

COMPANIES OFTEN BOAST THAT THEY'RE A GREAT PLACE TO WORK, BUT WHAT VALUE DOES CORPORATE CULTURE REALLY GIVE A FIRM? AND DOES THE FANTASY LIVE UP TO THE REALITY?

THE CULTURE SHOW



Words:

Dave Waller

AMAZON FOUND A neatly packaged parcel of criticism in its shopping basket last year, courtesy of the *New York Times*, after an exposé revealed the cut-throat nature of the online retail giant's working culture. In it, Amazon staff revealed that they're 'encouraged to tear apart one another's ideas in meetings' and to 'toil long and late' while being 'held to standards that the company boasts are unreasonably high'. They were also given instructions on how to send secret feedback to bosses, often to sabotage colleagues' careers. And when they complain of hitting the wall as a result of the relentless pace? They're told, bluntly, to 'climb the wall'.

Anyone who's ever been forced to sit through an annual employee conference and been baffled by the distant higher-ups dragging out their latest concept of abstract company values can be forgiven any scepticism around a phrase like 'corporate culture'. But Amazon shows that, beyond the veneer of marketing speak, it's a concept with some substance. Wherever you find a group of humans together, a culture of some kind will inevitably emerge. Some are clearly more constructive for business – and kinder to humans – than others. As such, it's important to approach a culture's development deliberately.

If at this point you're wondering what corporate culture actually is, then you're probably not alone. Campbell Lund, Head of HR at RBC Wealth Management, has a handy definition. "I see corporate culture as how things are done around here, versus what things are done around here," he says. "Diversity, CSR and flexible working are examples of what's done, as are recruitment and training. Corporate culture is about how that's all done." We're talking issues like what's important in the company, what kind of behaviours are rewarded and who gets promoted.

But is it really that important to have a desirable corporate culture? You don't have to employ a powerful algorithm to see that Amazon's done rather well for itself, thank you very much. But if the average company wants to attract and retain decent staff, it seems the answer is yes.

"Corporate culture is a differentiator, and is possibly more important now than ever," says Fiona St Clair-Bolam, Head of HR at Crestbridge. "In Jersey in the past few years, we've seen a huge increase in the



employee market, and companies are all looking for the same type of people. Most companies pay similar salaries and give the same benefits, so in the interview process a lot of people ask you to give examples of your culture and how that may be different to other companies. People want to feel proud of their organisation. And if you're demonstrating that behaviours are important, they do feel proud."

CUSTOMERS AND CULTURE

The likes of Google, Twitter, Facebook, Apple and Expedia in the UK are frequently praised for their culture. Then there's Zappos, the US online shoe retailer that's as famous for its culture as it is its footwear. The idea of fit is so important there that new employees are offered \$2,000 to quit after the first week of training if they decide the job isn't for them.

The link between corporate culture and customers may be a trickier one to define. After all, Apple punters are happy to suffer the exorbitant costs and ever-changing interfaces of its trendy products, not because their staff get free fruit in the canteen, but because they love what the products can do and how they're designed.

But the link is there. Apple's culture is one of reverence for expertise, belief in the power of small teams doing great things, and a strong work ethic – all of which draws the best people and results in its signature standards of design and

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apparently effortless ease, which in turn lures the custom.

"Culture is an integral part of strategy. Anything that influences strategy and affects how it's executed will be connected with how people behave, and is therefore connected to culture," says Richard Sheath, a Partner at board consultant Independent Audit, which recently surveyed FTSE 350 CEOs on their approach to corporate culture. "Strategy is made up of various things, including how people behave and work. And that's connected to how the organisation interacts with customers."

Innocent Drinks is a great example of this, a company that actively sends its

internal corporate culture beyond the walls of its office and trades on it as part of its brand – where the youthful, energetic sense of innovation encouraged in its employees finds its perfect mirror in the marketing of its products to punters.

So how does a company decide its culture? Senior figures have a huge role to play, whether that's the board itself or, more likely given the contact they have with the rest of the business, the CEO.

"Boards do feel a direct responsibility for culture," says Sheath. "They just struggle at times to pin down what they can do – and they worry about it. But it's important not to expect too much of the board. The CEO is responsible for executing strategy, and getting the right culture is part of that. And with their proximity to other managers, they're in a better position to influence culture anyway."

BEING REAL

Yet culture isn't simply a top-down deal. "It doesn't just arrive because someone did a presentation and stood at the front saying this is what it is today," says RBC's Lund. "You need an ongoing, two-way dialogue to make sure the collective ambition is well understood and lived at all levels."

