

Culture and Core Values

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Culture is the condition in which the business happens. Culture is the space in which the work gets done. Culture decides who and what wins and losses in a business. Culture regulates actions and therefore governs results. Culture is like water to the fish or air to the bird, invisible to the people within it, but the ultimate determinant. Culture is the 'dark matter' of the business universe. Culture is superior-ordinate. Culture is decisive.

Most businesses pay little attention to their culture, primarily because they believe they have no direct access to shaping it. But there is a way to build and sustain a powerful culture. By focusing on the distinct areas that constitute culture and managing them in ways that are truly committed and authentic, they will generate a culture that promotes high performance and success.

This article is about breaking free in the core values aspect of culture.

What is the core of every successful business and how is this core expressed? It's expressed as values—core values, a crystal clear expression of what the company stands for. Values are revered affirmations, honored declarations, esteemed pronouncements. Without core values clearly and solidly at the heart of a business, the business is limited in its performance and therefore its success.

When core values exist as platitudes, neither honored nor upheld, the essence of the business is weak and shallow. The business lacks the necessary energy or chutzpa to effectively confront challenges and take authoritative actions. It is fundamental and critical for business success that the board, the executives and the employees fully embrace and faithfully express the company's core values. When these are fully alive within the enterprise, they become the DNA of the company, continuously replicating their "strands" in what people do, think and say.

Successful companies reinforce their core values. They regularly voice, laud, extol, and acclaim them. They declare their core values over and over in numbers of different ways. When making decisions they refer to their core values. When planning strategy they raise their core values. When hiring, firing, promoting and compensating, they bring up their core values. Core values are present all the time, either on the front burner or the back burner, but always cooking.

“But what are core values?” The answer to this question is found through reflection and contemplation, followed by no nonsense, honest dialogue. You won’t find core values outside your company’s walls. They exist within you. No consultant, advisor, book or blog can give you the answer. There are no “right” core values. There are only the core values that are your truest expression of who you are and what you are willing to be governed by.

You need to understand that core values are the heart of your company, determining how you lead, how you manage, how you decide, even what you decide. Successful leaders shape their thinking and actions, and their relationships (both inside and outside the company) to the dictates of their core values. They are conscious to the fact that core values provide a rigorous system of guiding principles that determine their philosophy of business.

But when you look, most companies’ values are inauthentic; they simply “don’t walk the talk.” A clear example is certainly the “big banks.” Check out the websites of Wells Fargo or Bank of America. Then try being a customer of theirs trying to secure a loan or resolve a mortgage issue. The distance between what they say their values are and how they operate as a company are light-years apart. These entities lack integrity with their declared core values. Their values do not govern the culture. If they weren’t ‘too big to fail’, they would.

In *How the Mighty Fall*, one of Jim Collins’ conclusions is that companies that don’t operate consistent with their core values eventually fail. Whether big or small, a company that has authentic core values and is fully committed to their embodiment and their expression, strategically moves their core values from the ethereal to the practical, from the subjective to the objective, from “it sounds nice” to “that’s the way it is around here,” will have a tremendous foundational piece of their culture solidly in place.