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Route to:

What's the truth about your culture?

THE DAILY WORK ENVIRONMENT MAY BE YOUR STRONGEST – OR YOUR WEAKEST – RECRUITING TOOL

OKAY, HERE'S TODAY'S POP QUIZ for all our married readers: Describe your spouse to a total stranger in 10 words or less.

Was that harder than it seemed? Have you grown so accustomed to his or her face that you rarely take a second look?

Now describe your corporate culture in 10 words or less. Was that equally as hard?

Despite the fact that every organization has its own distinct culture, chances are that most employees are so accustomed to *functioning* within it that they spend little time *reflecting* on it. It's just there, and everybody adapts as best as they are able.

But once upon a time, each potential hire saw that culture for the first time and formed – perhaps in the blink of an eye – an opinion as to whether it would be the kind of environment that would foster many years of personal growth and satisfaction. And while company literature may have painted a rosy picture of a progressive, worker-friendly organization that treasures its employees and adores its customers, close observation may or may not have led to a similar conclusion.

Culture is the Personality of the Corporation

IN SIMPLEST TERMS, culture is the personality of the organization. That personality, however, consists of many different elements ranging from the way people behave to the way they dress and design their place of work.

On a philosophical plane, the institution's leaders – by thought, word and deed – create a value system that influences the way individual employees behave. Microsoft, for example, states on its website that it values “integrity, honesty, openness, personal excellence, constructive self-criticism, continual self-improvement and mutual respect.” The company further states its commitment to customers and partners and its “passion” for technology. It likes to take on “big challenges” and see them through. Last, Microsoft states its belief in honoring commitments, delivering results and striving for the highest quality.

By most accounts, Microsoft's work environment reflects those lofty goals. In contrast, look at the work environments of companies from the go-go '90s whose top executives now reside in jail. The constant push to inflate revenues, drive up stock prices and create personal wealth created cultures of duplicity and greed.

Good companies not only encourage high standards of conduct, they also treat employees well. An assessment of corporate culture thus includes attitudes and policies with regard to training and personal development, reward and recognition, advancement, flex-time and other worker-friendly benefits (such as daycare, fitness facilities, take-home meals, dry-cleaning pickup and the like), working conditions, work-life balance and civic participation.

Actions, of course, speak louder than words. If an employer says it encourages community involvement, it should not penalize the worker who takes two hours off from work to do so.

Some behavior systems may not be part of the policy manual or employee handbook. It is rare to find official acknowledgment of office politics, risk aversion, information hoarding and other negative practices that may exist at various organizational levels and to various extremes. However, to the degree that such behaviors are tolerated (if not exactly encouraged), they can have a debilitating effect on the work environment.

Culture manifests itself in concrete ways as well, no pun intended. Architectural design, interior décor and personal attire all speak volumes about how the organization views itself – for example, hip and edgy, conservative and solid, relaxed and friendly, buttoned-up and secretive, or any other adjectives one wants to use. A corporate law firm, of course, may seek to present a different image from a technology start-up. The problem arises when the technology outfit looks more like the conservative law firm.

Last, consider corporate brand-building, through which the corporation – via advertising, literature, web presence, public relations and customer service – becomes the brand. (Southwest Airlines and Apple Computer are good examples.) In effect, the company and its products or services become indistinguishable from each other. You just know they must be great places to work.

What Inquiring Minds Want to Know

ANY SAVVY JOB CANDIDATE, upon the first visit to a potential new employer, will seek the earliest possible opportunity to ask someone outside the interviewing chain, “What’s it *really* like to work around here?”

It therefore behooves the hiring manager and all in authority to ask that question first. What *is* it like to work here?

Not every organization can be the coolest place on the planet, and we’re not talking global warming. In fact, as noted earlier, not every organization *wants* to be the coolest, hippest employer on the planet. That said, what do you want to be?

An important piece of the cultural puzzle is consistency, because inconsistencies tend to set off mental alarms. For instance, one expects the art department to look creative, and the R&D depart-

ment to be filled with high-tech gadgets. If the art department has the same drab furniture and walls as accounting, and R&D prides itself on a 20-year-old electron microscope, then the inconsistency red flag arises. Similarly, a company whose advertising says it “dares to be different” should not have a design-by-committee process that stifles individual innovation.

In short, cultural insight and awareness is much like emotional intelligence – the ability to see oneself as others see us. Often, small changes and adjustments can eliminate the jarring inconsistencies that make job-seekers have second thoughts. And if emotional intelligence is too abstract a concept, think about the “curb appeal” of a house for sale. What kind of first impression is being made? What might planting a few bushes do to help?

Although some informal aspects of the work environment may start from the bottom up, such as getting together for a drink on Fridays after work, true corporate culture is driven from the top down. People tend to do as they see their bosses do – whether by commission or omission. One of the great challenges that faced Jeffrey Immelt on taking the reins at GE, and Alan Mullally at Ford, was to put their own stamp upon cultures so totally dominated by their predecessors. There’s no question that new values drive both organizations today.

Not everyone can be the CEO, but corporate cultures do extend downward – to individual divisions, departments, research centers, manufacturing plants and regional offices. Within whatever span of control you have, it is therefore possible to ask what’s it like to work around here and to take corrective action as needed. Encourage adherence to the corporation’s values and perhaps improve upon them. Be worker-friendly and discourage disruptive behavior. Spruce up the workplace and re-evaluate the dress code. Promote innovation and individual responsibility.

Old-timers may be used to things as they are, but potential new hires are not.

—George Snider

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