



xoxoday

A guide to building & maintaining your culture “garden”

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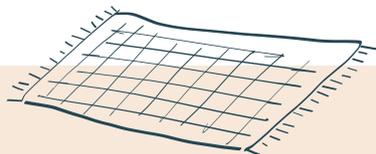
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Introduction

Company culture is an area that's received more and more attention and focus over the years as businesses have seen and felt the power and difference it can make. In fact, in 2014 Merriam-Webster announced that **"culture" was the word of the year**, with more lookups than any other word. And in that same year, a global survey conducted by McKinsey & Co., found that spending time on culture was a key priority of C-Suite executives.

This is exactly why the world's most successful companies understand that **everything starts and ends with culture, and use culture as a competitive advantage**. They clearly define it, effectively weave it into everything they formally and informally do, and consistently and effectively deliver against it across the entire organization. And if you want further proof of the importance of culture, just look at how many HR roles now have the word "culture" in the job title.



"Culture is the underlying fabric that holds an organization together. When the fabric is strong, groups can endure major challenges and thrive during better times. If the fabric is tattered, groups may manage to get by, but employees, projects and clients fall through the gaps."
Kevin Oakes - **'Culture Renovation'**

In this eBook I'll explore and demystify many of the concepts of culture, explaining what it is, why it is important, and how to drive and maintain it at your company.

About the author



Debra Corey is a highly experienced and **award-winning HR consultant**, three-time author, world-class speaker, and **was named one of the top 101 global employee engagement influencers**. She's had a varied and exciting career over the last 20+ years, working for many well known global companies where she's developed and delivered HR strategies in a rebellious way, pushing the boundaries and challenging the status quo to truly drive employee engagement.



What is culture?

Let's start by defining culture, so what exactly is it? When people ask me this question I'm embarrassed to say that I normally break into song, singing the chorus "this is how we do it" from a popular song because, well, culture is quite simply how companies "do it".

But like a song that has much more than a chorus, so does the definition of culture and the concept of how culture "does it", which is far reaching and far from simple.

And that's because culture is influenced by a combination of tangible factors such as **policies, practices, office design, and hierarchies**, as well as intangible factors such as **how you treat one another, how you socialize, how you work with your customers**, and even the branding you use to portray your company.

Some of these factors you can see (and not see) and others you can feel (and not feel). **It's this complex and subtle mix that creates and defines your own unique culture.**

Other ways to define company culture

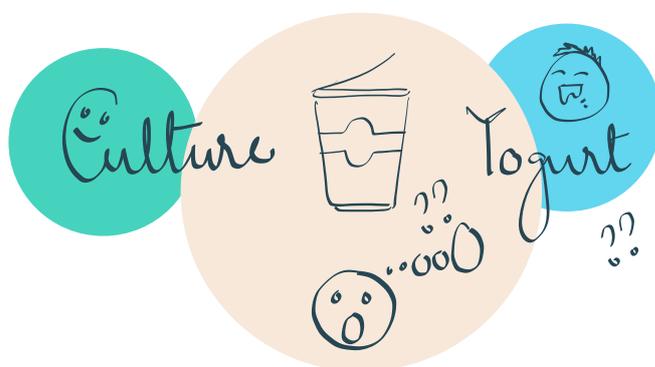
Since there's never one perfect way of defining a word, here are four other common ways of defining culture:

- The glue that holds a company and their people together.
- What people do when no one is looking.
- The heart and soul of a company.
- An invisible hand that guides and shapes an organization.

"We discovered that culture is almost like air – it's everywhere yet invisible. But when harnessed correctly, corporate culture can turn into a tailwind of progress instead of a headwind of obstruction,"
said **Columbia Business School Professor Shivaram Rajgopal**

Why is culture important?

Let's move to the next important question, which is why is culture important? The good news is that there are many positive and quantifiable ways to answer this question, which is exactly why so many companies have turned their attention and focus to it. In a moment I'll share these, but before I do, **let me answer this question by using the analogy of another kind of culture, one used for yogurt.**



Let me start by saying that I love yogurt, so much so that I bought a yogurt maker so that I could make it from scratch. But what I quickly discovered was that the trick to yogurt is the culture, sometimes called the yogurt starter. If you get it right, the yogurt is lovely, and if you get it wrong, it tastes so bad that it ends up in the trash!

