fundamental human desire. If your company is a place where people are constantly learning, it is only a matter of time before they will flourish beyond your expectations for them. We thoroughly encourage our member companies to invest in employees through books, courses, workshops, training and certifications.

However, some business owners are reluctant because they fear they might invest all of this money into their employees only to have them trained and then leave the company. The real question is not, “What if I invest and they leave?” but, rather, “What if I do not educate them and they stay?”

Education is the cure for stagnation, as long as it is driven by your employee’s curiosity. If you treat an employee like a valuable asset, he will perform like one. If you treat your employee like a bad investment, he will perform like one.

(2) Your company must have an aspirational vision — The CEO’s job is to see a better vision for the future and to communicate that vision to everyone in a way they can understand. Ultimately, the CEO’s job is to embody that vision and be an enlightened example of it.

Studies are starting to back this up and it is obvious that one of the core values that drives Gen Z is a strong sense of meaning in their work. In fact, according to Randstand’s 2022 Workmonitor report, 42% of Gen Z workers would even take a pay cut if it meant working a job that makes a difference in the world, and 49% would not accept a job at a company that does not align with their values.

Even though you know how impactful your products/services are to your customers’ lives, do your employees regularly get to see that impact? Ask your employees how their personal success (and the company’s success as a byproduct) could positively impact those they care about.

Apple’s vision is not to sell more iPhones, laptops and headphones than Samsung. It is to empower every creative person in the world to be more creative. Tesla’s vision is not to sell a ton of electric cars. Its vision is to save the planet through cars. Meta’s (Facebook’s) vision is not to amass as much personal data as possible. Its vision is to connect the world.

But you do not have to be a giant company with a giant budget to have meaning. For example, have you ever walked

If your company is a place where people are constantly learning, it is only a matter of time before they will flourish beyond your expectations for them.

into a fancy coffee shop where the barista tries to explain to you, in excruciating detail, the specific topography of the particular Colombian hillside from which the native coffee bean farmers carefully extracted your coffee beans?

Even though you might not care about the origins of your cappuccino, the process and people involved mattered so much to the minimum-wage barista that he took the time to learn about

them. Imagine if you could galvanize that type of commitment to your projects. If you can connect your vision to your employees’ personal values, you will inspire their passion.

(3) Your company must recognize the four different communication styles — Business is relationships. And your team’s communication skills determine the quality of their relationships — with their colleagues, their managers, your customers, etc.

In previous articles, we have mentioned the four different DiSC communication styles and how essential it is to adapt our communication style so we can build rapport with others. You can read more on the four styles in the May 2022 Office Technology article, “Hiring & Mentoring,” and the February 2023 article, “Increasing Engagement.” But the main point is: If we learn to speak other people’s languages, we can accelerate collaboration and mutual respect more quickly than any “company initiative.” When your employees realize that everyone they know can “speak our language,” they feel seen, understood and heard.

If people do not have an opportunity to contribute, if they are not listened to or regarded with genuine respect, why on earth would they remain engaged? Would you? As a leader, it is your job to give them the skills to be successful in their communication. Additionally, you can do this by maintaining an open channel of communication. It is not about agreeing with them on everything; it is about allowing them the opportunity to contribute — even bad ideas.

When you disagree with your employees, they deserve the right to know why management is not going to go in their direction. If you refuse to tell them why their ideas are incomplete or may negatively affect another area of the organization that they have not considered, they will eventually clam up, withdraw their passion, become indifferent and stop attempting to contribute anything toward your company’s growth. In the short run, you will gain some speed, but in the long run, you will lose their engagement. As a leader, the point is to nurture a culture where ideas are welcome contributions, rather than annoyances.

Most importantly, ask your employees about their ideas for improving their own performance. You might be shocked

by their responses. Most employees are just waiting to be asked.

(4) Your company must accept change as an opportunity — How many other business owners do you know who try to bad mouth, resist or ignore any change, even at the cost of their business' survival? Employees are not blind to this. Of course there is a time and place to remain conservative, however, if we want our company to be exceptional, we need

to venture out into a bit of uncertainty and that demands we face challenges and reframe them as opportunities.

In other words, it is our job as leaders to see the silver lining in every challenging situation. Every giant obstacle can be alchemized into a giant competitive advantage — it just depends which side of the problem you are on.

If you have not figured it out yet, it is a big problem. However, once you have overcome it, there is now a huge barrier to entry your competitors will struggle to overcome. If it was this difficult for you to overcome, just imagine how much more difficult it will be for competitors to figure it out and catch up to you.

The reason all of this is important is because optimism and pessimism are contagious. When you exemplify an optimistic attitude, it rubs off on your team members and they will start to see opportunities where they once saw brick walls. It is extremely powerful when you have a large group of people who collectively understand that there is always a solution.

(5) Your company must facilitate personal achievement — Your employees already have plenty of goals for themselves. In fact, they probably have much more demanding goals for themselves than you could ever impose on them and get away with. The problem with goal-setting occurs when we try to impose our goals, quotas, etc., on others, while ignoring their personal aims. Behind every unmotivated employee (with potential) is just an individual who does not understand how the success of the company connects to their personal goals.

