



Hallmarks of a Healthy Corporate Culture

By Bruce T. Jensen



About the Author

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Suppose your business is looking to hire someone who is resourceful, self-motivated, and a team player. You find that very person! However, over time you discover that this match-made-in-heaven just doesn't seem to work out for your company or the employee. So what happened?

Often such disappointment stems from a disconnect between your expectations as an employer and expectations of the staff member. This disconnect may be symptomatic of a broader weakness in corporate culture.

So, what is corporate culture? It's usually defined as a shared set of mutual beliefs, values and practices. It also represents the way the company's workers think, feel and act. Successful management teams shape their corporate culture by aligning their philosophy with the philosophy of their workers. Naturally, this process begins at the time of hiring.

The best job candidates have this mindset: "Before I work for a company, the company has to work for me." Therefore, it's vital that every plank of the company's mission statement (and values and vision statements, if a company has them) be clearly articulated to job seekers. Through such communication, both employer and job candidate can determine if there is a good fit. Employers also need to communicate their vision for the future and discuss how that candidate would contribute to it.

Legendary corporate chieftain Jack Welch, who guided General Electric from 1981 to 2001, once said: "No company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it." How true. While most businesses take time to craft a mission statement, how many communicate that statement to each employee at the time of hiring? And how many companies specifically ask for each employee's "buy-in"?

Implementing the mission statement at every level of an organization is, I'm convinced, one of the hallmarks of a great corporate culture. And make no mistake: a corporate culture can make or break a company, no matter how strong the business model.

To ensure a strong corporate culture, companies should have basic traits they require of employees in addition to specific job qualifications.

At my company, a banking firm, we require every team member to have impeccable ethics, extraordinary customer service skills, commitment to community, and self-discipline. Of our key officers, we also require two other traits: entrepreneurship and creativity.



There's no question that strong culture is linked to a firm's organization style. In his perpetually best-selling business book, *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins studied the best performing U.S. companies over time and constructed his "Good to Great Matrix of Creative Discipline" (shown on this page). Great organizations reflect a high ethic of entrepreneurship and a high culture of discipline.

Wise supervision of team members is also a hallmark of a healthy corporate culture. For example, our company does the following:

- Remove hierarchies to preclude intimidation and promote free-flow of ideas
- Empower and trust team members to unleash entrepreneurship and creativity
- Control outcomes, not behavior
- Listen to team members to foster a level of comfort and implement good input
- Focus on consensus
- Place our mission statement on every worker's desk in view of the worker and customers
- Create various "bonding rituals" to cultivate mutual cooperation and have outright fun

I mentioned that sharing corporate vision with workers is critical to corporate culture. We do that regularly because you can't have workers' philosophy and vision drifting out of sync with those of the firm. Our corporate vision revolves around three things: innovative concepts, a savvy revenue plan and an ongoing, enviable corporate culture.

Corporate culture will most certainly control both a firm's reputation and employee productivity, not to mention revenue. So take it from Jack Welch, who said on another occasion, "Control your own destiny, or someone else will."