And the reason this happens is that the starter begins the fermentation process, which produces changes in the composition, sensory properties, and even its shelf life. When I learned (and tasted) this, I immediately thought of **company culture**, for it causes so many similar impacts on our business and our people. **It starts and continually drives how the business works, acts and even how long the company will last.**

Moving from yogurt to data, here is some data I've pulled together to show the power of culture. I hope you find it helpful if and when you're asked to explain the impact culture can have on your people and your organization.

→ **Impacts** recruitment

Glassdoor found that 77% of adults would evaluate a company's culture before applying to an open position, with 56% ranking an organization's company culture as or more important than salary.

→ **Impacts** retention

Randstad found that 38% of employees want to leave their jobs due to a toxic work culture or one where they don't feel they fit in.

→ **Impacts** job satisfaction

Hack Future Lab found that employees at organizations leading with culture are three times more likely to be satisfied with the company, with no plans to leave.

→ **Impacts** business success

Deloitte found that 94% of executives and 88% of employees believe a distinct workplace culture is important to business success.

→ **Impacts** productivity

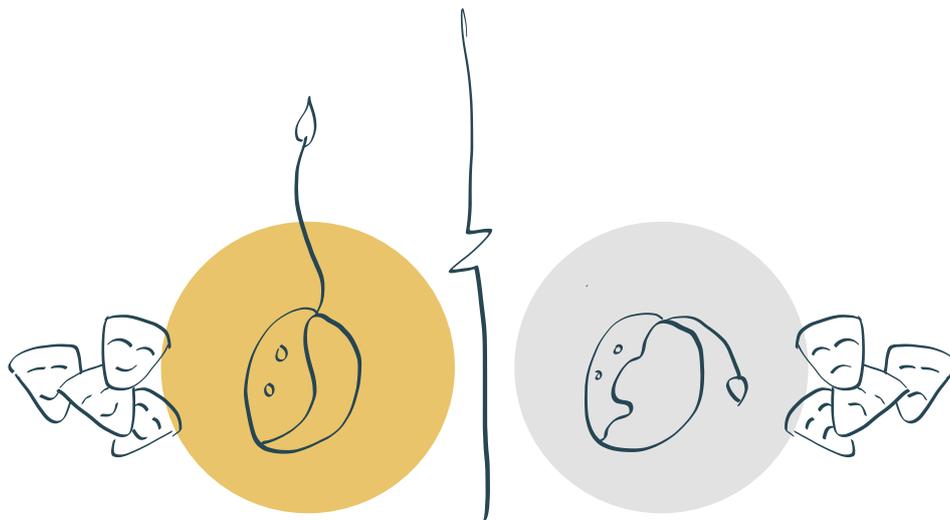
Grant Thornton found that executives who classify their culture as "extremely healthy" are 1.5 times more likely to report average revenue growth of more than 15%, and 2.5 times more likely to report significant stock price increases.

How to build your culture

Now that we've gotten the basic questions out of the way, let's now move onto how to make it happen, how to build (or re-build) your culture. In this section I'll use another analogy, this time of a garden, which I'll use to cover two key steps - **selecting your seeds** and **planting your seeds.**

→ Selecting the “seeds” of culture

Getting the “right” culture starts by having a solid foundation or building blocks, something that will encourage and **drive the “right” culture to grow and thrive** at your organization.



To explain this concept, let me compare it to a garden, which requires the “right” seeds to achieve your desired garden plan. Do this, and you have a beautiful garden that works well together. Don't do this, and even if you water your seeds over and over again, your garden will never meet your desired objectives.

The same is true with your company culture, for if you don't start by selecting the right “seeds” it will not grow, and your business will not achieve the positives derived from a strong and flourishing culture.

There are many ways to explain this concept of “seeds”, but as someone who likes to keep things simple, I define it as the following **three building blocks**:



You’ll notice that each of the three building blocks start with the word “shared”, and that is to make the point from the start that **culture is the shared responsibility of each and every person across your organization, that it is co-created and co-lived.**

1. Shared Purpose

It all starts with planting the seed of purpose, with a shared direction through your company’s mission and purpose. This lets your employees know exactly what you’re working towards, and where you want to go. Another way of putting it is that **it’s what gets your employees out of bed every day to go to work for.**

From a culture perspective, this sets the tone of your company’s culture, directing everything else towards it. Or, using the garden analogy, it’s the **sun in the sky that the plants rise up to reach.**

Gallup research shows that across all industries, 41% of employees strongly agree that they know what their company stands for and what makes it different from their competitors. This shows that more than half of employees feel disconnected from their company’s mission and purpose.

