



Creating great places to work & exponential results!



Accidental or Intentional: Creating the Organizational Culture You Want

By Libby Wagner, Founder and President

Our recent office relocation included the movement of many boxes of books. It seems like we moved an acre of books, and at least half of this acre is devoted to leadership, organizational development, sales, performance management. Suffice it to say that it's quite the library, and for the most part, I've read them all, sometimes more than once.

All this to say that there's plenty that's been said about leading teams and groups, and plenty other things have been said about organizational culture, organizational environments and teams. But some things bear repeating, especially when the repetition means that you might actually make a change in something that's important to you.

What are the characteristics of your organizational culture? And perhaps more important, is the culture of your team or organization the one that you want, the one that you intend? Many organizations' cultures are not the ones they intend, but they are the ones they've got!

How does this happen when just about everyone sets out to have great places to work that meet the goals and the mission, attract great people to work, and loyal customers to do business?

When we have an accidental culture, rather than an intentional culture, most likely it's because our organizational behaviors are not matching up with our intentions.

How to create more intention around your culture:

- I. Revisit or clarify your organizational values.
Most organizations or teams have clearly identified their values—the principles they agree to live by in their work and business. Sometimes these are corporate-wide, and other times they might be team-specific, like a [Team Agreement](#). If you don't have these articulated, that's the first step. Clearly identify 5-7 key values that are important to you in your business to be the kind of place you want to be that does the kind of work you do. Then—and this is the really important part—you need to define them

behaviorally. Most organizations have things like “communicate honestly” or “respect each other,” but because they don’t define them behaviorally, everyone does his or her best (or not) to fulfill this as they define it. There’s no collective definition, so you get what you get!

2. **Operationalize your values and practice them consciously and purposefully.**

As the leader, you’ve got to carry the flag. Articulating your values, and even defining them behaviorally, is no guarantee that you will begin to shape or re-shape your culture according to your intentions if no one is committed to carrying them out. Lead from the front. Your values should not only be visible, and some organizations are good at this—you see posters or plaques or wallet cards—but you have to actually use them. Many teams I work with begin their meetings with their Team Agreements or Guiding Principles almost like we used to say the Pledge of Allegiance in grade school. In other words, you check in on the promise you made to each other and see where your successes are and where you’ve got room to grow or pick up the slack. You’ve also got to weave the language of your values into your performance evaluations (formal) and in the language you use when you make decisions and collaborate (informal).

3. **Reward and recognize one another for upholding your agreements or values.**

It is true that what gets done is what gets measured, so those things we want to happen with some regularity and consistency in our organizations need to be noted in some way. Generally, I advise clients to do this both formally and informally, as suggested

above. Additionally, I’d add that when appropriate, it’s important to honor and recognize those who are demonstrating the values as you intend. Three important times for recognizing (i.e. in a public forum, using your own special recognition practices, formal letter of thanks and recognition, etc.) could include consistent performance, above-and-beyond performance and career milestones. For example, if one of our values is flexibility and resiliency, that in your organization we all roll up our sleeves and help one another on projects or proposals or initiatives that are priority, and someone regularly demonstrates her ability to assist others and perform her own job tasks, that’s a good way to reinforce the values and culture you want. Notice it and recognize it with high specificity.

There’s really no reason your culture can’t be exactly the one that gives you the highest levels of productivity, trust, morale, profits, customer delight and employee retention. Just intend it, and take disciplined action toward it!

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