

Building Remote Work Culture and Operations

A strong remote work environment doesn't happen by accident—it's built through deliberate culture-setting and smart operational practices. These chapters cover how to establish a team culture that thrives at a distance and how to keep your administrative and operational functions running smoothly without a central office. Featuring insights from experienced CEOs, this course gives accounting and tax firm leaders practical guidance for managing people, processes, and performance in a fully remote or hybrid setting.

CREDIT HOURS 2 | FIELD OF STUDY BUSINESS | EXAM QUESTIONS 10

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LEARNING ASSIGNMENTS AND OBJECTIVES

Assignment

- Study the full course materials included here.
- Complete the review questions after each chapter.
- Answer 10 final exam questions.
- Final exam is scored immediately, 70% or better passes.
- Certificate of completion is available in your account.
- Failed exams can be retaken free of charge.

Course Objectives

- Recognize the formula used by the author to define workplace transparency.
- Recall the skills to look for when hiring remote workers.

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Chapter 1: CREATING THE RIGHT REMOTE TEAM CULTURE

Chapter Objective

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize the formula used by the author to define workplace transparency.

There are many articles and blogs written that discuss the importance of company culture in large corporations, but company culture should be considered an important factor for companies of every size, from a one-person shop to a small business and beyond. The culture is what drives the people within the company to make the decisions they make each day. It drives how they interact with customers and coworkers; it defines how they act or react to unforeseen circumstances. In a large part, company culture represents the essence of the company.

In this chapter, we discuss company culture, how to adjust it to meet the remote workers' needs, and how to maintain that culture when the team is distributed. If you take care of the company culture, everything else will take care of itself.

YOU ALREADY HAVE A COMPANY CULTURE

Every business has developed a company culture that guides the everyday actions of its people. However, it is not unusual that a company leader is not aware of their own company culture. When this happens, the culture is not being guided and shaped by leadership. It is the result of a lack of intent-based leadership. Intent-based leadership is about purposefully creating an environment where people feel valued and instilling in them that their work has a purpose that contributes to something bigger than the individual. When this type of leadership is absent in a company, it is reflected in the attitudes of the employees when they interact with customers and with each other. Further, not all companies are consciously aware of the elements that are defining their company culture. Regardless of whether they are aware or not, those elements are already impacting the organization. The aspects of company culture are not set by the words written on a memo or shared documents from human resources. They are defined by the actions of the leadership of the company and the rest of the team. For example, if leadership typically acts in an unempathetic way toward employees, then employees will follow suit with each other and clients. If leadership watches the clock and makes sure that people are punching in on time or rushing employees to punch out on time to avoid overtime pay, then intentionally or not, they will create a culture of clock watchers. Those employees will be stressed with each start and end of the day and won't bother to worry about the quality of the work they did in between. They work for the hours.

Company culture goes much deeper than what is discussed in just these examples, but the point is that it is important to create your company culture with intent-based leadership. Do not simply allow it to be created on its own and defined organically without the clear guidance of your vision for the company. If you did not create your company culture with intention based on your values and your mission, then you need to start now.

Best Practices

Create your company culture with intention based on your vision for the company and its values.

WHAT IS COMPANY CULTURE?

A corporate or company culture is exemplified by how its people act and interact in their day-to-day business. It comprises the shared values of the organization as well as shared goals. For example, some of the core values of American Express are as follows:

Integrity: We uphold the highest standards of integrity in all of our actions.

Teamwork: We work together, across boundaries, to meet the needs of our customers and to help our company win.

Respect for People: We value our people, encourage their development, and reward their performance.

Personal Accountability: We are personally accountable for delivering on our commitments.

Quality: We provide outstanding products and unsurpassed service that, together, deliver premium value to our customers.

From these elements, people within the culture understand right from wrong. These values let them know what behavior is acceptable and what is discouraged. When a company clearly defines what their core values are, what their company mission is along with their goals, they begin to define their company culture with intention.

When broken down to the most basic elements, the formula for a company culture is: Values + Behavior = Culture.