The research goes on to show that a 10% improvement in employees' connection with the mission and purpose of their organization would result in a 12.7% reduction in safety incidents, 8.1% decrease in turnover, and a 4.4% increase in profitability.



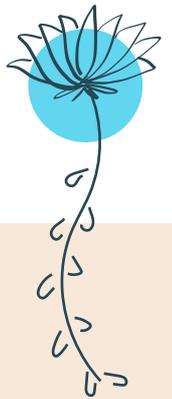
2. Shared Belief

The next building block comes from shared beliefs, which are derived from a set of company values and behaviors. As Ken Blanchard and Garry Ridge say in **'Helping People Win at Work'**, values "guide our behavior while we're scaling the mountain we set to climb." Or, using the gardening analogy, as we plant our seeds and watch our plants grow.

This guidance and this direction is crucial to your culture, as it helps define not only how you'll achieve your shared purpose, but how you'll do that in your own unique way, setting you apart from your competitors.

3. Shared Actions

And finally, a company's culture is determined, and the seeds are planted, by shared actions, which happens when your purpose and beliefs are turned from words into actions. In a nutshell, it's having formal and informal practices, ways of thinking and acting, or what I like to think of as "collisions", that align your words with your actions. I'll share examples of this in the next section, illustrating the importance and impact of these actions.

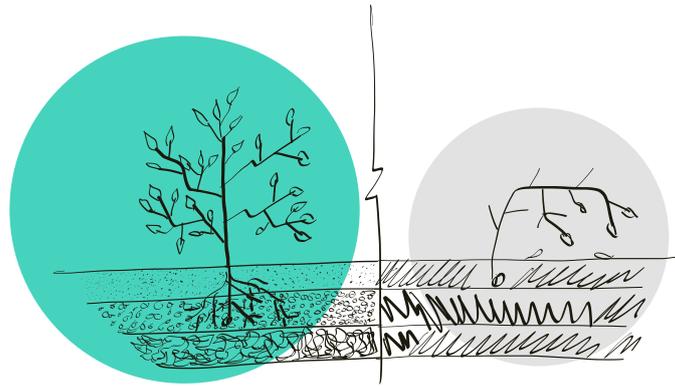


"Culture is like a party. When it works, everyone wants to show up. When it feels forced, everyone makes lame excuses to leave early. Like a party, culture should be thoughtfully designed, and yet no one should feel like they are forced to attend. It's important that everyone can co-create the party experience!"

Jenny Gottstein, Design Lead, Design For Play @ IDEO

→ Planting the “seeds” of culture

Once you select the right seeds for your garden, it's time to get down to work and plant and arrange them in your garden.



When it comes to culture, a similar process needs to take place, where you take your building blocks to the next step by “planting” them throughout your business in a variety of meaningful and effective ways. From each and every micro and macro thing that you do, these seeds of your culture need to be planted throughout your “garden”, your company, so that they can **grow and flourish**.

Gallup calls these the “drivers” of culture, explaining them as what “collectively shapes how employees conduct themselves, make decisions and accomplish their work”. They list these **five as the drivers of culture**: Leadership and Communication - Values and Rituals - Human Capital - Work Teams and Structures - Performance.



I use a slightly different list to Gallup, as mine are roughly based on The Engagement Bridge™ model shared in my book “Build it: The Rebel Playbook for Employee Engagement”. **Here are my nine that should be planted to drive your culture:**

1. Values



As mentioned earlier, your company’s shared beliefs, your values and behaviours, are the building blocks of your company culture. However, it’s what you do with these values and how they are acted out through your behaviors that drives your culture - how and where you plant and sprinkle them in your garden.

As I write about in my book “Bringing Your Values Out to Play”, you need to bring your values out “to play” over and over again, from how you make hiring and firing decisions to how you reward and recognize performance, and everything in between. By doing this it sets the tone for your company culture, planting your values seeds so that your employees live them without even thinking about it, when no one is looking.

A great example of this happening, of values and culture being acted out, was shared with me by Flipkart, an Indian e-commerce company. Their employees stepped into their values of “audacity” and “bias for action” when facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, taking the initiative to come up with inventions to maintain high standards of safety and hygiene at this critical point in time. One such invention was a foot-powered touchless hand sanitizing dispenser that was developed by employees at one of its fulfilment centers, and was then replicated at its fulfilment centers across the country.

“The most important thing to understand about transforming a culture is that it isn’t a matter of simply professing a set of values and operating principles. It’s a matter of identifying the behaviors that you would like to see become consistent practices and then instilling the discipline of actually doing them.”

