Corporate culture—what the management gurus know

By Diane Faulkner

What exactly is a corporate culture, and why would you want to know about it, especially when you don't have a lot of employees? Two words: Retention and profits.

No matter how much you pay people, no matter how good your benefits package is, if the work environment you offer doesn't provide the emotional and intellectual security to perform to potential, employees will leave.

Management gurus make millions providing guidelines for creating work cultures that help staff work smarter together and make bottom lines grow. What the gurus know, and want you to buy, is that successful companies, regardless of size, have people who interact so well together, they work as one body—the actual definition of "corporate."

Before you subscribe to one of the multitudes of popular management philosophies, know that they are comprised of these same simple components:

– Communicate everything

– Be fair

– Set benchmarks

– Document

– Hold everyone accountable

Here are some steps to take to create or recreate a culture.

Under the microscope

First, understand the role you and your managers play in creating your current environment.

Start with terminated employee files. Note trouble areas. Do termination reasons balance with review notes? Whose people are leaving quickly? How much movement is lateral versus promotional? How many employees left with no other employment waiting? How many terminations could have been avoided?

Next, speak individually with all your managers to determine how they would like to interact with the executive team and peers. Who's seen as the unofficial mentor, information hog, stick-in-the-mud, or complainer? All of these types must be made aware of how they work and how they can impede improvements and relationships. End interviews with an open discussion on any difficulties they may currently be experiencing with any level staff.

Speak with a sample of non-management employees from various departments. Include a wide distribution of talent, attitude and experience. Find out how they were trained; how well they believe they are doing in their jobs; their ideas on how their jobs could be improved (outside of pay); and how they go about identifying areas for improvements, as well as how the improvements are implemented.

Finally, find out how employees view their relationships with managers and their thoughts on the executive team. Ensure confidentiality.

Sound like a lot of footwork? It is. For a medium-sized organization, a complete change can take three to five years; smaller ones, 18 to 24 months.

The variables

Now that you have background information, what do you do? Begin by working with first-level managers. Use the information gathered to bring them up to speed in areas such as proper documentation techniques, counseling, development and hiring strategy.

Be an example. Walk first-level managers through problem solving techniques as situations arise, so they can emulate you. Help them understand how they influence attitudes, abilities and productivity.

Hold managers accountable for staff success and failure—first by counseling, then by pay. By changing paradigms on their positions and responsibilities, you will immediately affect their department's culture. Attitudes and communication will improve.

Goal setting

Next, set short-term goals by department; then set goals for the entire organization. Work with staff on goal setting, introducing the basic concepts. The ultimate objective is to have all staff thinking about long-term objectives, supported by various length goals.

Teach managers to require their to staff think about, and then commit to, specific dated goals tied to objectives. In about eight months, you will be ready to move staff to the next step of long-term goal setting.

Look for commonalties among departments. This is where problems in inter-departmental relationships surface. Identify the biggest, most expensive problems, as well as the "tweakers"—seemingly small problems that actually define your current culture. Correct the parts to fix the whole.

Create a new culture? It can be done; you just have to begin where it counts.

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