

Culture as a Strategy at TFP



There is a general truism in business that for any business its people are its greatest asset. This certainly rings true for me. But there is another level to this thinking. Any group of people will establish norms of behaviour and practices on how they interact. If they are connected via a company then there will also be a shared set of values, stories, foundational myths and the like. In short, groups of people interacting create a culture.

It's all about the culture

So how do we get culture right in a business?

A good culture will ensure cohesion, good cooperation, additional discretionary effort from employees, reduce churn rate and generally improve almost every aspect of the business. A good culture needs to be inclusive for everyone and make everyone feel connected. Basically, a good business culture will mean everyone cares about the business and poor one will have the exact opposite effect.

So how do we go about creating a good culture? Our culture is something we are proud of and these are a few things I think we have learned.

1 - It can't be forced

Cultures evolve they cannot be imposed. Cultures evolve, overtime through the day-to-day interactions of the people involved. But unlike Darwinian evolution, which is blind, cultural evolution, can and should be guided, this is where leadership comes in. In essence a good leader can be seen as a guardian of the culture. They will not be able to dictate what a culture will be, but they will be able to shape and nurture it.

This process involves lots of listening and lots of letting go of ego. A leader must genuinely listen to what the people within the company want, what culture is looking to emerge, and then, once understood, the leader may be able to nudge it in a certain direction. This process is more like coaching than teaching or directing. A coach will help their coaches come up with the best answer rather than telling them what the answer is, so it is with a leader and culture. Leader will nurture a culture but not create it themselves.



A sample of the white board brainstorming sessions that helped defined our culture. These involved the whole company.

2 - Everyone needs to be involved

The process of articulating and growing a business culture should involve everyone. It is not something that senior management can create and then impose. It must be organic and must have input from everyone in the organisation. Without that universal input counter cultures or subcultures may form. Those that feel left out or looked over will not participate in the main culture and may even subvert it. This is true in our wider society with large swathes of the disaffected checking out of mainstream culture entirely. Luckily businesses are much smaller entities than entire countries and so cultural participation and inclusion is much easier to achieve, none the less without a concerted effort to involve everyone subcultures or counter cultures may emerge, this is normally in the forms of silos or cliques within the company.

3 - Stories and mythologies are important

Just as with the cultures of countries and civilisations stories and mythologies are important in business cultures. Obviously, I am not suggesting every company needs to write its equivalent of the Iliad, but some care and attention need to be given to the stories that are shared within the company.

The stories about how things were dealt with, how adverse situations were handled, how people made heroic contributions to the company are all important cultural artifacts. Curating and promoting those stories help sculpt the business culture.



4 - Practices are important

The things we do day to day can either enforce or quietly undermine a culture. For example, if you are promoting a high trust and open culture but all your processes require that multiple managerial permissions are required to make minor decisions then the process undermines the culture. In this example the culture is saying “we trust you” but the process says “you can’t be trusted” in cases like these the actual day to day experience will be more salient in everyone’s minds and often the cultural message will be seen and mere hypocrisy.

Care needs to be given to any practices that involve the leaders and directors. If directors are seen to have special treatment or to be able to get away with behaviours that others would not, then culture is quickly undermined. This is the quickest way to propagate subversive counter cultures within the business.

5 - There is no place for big egos

One of the hardest things to do is to let go of our own ego’s enough so that they do not interfere with a culture.

Ego's, practically by definition, are antithetical to a good collective generated culture. If its "all about me" then a healthy productive culture will be tricky to form, this is because egos tend to compete rather than cooperate. Big egos lead to hierarchy rather than genuine community.



Now it must be said that this not about being totally self-less or turning everyone into some kind of egoless monk. Egos are an important driving force that compels people to success, but they need to be harnesses and mastered rather than being the dominating force. A well harness ego will drive someone to do good things a badly harnesses one can destroy a business culture as it rides roughshod over everyone else.

Mastering one's ego is particularly hard for those in leadership positions. There is always a temptation to think that they are in that position because they are somehow better, more competent, or harder working than others. They deserve their position because they are special or better. Our entire society lionises "the great men" (and this is, sadly a phenomenon that skews quite male) we pump up and puff up the great business leaders and put them on pedestals next to the gods. With all that going on in our society at large it's very tempting to buy into it and leaders will often create a mythology around themselves that feeds their ego's desire to be seen as brilliant. This must, of course be resisted as it can be so destructive to a healthy culture. The only way to do this is for leaders to become more self-aware through personal growth work.

Conclusions

So those are a few of my observations on how we developed our culture at TFP and the wider SPG group. We are far from perfect in the execution of all these five points, I am not saying that we are in any way masters of generating great culture, that would be highly egotistical of me and hence a self-defeating idea! But we try our best to be mindful of the points outlined and, I think, we have done a pretty good job at evolving a good culture. A good business culture can, in a small way, make the world better as it enriches the lives of all involved. A poor business culture can be highly destructive not only to the employee but to wider society. We are not perfect, but we do aim high and try hard, and that is all any of can do in life, to try and leave the world being a bit better.