Patty McCord, ‘Powerful’

2. Rituals



Rituals are another important, but often overlooked tool and driver of culture, and for this reason they should be carefully designed and nurtured to align with the culture that you are trying to create and maintain. Too often we spend our time on the insignificant parts of rituals, or as Brené Brown explained in one of her podcasts, focus on the flowers at your wedding and not what really matters. **As you plan and develop your rituals, be driven and directed by your culture, having them dictate how it will look and feel.**

To illustrate this, just think back to the last company party or meeting you attended, and ask yourself - what did it say to you about your company culture? When I think of this, I'm reminded of an annual recognition party that Virgin Group held and told me about when I interviewed them for one of my books. The theme of the party was "Willy Wonka meets Alice in Wonderland" and they brought it to life by serving cocktails in teacups, having a golden gate and having no other than Sir Richard Branson greeting attendees dressed as Willy Wonka. Now what does that say about their culture . . . heaps!!

3. Communication



How you communicate to your workforce can be another key driver of culture, for although we often say that "actions speak louder than words", words still have a voice and have an impact. This translates into factors such as how transparent you are when you communicate, how often you communicate, and even if and how you ask for feedback when you communicate. Together, these say a lot about your culture, and for this reason need to be considered as you communicate with your workforce over and over again.

To illustrate this, just look at social media company Buffer who have a culture (and a company value) based around transparency, translating it in many ways through their approach to communication. An example is their transparent approach to the communication of salaries, with all of their salary formulas and actual salaries being shared with not only their workforce, but to the world on their website. As CEO Joel Gascoigne says, being transparent about pay "gives employees one less thing to worry or gossip about and introduces a level of fairness".

Another example is The Granite Group’s approach to communication throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As they shared with me for my book, their CEO Bill Condron sent out daily communications to provide updates, sharing both good news and bad, as well as committing to answering employee questions within 15 minutes. As Chief People Officer Tracie Sponenberg said “We took a thoughtful approach to communications from the beginning, we met people where they were at, trying to approach everything with empathy, listening to their individual needs.” This, and the previous example, clearly reflect their own unique cultures, and communicate it to their workforces through what and how they shared their messages.

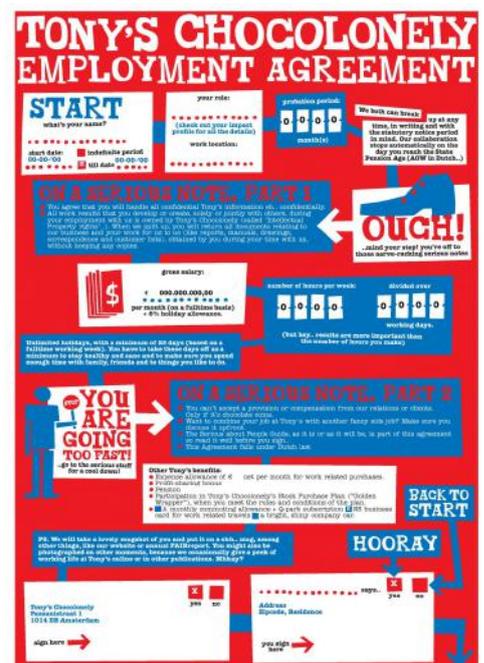
Through Empuls, employees get to connect,voice out, unleash their creativity and flaunt their best! Instant reactions,likes and comments is an add on to keep them engaged and excited throughout!!



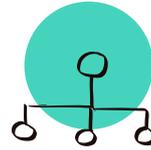
4. Management practices

The next driver is what I call management practices, which **Gallup** calls “**human capital**”. These are all of the policies and practices you put in place throughout the entire employee experience that again set the tone for your culture. From offer letters, to employee handbooks to sick policies, they all reinforce (or get in the way of) your company culture. And, sounding like a broken record, for this reason you need to build your culture into them, aligning them to **reinforce your culture and not act as a wedge or hurdle to your culture.**

An example of a company who has built their culture into their management practices is **Tony’s Chocolonely, a Dutch chocolate manufacturer.** They decided to revamp their offer letter to reflect their culture and values, and the result is this one page template that certainly aligns with their culture and values such as “makes you smile”, with them jumping off of the page in respect to the colors, the design, and the words they use.



5. Job and structure design



How jobs and organizational structures are designed are often not considered a driver of company culture, however they are at the heart of culture. Why? They send a strong and ongoing message to your workforce as to how much you trust (or mistrust) them, how much autonomy and responsibility you're willing to give to them, and other key elements of your culture. It's important to understand the impact of your designs, and if you feel there is a disconnect with your desired culture, then take a step back and boldly change them.

