



Corporate Culture

Much of the information in this article can be found in the book, *How to Hire and Keep Great Employees* by Jim Harris and Joan Brannick. The authors make a very strong case for why it is so important, particularly today to have a strong corporate culture and for aligning all levels of one's business with that core culture. If you are seeking additional information on corporate culture, their book would be an excellent resource.

This information is critical for business and executive coaches. Understanding corporate culture in the business world is as important as being multi-culturally competent in private practice. When you are called into a company, one of the first things you will want to know is, what is their corporate culture? Do they even have one? If so, what is it? Are they confused, attempting to be led by different priorities in different circumstances? Is the problem that there is no clearly identified culture?

As a coach, you must examine your own experiences, behavior, and values for any bias toward one culture over the others. Each one has value. It is not helpful for you to come into a system and attempt to persuade leadership their culture is "wrong." If you find it difficult to work within a particular culture, then you would either want to refer the client or seek strong supervision during that experience to prevent your bias from tainting your work.

A common complaint of business leaders is their inability to find good employees and then secondarily, the recidivism rate once they hire employees. One of their biggest complaints is that they hire people, train them and after investing in them, the employees find employment elsewhere.

This is the fate of many corporations today. Because of downsizing and outsourcing, people lack the job security that was present through the 80s. Now, employees know they can't count on putting in their 40 years and getting their gold watch with one company the way their parents and grandparents did. Employees today know they have to look out

for number one and make career decisions based on whatever is best for them and their families.

Organizational loyalty is pretty much nonexistent as workers realize that companies have no loyalty toward them. One of the things that can help engender loyalty is to have a strong corporate culture with which employees can identify. Of course, this is a two-sided coin. You may have people who leave because their values are not aligned with the company's culture but the ones who stay, will be more likely to commit because the fit feels "right."

Ask your clients if they have an identified corporate culture that is known and supported by all employees. If they don't know, then be assured they don't have a corporate culture other than the culture of confusion.

When an organization has chosen one of the following four cultures and aligns all their business practices toward that purpose, then they have a corporate culture. Without this, the organization is most likely drifting around, trying to satisfy all four, without ever really reaching a pinnacle of greatness in any. When one core culture is focused upon, the rest of business falls into place.

The four corporate cultures identified by Harris and Brannick are:

1. Customer Service
2. Innovation
3. Operational Excellence
4. Spirit.

Customer Service: "The underlying purpose of a customer-service culture is to create solutions to meet customer needs" writes Harris and Brannick. The idea is to always meet their current needs certainly, while anticipating future needs before the customer is even aware of them. Customers always receive outstanding service and corporations aligned with this culture are constantly seeking ways to go above and beyond for their customers. Even though these companies understand the old adage that "The customer is always right" may not necessarily be true, their reality is the customer is still and always will be the customer and should be treated like royalty. Higher-end hotels often have a customer service culture.

Innovation: Harris and Brannick state, "The underlying purpose of an innovation-driven culture is to create and shape the future." People who thrive in this environment are those who can tolerate chaos, competition and making mistakes. There will be no gain without risks. Innovative companies understand this and sometimes even reward mistakes to encourage risk-taking. The primary asset in these corporations is intelligent people. They are able to hire and retain the best people in their field by constantly staying on the cutting edge. Technology companies frequently have a culture of innovation.

Operational Excellence: Harris and Brannick write, “The underlying purpose of an operationally excellent culture is to create processes that minimize costs while maximizing productivity and efficiency.” Most franchises operate within this cultural framework—downplaying creativity for adherence to standard operational procedures. Standardization of processes is critical. These companies are big on analyzing data to determine where improvements can be made and then making them.

Spirit: According to Harris and Brannick, “Spirit-driven companies are obsessed with creating environments that unleash the limitless creativity, enthusiasm, and energy of people.” The idea here is that one takes care of and encourages his or her employees, then business will automatically be taken care of. People working in a spirit culture develop a strong loyalty to their workplace. Sometimes they leave to try out other pastures, but often they return, realizing the grass isn’t always greener on the other side. The leaders in a spirit-centered culture become servant leaders, looking out for the welfare of their people.

When a company is aligned with their core culture, then employee training, employee incentives, hiring, and retention are all centered around meeting their main corporate goal of either customer service, innovation, operational excellence or spirit.

As a business or executive coach, your client may identify a lack of or a misaligned culture as an area requiring attention. Having this information available will help inform the questions you ask to help your clients to gain clarity and make the changes they desire.

It is also critical that as a coach, you are sensitive and respectful of the corporation’s culture. You would not want to walk into a company and judge their operational excellence culture “wrong” because your personal bias is toward a spirit culture. No one culture is better than the others. Each has a place and it is up to the business leaders to choose the culture that best serves their values, their product or service, and their customers. They will then hire and retain those employees who will best align with their vision.

QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions and send your answers to assignments@academyofchoice.com.

1. If you were to start your own company, which corporate culture do you think you would use and why?
2. What questions might you ask a client who is espousing a spirit culture but their policies and procedures do not support that?
3. How might an innovation culture reward mistakes and why would it want to?
4. How might you work with a client who is in a customer service culture but who really wants to be part of a spirit culture?
5. What questions might you ask a client who wants to have a customer service culture but is overly concerned about unleashing her employees with the task of satisfying the customer at all costs because she is concerned about going over budget to do so?