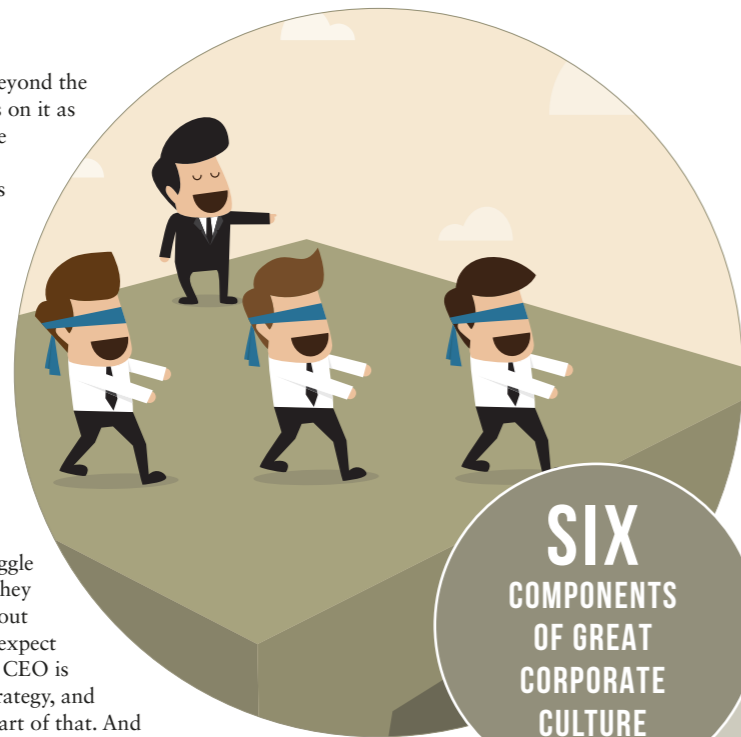
Tools are emerging to do so. RBC used IBM InnovationJam, a purpose-built large-scale platform that enabled conversation with 80,000 employees to clarify what the company's purpose and values should be. "Culture is a critical thing to look after," says Lund, "but it's not simple. It requires focused effort over time."

Finally, it's about authenticity. It's no good management announcing they have a certain culture if the employees' direct day-to-day experience shows it to be completely

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SIX COMPONENTS OF GREAT CORPORATE CULTURE

Author John Coleman, writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, identified six factors that help create a strong corporate culture:

different in reality. It's no good a bank proclaiming to support LGBT lobbying group Stonewall if its internal culture shows intolerance and bullying towards those of different persuasions.

"People can be a bit sceptical when they read the values of a company," says St Clair-Bolam. "And they are meaningless unless the behaviour of everyone matches those values. The open door policy can't just be about saying your door is open. People have to know they're welcome to walk through it."

And flagrant inconsistency isn't the only way to get it wrong. Copying another successful firm's approach without checking its relevance to your own team is a surefire way to have a disjointed culture, as is fixing it and not letting it evolve.

Company culture is a living, breathing thing that should shift to meet changing demands as companies grow, customers change and teams evolve. And it needs to be flexible – your company's culture in London, say, may well be different to that in Toronto, even though the values and purpose are the same.

The same goes for different parts of the same company. "Look across our different businesses in the Channel Islands – from trusts to investment banking," says Lund. "Each has their nuances in culture." As do all companies.

The good news, both for workers and customers, is that for every Amazon and its metaphorical walls to scale, there's a Zappos offering people cash to leave if they don't like it. Which would you pick? ■

DAVE WALLER is a freelance business writer

1 Vision A great culture starts with a vision or mission statement. These simple turns of phrase guide a company's values and provide it with purpose. That purpose, in turn, orients every decision employees make.

2 Values A company's values are the core of its culture. While a vision articulates a company's purpose, values offer a set of guidelines on the behaviours and mindsets needed to achieve that vision.

3 Practices Values are of little importance unless they are enshrined in a company's practices. If an organisation professes that 'people are our greatest asset', it should also be ready to invest in people in visible ways.

4 People No company can build a coherent culture without people who either share its core values or possess the willingness and ability to embrace those values. That's why the greatest firms in the world also have some of the most stringent recruiting policies.

5 Narrative Every organisation has a unique history, a unique story. And the ability to unearth that history and craft it into a narrative is a core element of culture creation.

6 Place This shapes culture. Open architecture is more conducive to certain office behaviours, such as collaboration. Place – be it geography, architecture or aesthetic design – has an impact on the values and behaviours of people in a workplace.



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