

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends



Culture – It's Not Just for Anthropologists Anymore

By Rob Rush, CEO, LRA Worldwide

December 20, 2007 - The list of trendy business buzzwords that enter the national consciousness and swiftly become hackneyed, empty shells of their previously profound selves is long and distinguished.

To understand this phenomenon, one needn't think outside the box to identify the low-hanging fruit that will allow us to innovate, simplify and effect the paradigm shift that will be a win-win (with ROI!) for all the key stakeholders.

See what I mean. What at one time may have been evocative and meaningful becomes, at best, white noise. At worst - trite and laughable.

I bring this up because a concept that is near and dear to my heart – and, at least in my opinion, still very powerful and meaningful – may be meandering down the path to overuse and emptiness. Culture. Not the kind of culture associated with La Bohème or strep throat, but the type that dictates who we are, what we do, how we do it and how we pass it along.

For the record, this type of "culture" is defined as "the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations." Pretty heady stuff, but if you flip open any dime-store business periodical – hospitality industry trades included - you are liable to be overwhelmed with the offhand references to "culture" and its near-ubiquitous impact on the business environment. At this point, "culture" is used as a catch-all proxy for various pitfalls and challenges in any business. For instance:

- Poor hiring decisions

"Bob just wasn't a good fit for the culture here."

- Personal leadership styles

"The new CEO is looking to put a personal stamp on the corporate culture."

- Training

"This course will effectively 'teach' the corporate culture."

- Identification of business goals/priorities

"Our culture emphasizes financial metrics over customer care."

What these typically cavalier references fail to take into consideration is that culture is in no way represented by the snapshot in time inferred in these statements. It isn't a band-aid, quick-fix or turnaround solution. It is most certainly not available in an off-the-shelf training manual, and you can't "change" it just because the boss says so. While these examples may capture the information that forms the foundational basis of a true culture, they fail to capture the generational aspect. Of course, the passing of generations without the related transfer of relevant information as a foundation is just as flawed. In reality, the concept of culture is a perfect marriage of information and inspiration, purpose and execution, standards and storytelling.

Knowledge. This is the X's and O's, the basic blocking and tackling. What is it we do. How, where and when do we do it. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Belief. This is a key component that often is overlooked in the multitude of offhand references to culture...and how to change it. Why is this the way things are...and why is it important, both for me personally and the greater group as a whole. (Regardless of whether that group is a business or the first colony of settlers on the moon.)

Behavior. Now we're getting in to the good stuff. How does the knowledge and belief manifest itself in the type of person that you are – both on the job and off – and how you interact with other people. How intuitive the desired behaviors are to those within your "culture" is indicative of its relative strength - is this something we have to work at...or does it come naturally?

Learning and knowledge transfer to succeeding generations. A truly strong culture will have both formal and informal ways that it perpetuates itself. Think of naturalized U.S. citizens that diligently study U.S. History and take a citizenship test, but really learn about American culture via reruns of Mork & Mindy. (Just joking...sort of.)

Culture, by definition, needs to be slow-cooked in a crockpot, not seared over a hot flame. In the multitude of "how-to" articles surrounding the development of a "customer service culture," invariably the most important word in the article is "repeat." Only in repetition – over time, personnel, geography, situation – does the continuum effectively flow from knowledge to belief to behavior to ingrained culture.

As I am wont to do from time to time, I turn to the sports world for an illustration. My colleague, Zach Conen, who I have referenced in the past, is a die-hard Boston Red Sox fan. His desk rests underneath a picture of the seating area at Fenway Park, the Red Sox home field. The only word on the picture is "Pews"...implying that being a Red Sox fan is akin to being a member of a religion. And until 2004, it was the religious equivalent of Christians being fed to the lions in Ancient Rome.

At the start of the 2004 season, the Red Sox and their legion of fans throughout the world had endured an 86-year championship drought, losing in excruciating, heartbreaking fashion, time and again. (If you are not familiar, simply Google "Bucky 'Bleeping' Dent" or "Bill Buckner" for a quick tutorial.) The point being, is that for 86 years the culture of a Red Sox fan – and the related knowledge, beliefs, behaviors and generational transfer of knowledge – revolved around expecting the worst and waiting for ultimate failure.

Well, the Sox won in 2004...and they won again this past October. With two championships in the past four seasons, the vestiges of the "losing" culture have not been completely obliterated, but are certainly well on their way to dissipating. As one Boston sportswriter noted, there is now a generation of Boston sports fans for whom Bucky Dent and Bill Buckner mean nothing. But even after four years of prosperity, the ingrained culture is certainly changing, but has not completely changed. While there is tangible evidence to support an immediate shift in knowledge and beliefs (We have won! We can win!), the related behaviors (I can't stop pacing and I feel like I'm going to throw up!) and at least some of the stories they tell their kids ("I can tell you exactly where I was when Bucky Dent hit his home run") remain in place. And as noted above, for a truly aligned culture (and cultural shift), all four elements need to be marching in lockstep.

So even when all visual and physical evidence points in one direction, a culture doesn't develop or change overnight, nor is it the result of the efforts of one person. So before you look to "develop" a guest service culture from scratch or "overhaul" the existing culture, make sure that you have a full understanding of the elements in place (knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, generational transfer of knowledge) that affect your current state and the time and effort that it will take to shift all four of those components gradually and in concert. Knowledge alone won't do it. Nor will behavioral change that takes place in a vacuum. And so on.

Make sure all of the ingredients are there and give the crockpot time to simmer. And Zach, go drink some champagne. It's time you forgot about Bucky "Bleeping" Dent.

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