How To Sustain And Strengthen Company Culture Through The Coronavirus Pandemic

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I write about the changing nature of work, workers and the workplace.

Right now, leaders have the unique opportunity to shape, cement and leverage their company cultures to create the greatest impact for their organizations. Organizational culture is one of the most important differentiators companies possess—and it's doing hard work since the pandemic. If culture is "the way things get done around here" and "what people do when no one is looking," it is especially relevant when employees are away from the office, from their teams and from their managers.

People are working from home and may never return to the office in the way they once knew it. This means they may not be receiving the same direction, guidance or coaching from leaders, and culture is about guiding the actions and decisions of all employees at all levels to a true north.

So how do you manage, maintain and leverage culture in such cataclysmic times? How do you manage your culture by design, rather than by default? Here's what we knew about culture and—perhaps more important—what's new since the pandemic.

Competitive Advantage
We always knew culture was one of the most powerful sources of competitive advantage. *What's new* is that for the best companies, it has become a beacon. The reason it's so powerful is culture is hard for competitors to replicate, but the decisions your company has made—and will continue to make in the next weeks and months—are a window into your culture. They send strong messages about your character, they attract employees and customers and they are irreplicable for competitors.

Nurturing People And Skills
We always knew culture attracts talent. *What's new* is that matches between employers and employees may be shifting. The most effective company cultures value people, provide career growth, adapt to meet customer needs, and deliver great results to shareholders. But a lot of culture is subjective as well. The best-fit cultures for some may be less than ideal for others. The pandemic has put many cultures in stark relief as employees have gotten the chance to see if a company's stated values truly manifest in its actions. For example, the company which provided employees with tools and technology to get their jobs done has struggled to adapt and outfit them in their home offices, or the organization which seemed so nimble under normal circumstances has been challenged to make fast decisions and shift to meet demand. The pandemic has resulted in new realizations of company culture which may cause employees to reassess whether they want to stay with their company long-term.

We always knew leaders had an outsize influence on culture. *What's new* is leaders have become even more important in shaping employee perception and engagement. Leaders matter to culture because people tend to focus on leaders and draw conclusions about company culture based on their position and their choices. When companies recognize or promote leaders, they are endorsing that leader's behaviors, values and approaches—for better or worse. During the pandemic, leaders have become a single source of truth for many employees. There is so much information coming from so many sources, employees look to leaders to make sense of what's happening and put situations in the context of their particular company. Leaders who have the most information about any one topic, also rise to a position of even greater influence. If your company has shut down manufacturing, the operations leader who plans and communicates about the restart will get attention. Or if your company is consumer-driven, the leader with her finger on the pulse of customer demand will have heavy influence.
We always knew culture was defined by behaviors. *What's new* is the intentionality that is critical to manage behaviors. You don't really manage a culture, instead you manage the behaviors that shape it—encouraging, discouraging and fostering behaviors that demonstrate the values and norms you want to reinforce. A culture is significantly shaped by the worst behavior it will tolerate. What's unique about the pandemic is it may be harder to see and be aware of employee choices and actions which may make it harder to validate the behaviors you want.

Communication And Community
We always knew culture was more effective when companies discussed it openly. *What's new* is the extent to which distance is detrimental. Culture is like an iceberg for which

norms, values and assumptions are below the water level and invisible, but palpable. The more companies can bring things above water level and make them more conscious and visible, the better. Because people aren't together, this open discussion about what you value, how things get done and what's acceptable or not acceptable is especially important. People don't trust what they don't understand—so clarity on culture and expectations is more important than usual.

We always knew culture was significantly affected by place. *What's new* is the extent to which presence matters to the success of the organization. When people can gather together, it's typically easier for companies to communicate a sense of common purpose and goals and to create a sense of community. Without this time to be physically together, companies must be creative in maintaining a virtual sense of esprit de corps.

How To Manage Culture Effectively
Given the importance of culture, how should companies and leaders manage their culture? Here are eight recommendations:

- Articulate, validate and reinforce your culture. Talk about your culture and what your company values.
- Stay true to your culture and avoid letting the pandemic erode what you value. If empowerment and participation are priorities, ensure that even amidst federally-mandated or top-down decision making you're still seeking input and involvement.
- Recognize employees who act in the way you desire and hold people accountable for behaviors and for performance aligned with your preferred culture.
- Stay attuned to employees. Focus on their needs and proactively address their concerns.
- Develop leaders by providing education and coaching. Ensure they are managing based on objectives and showing empathy to employees.
- Encourage strong connections between employees. Create or maintain mentorship programs and be planful about linking individuals and teams.
- Communicate regularly and openly. Create a density of information in which more people have more information more quickly in order to guide decisions and actions.
- Demonstrate culture inside and outside your company. How you treat employees is important. How you interact and contribute to your community is as well—sending a strong signal about your culture.

Culture has always been one of the most powerful differentiators for your organization, but the need to manage culture intentionally is especially critical now. Focus on key talent, develop leaders, hold people accountable, be open about your company's values and create a strong fabric of information and connections. The pandemic may significantly shift how your company responds to the market. It is surely an opportunity to strengthen your culture.