An example is how Drift, a U.S. software company, moved from traditional job and team designs to ones better aligned with their mission and their culture. They did this in two ways - first, they reduced the size of their teams to three members to function better as a team, and second, they increased the amount of ownership, freedom and autonomy by letting teams decide what they were working on, when they were working on it, etc. As CEO David Cancel said "It allowed the people closest to the problem to come up with the solutions and test those solutions with the actual customer."

6. Reward & Recognition



The next driver is reward and recognition, which is a powerful influencer of culture since what gets rewarded (or punished) is what gets repeatedly done. Think of it like flowers that lean towards the sun for light, so too will your employees lean into what is rewarded and recognized to reap the benefits of the "sun". From how goals are set, to how performance is measured, to how you reward and recognize, they all send a strong signal and message to your workforce as to what you consider important and worthy of their time, and what matters the most as a part of your culture.

An example that springs to mind is from when I was asked to review an existing incentive program for my company's delivery drivers. The program was based around delivering our goods to our customers as quickly as possible, and for this reason 100% of the incentive was based around speed. What I quickly learned was that this was not only creating the wrong behaviors, putting our drivers at risk, but was also against our culture of respect and support of our workforce. As I quickly changed it, weaving our culture into the design and the behaviors.

7. Workspace



Workspace, both physical and virtual, are also enablers and destroyers of culture. From how offices are arranged and decorated, to where and when we allow work to get done, it's important to think about both the overt and hidden messages they send, and consciously do something to create alignment with your culture.

I saw this alignment as I travelled the world interviewing companies for my various books, visiting their offices and seeing how their culture was translated into their physical workspace. One example is Social Chain, a social media marketing company, who's office in Manchester I visited a few years ago. When you enter the office the energy is contagious, buzzing from wall to wall. Whether it's the full size slide, the train carriage informal meeting pods, the jungle rooms to create zen space, or the magical bridge complete with a pond, their culture is intentional and is seen and felt everywhere.

8. Informal “collisions”



Next are what I call informal “collisions”, which are those things that are below the surface, happening informally in an organic way as a result of the other drivers. An example is how your company deals with problems, mistakes or challenges. Do you pull together and support one another or do you point fingers, do you sort it out at the leadership level or bring in a group of people from across the organization?

It's important to recognize and deal with these informal collisions to ensure they are bringing your culture to life in the manner you intend it to. And if it doesn't, as I've said over and over again, review and reset how you want these collisions to happen going forward.

9. Leadership



The final driver in my list is leadership, which I've intentionally left for last since it can make or break every good piece of work you do when it comes to the other drivers. And that's because if your leaders don't display and role model your culture it will never stick in your organization. As said in Gallup's paper on culture "Actions always speak louder than words, and the most influential messages are conveyed by leaders' actions."

Bottom line, you need your leaders to be the architects of your company's culture, building it piece by piece with every word and action that they take. They need to understand their role and their impact, have the courage and commitment to follow it through, and make the choices that are in line with the culture you want and need.



Maintaining your cultural “garden”



Once you plant your garden, as I'm sure you know, your work is not done - you need to water it, feed it, and do overall maintenance to it.

The same is true with your culture, which like a garden is a living thing, and thus should not be left to stagnate. **Remember that your culture needs to endure to support your business, and so it needs a proper and ongoing maintenance plan.**

“Culture is not an add-on feature, nor a switch you can turn on or off with happy hours and perks. It’s a practice that has to be exercised every day in every corner of the company’s operations.” **Jenny Gottstein, Design Lead, Design For Play @ IDEO**

Besides constantly tending the nine culture drivers included in the previous section, there are other important things that must be done to maintain your culture to ensure it grows and flourishes. **Here are four tips to help you with this:**

1. Have a person(s) focus on it

Having a focus on culture is absolutely critical to its success, and for this reason it's important to have a person or persons in your company focus their time and attention on it.

Whether its a Head of Culture or a Culture Professional, by having someone focus and concentrate on linking culture to every HR and business process, they will ensure that strategies and initiatives align and drive your desired culture.

