

# High Performance and Corporate Culture

By Jason Young

What exactly is corporate culture? The dictionary defines culture as “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought.”

While this definition is far reaching, it does give some clues as to the nature of an organization’s culture. I define corporate culture as the assumptions, values, beliefs, behaviors, practices, norms, and products of an organization. Because the definition is so broad in its scope, it sometimes helps to describe what corporate culture is not.

Corporate culture is not a set of core values developed by a small group of people at an off-site leadership meeting. It is not always what a chief executive describes in an annual report or shareholder’s meeting. In fact, corporate culture is not always what the leadership team of an organization says or thinks it is.

Every business entity has a culture that serves as an operating system or framework for the organization. In some organizations, culture is conscious, intentional, and tangible. In other organizations, culture is unconscious and intangible, but impactful nonetheless.

What an organization assumes, believes, values, accepts, promotes, produces and the way in which behavior occurs frames its corporate culture. Corporate culture shapes the work environment in which performance occurs and performance drives the bottom line. These are two of the facts about organizational life in today’s business economy.

In some companies, culture develops by default. In others, culture develops in ways that are conscious, intentional, and tangible. The latter are the organizations that position themselves for competitive advantage by designing work environments that allow people the freedom to be their best selves and consistently outperform their competitors.

Southwest Airlines is one example of a company that has created a work environment where people can do their best work. Southwest is one of the few airlines that has maintained profitability. And, Southwest has a good track record as an employer, taking pride in its position as a low-cost, on-time carrier that is perennially profitable – in an industry that is notorious for its financial losses. How did this happen?

Herb Kelleher, Southwest’s CEO, said it best. “It starts with hiring. We are zealous about hiring. We are looking for a particular type of person, regardless of what job category it is. We are looking for attitudes that are positive and for people who can lend themselves to causes. We want folks who have a good sense of humor and people who are interested in performing as a team. . . if you start with the type of person you want to hire, presumably you can build a workforce that is prepared for the culture you desire. . .”



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What type of culture characterizes Southwest? Positive, fun, team oriented, and “on-time” are just a few of the words that come to mind. What type of people work for the airline – one Southwest employee was quoted as saying “of course I’m on-time, I work for an on-time airline!”

This is an example of an organization where leadership assesses the work environment, defines the culture it seeks to create in terms of values, and works to create alignment between values and behaviors. It all begins with assessment and while that process may take time, the rewards generated are well worth the investment.

Corporate culture is important because it shapes the work environment in which performance occurs. Ultimately, not paying attention to culture undermines an organization’s profitability and sustainability. The good news is that corporate culture does not have to emerge by default; it can be designed and developed in thoughtful, intentional ways.

Strategic leaders begin with a careful assessment of the cultural reality around them, examining both their own perspective of the organization as well as the actual experience of those within the organization. A key factor in creating an environment where both people and profits thrive is the ability to create alignment between values and organizational practices or behavior.

The goal in designing and developing a corporate culture that inspires high performance is creating alignment between values and organizational practices or behavior. This means that culture, which is often thought about as intangible, must be made tangible. People within the organization must hear about values -and consistently experience those values on a daily basis.

Finally, the discerning leaders will involve those within the organization in articulating the desired culture based on shared values. It is not unusual to find that answers and solutions for creating alignment between values and behavior already reside in the people doing the work. The benefit of involving the entire organization in this process is buy-in, which translates into a motivational environment where people can be and do their very best.