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What is Culture?

I believe that culture is a development from the way you think, the way you feel, and the way you act. It is about the values that you operate under, both in public and in private. Culture in a business context is centred around the way a company and those in it carry out their activities on a day-to-day basis. In my opinion it is as important as, if not more so than, a business's strategy or a company's products. While a client or customer may like a company's offering, what they really remember and feel is the service received. It is likely to be the service or the people providing that service that they will discuss with others, whether positive or negative: this is likely to be the key element that determines whether they return for more or not.

That doesn't mean that service is culture: it isn't! But the way that people in a team or firm act is driven, in a large part, by culture. Sometimes culture in a business is driven by a formal set of values that are set by the company itself. Whilst these values are often ones that everyone recognises and perhaps supports, it is difficult to tune everyone into the same values. Having said that, for large organisations it is often the most effective way of trying to get their staff on a similar wavelength.

At my previous company, a set of values was decided upon that everyone was required to follow. This was an attempt to develop a culture that was particular to the business. Having been asked to be a Values Leader (someone who provided the 'Values' workshops for staff) I found that, in the main, employees were receptive to the initial sessions, but cynical as to whether the values would last and whether they would be truly upheld by management. Sometimes the approach felt like a PR exercise, rather than something that the employees could truly engage with and believe in.

In my opinion, culture starts with your own personal values. These are rarely written down, but are developed over time from your upbringing, the people around you as you grew up, the challenges you have faced in your lifetime and from those you have worked with and for.

It is often said that culture in a business takes time to develop. I don't necessarily believe that to be the case. A group of people who come together to achieve something meaningful, and who can agree on an approach to their goals, can create a culture almost instantly. Trust between those individuals is vital and a willingness to work as a collective towards a common objective can be very powerful in creating a strong culture. That does not mean that everyone needs to be the same, however. A business culture is not born out of a set of individuals who are clones of each other. In fact it is often advantageous to have a diversity of backgrounds and experience; but a commonality in terms of the business goal is essential.

Certain individuals are often said to be culture-carriers, but it is important not always to judge those that, on the face of it, appear to demonstrate values. Human beings can be good actors, so culture isn't something that should be viewed or judged just by someone's behaviour. It is the combination of think, feel and act that drives culture. Those three elements create something distinct. That 'something' is not necessarily visual or tangible, it is just something that is 'there': something that defines a person or business.

If a business has a good culture, one that isn't forced, but is the natural creation developed from all the individuals working together, and this can be combined with a strategy for success that is aligned to its clients, then that business has a far greater chance of success than one that is missing these vital elements.

Culture is key to a business. The right culture can be quick to achieve if the individuals have similar values and objectives. It can be felt and observed by those who come into contact with the business and by individuals in it. And it can be the difference between success and failure.

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