The solution here is not to hit them over the head with quotas but, instead, let them set their own goals. Your job as a leader is to help them to achieve those goals, to remove those hurdles and to guide them toward personal and professional success. The more they realize they can set goals and accomplish them, the more bold they will be. And that is how you lead by inspiration versus fear.

If you are having a tough time getting your team motivated to hit your goals for them, ask yourself, "When is the last time I asked my employees what their goals are for themselves?" If you expect your employees to honor the company's broader goals, the company should also know and honor their goals.

Your employees will only be as passionate as you are about the business. This might mean you need to step back, think bigger and expand the business into forbidden territories.

Their personal success is synonymous with the company's success. It is not a trade-off — it is an amplifier.

(6) Your company must incite passion — Your employees will only be as passionate as you are about the business. This might mean you need to step back, think bigger and expand the business into forbidden territories. But just like optimism, passion is contagious as well.

If you are struggling to remember your passion, it may very well be because you have shrunk your dreams down to more "realistic expectations." However, it is critical that others in your organization can feel your zeal for life.

For example, imagine a bunch of eager young cooks working for a tired, dissatisfied, despondent chef — one who used to make food he loved, but is now just copying trends. Once the head chef loses his passion for cooking and is just making whatever the competitors across the street are cooking, and he has restricted all creative ingredients from entering the kitchen because they are too expensive, why would anyone passionate remain there for more than a day or two?

Sometimes, we need to refresh our own spirits and enlarge our vision for what is possible to reconnect to the passion that incited our vigor at the beginning of our entrepreneurial journey. If a head chef is taking risks, making food that he loves and is willing to serve controversial dishes to customers because he believes in them, everyone wants to be a part of that magic. Regardless of industry, that is the energy you want in your company. If you can remember a way to keep yourself inspired, than you will bring out the passion that is inside of your employees, too.

(7) Your company must be a vehicle for you to give more than you take in life — One of the greatest joys in life is to give to others. How many other business owners do you know who are always trying to "get more out of their people?" Obviously, your business is not a charity, so you do need your team to perform at a high level, but the mindset to achieve that is backward.

When we can give more than we take in life, it fulfills us. We feel proud of ourselves, we know we are doing something beautiful and people want to be part of that. And the greatest irony is that the more we give to others, the more they feel compelled to reciprocate.

It is so obvious to us to overdeliver to our customers through exceptional customer service, but often we forget how much of an impact this approach can have on our employees. Imagine a younger version of you worked for a boss who genuinely valued your feedback, spoke to you with the same respect he would show an intelligent business partner

and actually implemented your ideas (whenever you gave a really good one). And, if you gave him an incomplete idea, he taught you why it was incomplete and challenged you to become more strategic. Imagine that this boss asked you things like, “What are you most excited to learn about, right now?” and then invested in those trainings for you with the understanding that he would enthusiastically want you to try out the best new ideas you get in his business to improve the health of the company. Would you work harder or slack off for that kind of boss?

Imagine that this boss actually took the time to learn about all of your personal goals and he would connect you to friends, resources and opportunities that improved your life outside of your standard roles and responsibilities to the point where you knew he sincerely cared about making sure you hit your commission goals so you could afford that vacation to Mexico. Imagine if he would offer to listen to your sales calls in order to teach you more about communication styles, or to share techniques that have worked for him in his career, not because he needs you to follow his script, but because he wants you to succeed. Imagine that you could sense how passionate this leader was about embodying the success you are after in life and you just wanted to be around him to absorb this passionate excitement for life like a sponge. And no matter how hard you worked for him, he always found creative ways to be generous to you because you knew that he fundamentally appreciated you as a person in his life. Would a younger version of you work for someone like that?

Company Culture Is Not a Luxury, It Determines Your Success or Obsolescence

Most business owners are so busy “putting out fires,” that “company culture” is relegated to a place of low priority.

As always, this change starts with the leader. It is a commitment to transform your business back into a place that inspires you and is a joy to be part of.

However, the real source of those endless “fires” is a symptom of a lackluster culture. “Endless fires” are the hallmark of a disengaged team that feels disempowered or indifferent to proactively charging forward and taking the initiative required to bring a business to the next level.

As always, this change starts with the leader. It is a commitment to transform your business back into a place that

inspires you and is a joy to be part of. Ultimately, it is your decision whether or not you want to recommit to excellence, but even though it is difficult, I cannot stress how worthwhile this endeavor is. Yes, your organization will become more profitable. Yes, you will reduce your turnover issues. Yes, you will start growing again. But the most important factor about investing in company culture is that if you decide to invest the time, energy and mental bandwidth required to turn your company into an environment that enriches everyone, not only will you get more out of every team member, but you will renew your own love for entrepreneurship as a consequence. ■

Dale Stein is co-founder of Technology Assurance Group (TAG), an organization of managed technology service providers (MTSPs). Collectively, TAG's members do \$800 million per year in IT, cybersecurity, telecommunications and video surveillance. They are located in 148 cities across the United States and Canada, and are presently serving more than 780,000 SMBs. He is responsible for developing TAG's strategic planning and guiding its business development.

In addition, Stein is the managing partner for TAG's MTSP, i-NETT. He is responsible for i-NETT's daily operations and serves as its president. Stein also founded Westec Security Corp. and served as its CEO. He can be reached at dales@tagnational.com. Visit www.tagnational.com.