The culture is greater than the company itself. The culture represents an ideal to strive toward. It is a marriage of shared values that inspire others to do better work in all aspects of their lives, not just their place of employment. It inspires commitment to realizing the ideal via their actions. Purpose-driven work is meaningful work.

Multiple studies show that both millennials and Gen Z desire purpose behind the work that they do at their jobs. The word purpose in this context may seem a bit ambiguous, and that is because it

means something different to each person. However, the idea of having purpose can be quite simple. Gallup's report "How Millennials Want to Work and Live" defines purpose as "liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals." A strong company culture can have a powerful effect on productivity, but more importantly, it drives a better quality of work and deeper employee satisfaction.

Impact on Remote Work

Your company culture acts as a guide in what to do when nobody else is around. In other words, if an employee was faced with a decision but there was no supervisor to ask for advice on what to do to do, that employee would then act based on the company culture by default. If left with only option A or option B as solutions, the employee would have an understanding of which option is the correct choice based on what they understand of their culture.

Because of this, the cultural understanding is of utmost importance with remote employees who are not under the watchful eye of a supervisor and who may have flexible hours. Remote employees will have a deep understanding of what is expected of them and how to respond in nearly any work situation within an organization that has a strong company culture.

In Times of Stress

The company culture is the best tool to help your people adapt and thrive in times of adversity. The culture of your company is ever present, regardless of whether the person is in the office, working from home, or on the road. Your company culture helps shape the behaviors and attitudes of each person working in the company. Their attitude helps set their outlook on events and how they handle events that may push them out of their comfort zones.

The company culture is also a source of strength. It builds confidence. People know what to do in nearly all situations based on their culture. A well-engaged remote employee would know how to act, how to communicate, and what their company expects based on what they know of the company values and mission that are exemplified through the company culture. The well-engaged remote employee will be able to discern what to do even without any supervision or peers to turn to for guidance. Their ability to rely on and trust that knowledge fuels their confidence at work.

The company culture is a huge contributor to the various goals of the company from sales to support to marketing and the hiring process. In fact, it is a main component to the success of the company.

Company Culture and Success

"Maintaining an effective culture is so important that it, in fact, trumps even strategy."

—Howard Stevenson, Professor Emeritus, Harvard Business School; Director of Publishing and Board Chair of the Harvard Business Publishing Company

That is a powerful statement, and it's not an exaggeration. In a healthy company culture, each employee feels like part of the larger team. As a team member who wants to belong, they want to see the team succeed in its goals. They have an attachment to good outcomes for the team and are willing to put in the effort to achieve those outcomes. They work toward that greater purpose. Purpose-driven work is also high-quality work, and that type of work reflects well on the whole company, helping to drive its success. That drive toward excellence is reflected in the work across all departments. It would be a touch point with every customer, each new hire, and all existing employees.

When a company emphasizes its core values in everything it does, its culture drives success at every level. For this to work, it is critical that the values of the company align with the values of the people it hires. That does not mean that everyone must have the same set of beliefs, but they all must share what they hold as important when it comes to core values. It is your personal values that guide you in your decisions and motivate your actions. I discuss in detail how aligned values and company culture impact company success in my book *The Artful Ask*, Pimbleberry Publishing, 2019. Here is a snippet from that section:

Understanding that employees tend to enjoy their work more when their personal values align with the company's value system should never be forgotten when cultivating company culture. They will create better relationships with other team members and are far more productive. In fact, a study of corporate culture and performance revealed a staggering correlation between the two.

Two Harvard Business School professors did a long-term study of 200 major corporations. The results are published in their book *Corporate Culture and Performance*, which shows how culture has a definite impact on the financial performance of a company.

This chart shows the results over an 11-year period of 12 companies that had corporate cultures which valued employees, owners, and customers. These company cultures also encouraged leadership from everyone on the team. The study compared these 12 companies to 20 companies that did not have such a culture. The financial difference is staggering.

