

Small Business Culture and Communication

An Editorial by Nicole Harbour

Organizational culture was a hot topic in decades past, but it remains an important, yet often overlooked, part of business life today. What is organizational culture and what does it mean to you? It is the culmination of your company's history, personnel and personalities that affects the way your employees interact with one another and with the public at large. Culture manifests itself through the shared stories that are passed around the office, the rules and procedures set in place (which ones must be followed, which ones are easily broken) and the tone set by an organization's leaders.

Much research has been done over the years on the effects of organizational culture on large corporations. Unfortunately, small companies have been largely overlooked in this area. Considering the fact that small businesses generally have a flatter organizational structure and fewer levels of hierarchy, culture plays a significant role in their daily operations. The smaller the group, the more likely they are to interact directly with the company's executives, as opposed to wading through multiple levels of management, and the more likely they are to know the goings-on of their fellow co-workers. Ask anyone who has worked in an organization with ten or fewer employees and they will probably tell you that secrets are impossible to keep and everyone knows everyone else's business (and yes, gossip becomes a part of your organizational culture as well).

That is why it is crucial for small business owners to set the tone and help guide their organization's culture. Entrepreneurs can be brilliant business people with a firm grasp of their product or service and a clear vision of where they want to go. Unfortunately, they do not always know how to relay this vision to their employees or how to incorporate their passion into daily operations. Hence, the drive to succeed can overshadow the importance of employee relations and communication. Employees may feel that they are merely cogs in a machine, unimportant and easily replaced. This translates into an organizational culture based on performance instead of relationships and can lead to unhappiness and internal strife. Even the most well-intentioned employee can unwittingly project hostility to an organization's public, be it through casual remarks to clients or vendors or through their tone of voice when they pick up the phone. Repeated interactions of this sort will have an adverse effect on business, as the company develops a reputation for mistreating its employees. Whether it's true or not, perception is reality.



Take a look at your daily operations and consider whether or not your culture needs a nudge in the right direction. If you have a revolving door or constant in-fighting and whispered gossip around the office, chances are your culture could use an overhaul. Think about the attitude that you project to your employees. Are you willing to listen to their suggestions? Do you express interest in their personal lives and mental/emotional well-being? Yes, personal problems should take a back seat to the business at hand, but a person's emotional state plays a vital role in their interpersonal interactions. Attempts to stifle or belittle what a person is feeling can backfire, making them more disgruntled and leading them to spread poison to the whole group.

Remember, culture is largely about communication, so determine the image you want to project and think of ways to get your employees actively involved in shaping it. This does not have to include spending a lot of money or revamping your entire system. It can be as simple as gathering your staff together for one hour a month and celebrating that month's successes, instead of focusing on failures. Help create new memories that will become upbeat stories passed along to newcomers. Ask your employees if there is a rule in place that they are all particularly disgruntled about and discuss how to revise it in order to keep them happy while maintaining productivity and procedures. Perhaps most importantly, lead by example. The tone you set in your day to day interactions will permeate throughout the whole company and become an integral part of your organizational culture.

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