Understanding Your Culture

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Culture is the element that holds everyone in your organization together. Almost all companies have a written document describing their vision, mission, and values, but company culture goes even deeper than this. It is an unwritten sensation that takes place within the walls of your organization. It is your vision, mission, and values in action. Every company is different. They have unique ways of approaching work-life balance, organization, hiring, and leadership. How do you understand your company's culture?

Decisions

How do decisions within the company get made? Are they made based on results, financial standing, past experience, customer satisfaction, internal politics, or competition? Does the organization empower and engage its greatest asset, its employees, in charting the course, or do decisions come from the top? Does your company lead the industry, or follow and respond when it is 'safe'? The approach companies take to make decisions effects how everyone in the organization performs at their jobs and as well as how they treat each other. If your boss always makes the decision and does not ask or consider your opinion then you may never give it. Think about how your organization comes to the conclusions that it does.

Risk & Mistakes

Do you allow employees to take risks and make mistakes? There are different approaches to the old saying, "high risk, high reward." How does your company approach this? Is failing an option, and more importantly, how do you respond to failure? How companies handle their problems says more about the company's culture than their stated vision, mission, and values. Think about punishment (or reward) that is given for mistakes and the notion surrounding risk. This can help explain why employees perform at the level they do, and it will also be a key differentiator in the company's ability to attract and retain top talent.

Ethics

Is your company committed to values? Does your company have a clearly represented list of values on their website, walls, or printed in the company handbook? Are they known and referenced with any consistency throughout the organization? Many organizations use this list as a hiring tool; some even screen candidates according to this list. Think about the values and character of your co-workers. Are they similar to yours? If so, then your company knows what they consider to be important in an individual's ethics and they are expecting their employees to uphold those.

Formality

How do you handle hiring, retention, promotions, and terminations? Are these processes formal and well-defined, or is each scenario handled differently? Do you have a formal performance evaluation process? Are there systems and programs in place to communicate to employees? The formality of processes and chain of command effects how your employees interact with each other and their personal process for doing their job. More importantly, a formal process for clearly communicating expectations and feedback has a positive impact on performance, especially if the feedback is used to strengthen and improve the employee as opposed to break them down and diminish their contribution.

Leadership

Where are leader's offices located, and how accessible do they make themselves (ie. is there an open door policy)? Do they clearly embrace the values of the organization in actions, not just in words? Some companies have a rigid chain of command and others do not. Does the leadership of the organization have a process for evaluating high-potential employees and do they create opportunities for them to fully utilize their skills and commitment to the organization? These may seem simple, but they definitely shape your culture.

Every company has a culture, whether they like it or not. This culture sets the stage for the success or failure of the company. Turnover and performance (individual, group, and organizational), collectively, are great indicators to determining if your culture, from the top down, is one you can be proud of.

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