Average Increase In...	20 Companies Without Performance-Enhancing Cultures	12 Companies With Performance-Enhancing Cultures
Revenue Growth	166%	682%
Net Income Growth	1%	756%
Stock Price Growth	74%	901%
Employment Growth	36%	282%

Source: John Kotter, James I. Heskett “Corporate Culture and Performance”

As you can see from the graphic, company culture is wildly important to a company’s profitability. It is also a driving factor in attracting and retaining great talent.

That last line is an important one because getting the talented individuals that fit into your company culture starts before the hire. A company should position itself to attract the best talent and best team members that it can. That means having a company culture that is attractive. If you have an unappealing company culture, it is reflected in how employees feel about the company, and the outside world will know about it as well. In this day of social media and Yelp reviews, it’s easy to find out what it’s like to work at any given company.

Best Practices

Companies should emphasize their core values in their actions, behaviors, and communications with everyone they interact with—from employees to vendors to customers.

Retention: The Cost of Replacing Employees

You can understand the importance of a good company culture by looking at examples of companies with negative company cultures. We can imagine a scene from a movie in which a customer walks into an empty supermarket. The camera pans to a cashier who is leaning against the counter, chewing gum and lazily scanning items while avoiding any unnecessary interaction with the customer. Somewhere in the background, there is a stockperson with earbuds in putting cans on a shelf in a clumsy and careless manner while a manager reads a tabloid from behind a Plexiglas booth positioned for observing the workers. Although a bit cliché, it’s a great example of a bad work culture. I’m sad to say that I’ve walked into plenty of businesses just like the one I described.

Needless to say, that sort of company culture does not cultivate a great customer experience or brand experience, and it's even worse as far as the employee experience is concerned. The customer at least gets to leave the place after a few minutes of walking through the doors. You have to ask yourself who would want to work in an environment like that, or for a company that does not consider their employees to be a team. Instead of creating a team-based environment, it becomes an hourly job with a loosely associated group of people who don't seem to want to be there at all. It's a culture that is entirely transactional, where someone is paid to show up, to accomplish a set number of tasks for a set number of hours, then to leave, only to repeat the process during their next shift. With this type of company culture, you might wonder who would want to stay working there for very long. We've glimpsed at what a bad company culture is like for the customer and the employee. Now we will consider whether a mediocre company culture is much better. When it comes to retention, I think the answer is no. It's one thing to leave a miserable job to get any job that's even marginally better, but if the new one is still not great, you won't be looking for reasons to stay.

A healthy and attractive company culture is not just a great recruitment tool, it is an excellent employee retention tool. A 2018 study performed by employee experience platform provider WeSpire showed that 75 percent of Generation Z thinks that work should have greater meaning beyond the paycheck. They take the time to read the mission statement and understand the company values when job searching.

The study shows that Gen Z is the first generation to prioritize purpose over salary when it comes to their work. At the same time, the study showed that Gen Zers prioritize authenticity and prefer to be able to respect the managers that they work under. The study also showed that Gen Zers will be happy to actively publicize ugly corporate cultures or toxic work environments. This means that transparency is big with this generation of the workforce and they are happy to leave companies that have an unhealthy or even unsatisfying culture, even if the next job is for lower pay.

Figure 10.1 summarizes statistics based on a 2018 annual survey by recruitment site FlexJobs, a 2018 employee retention report by employee engagement company TINYpulse, and a 2018 study performed by employee experience platform provider WeSpire. By looking at these statistics, you can see what is important to workers and how these priorities would be reflected in a company culture.

FIGURE 10.1: COMPANY CULTURE IS A TOP PRIORITY FOR JOB SEEKERS AND EMPLOYEES



Controllable Quit Rate

According to a 2019 study by employee retention and engagement company Work Institute, it costs the average company \$15,000 to lose a US worker. From trends reported by the US Department of Labor, the Work Institute study estimates that one in three US workers will voluntarily leave their jobs each year by 2023 for better opportunities. This shows a steady trend, considering that in 2018, 27 out of every 100 US employees quit their jobs. When looked at collectively across all US employers, this high turnover rate equates to roughly \$1 trillion in costs to US companies according to Gallup's 2019 report on voluntary turnover. Not only does this have a massive impact on profits