2. Create culture champions

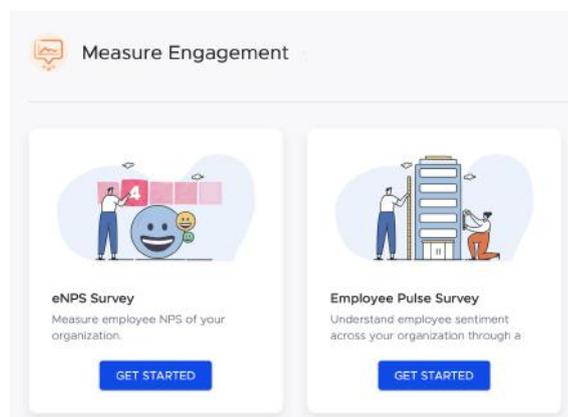
But as we know, one person or one team cannot drive a cause, which in this case is your company culture. **You need supporters, ralliers, or when it comes to culture, what we call culture champions or ambassadors.**

These are a group of employees that you enlist to drive your culture at the ground level, influencing their peers and being at the forefront of how the culture emerges and lives across your organization. They can and should come from across all levels and functions of your company, representing a diverse group of “influencers, energizers and blockers” as Kevin Oakes describes them in his book. And they can and should be trained and used in a variety of ways, giving them the tools and support required to truly champion and drive your culture over and over again.

3. Keep reviewing and assessing your culture

Next, if you want a healthy garden, you’re advised to test the soil to make sure it is the right texture and has the right nutrients for your plants to grow and be healthy. The same is absolutely true with your culture, which needs to **continually be reviewed and assessed to get a true picture of how effective (or ineffective) it is.**

One way to do this is by **conducting employee engagement and pulse surveys through products like Xoxoday’s Empuls solution**, that provides continuous employee feedback to help you **measure, analyze and improve** the various factors that affect your engagement, productivity, and turnover. Other ways are to conduct informal focus groups, or to review external reviews such as those posted on Glassdoor. By measuring and tracking the health of your culture in these ways you are better able to have important insights to help you understand your strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, and then do something about them.

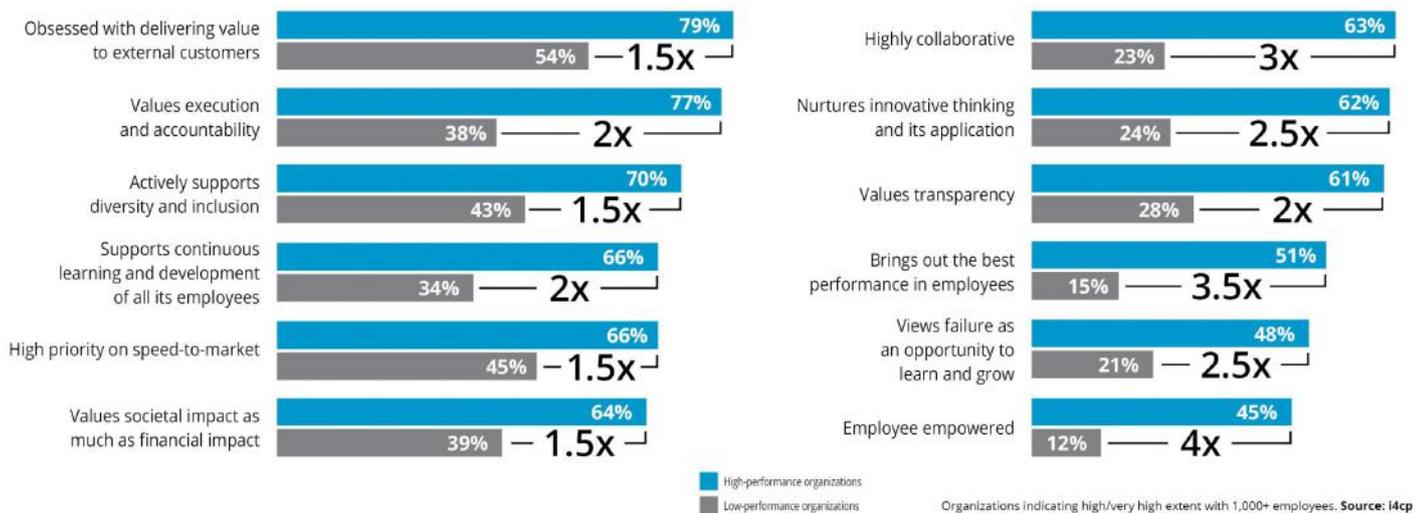


Xoxoday Empuls

One method for assessing the health of your culture is the **“Healthy Culture Index”** that combines elements that research firm i4cp have determined to be the foundation of a healthy organizational culture.

The graph below lists these elements, comparing how well high performing and low performing companies score for each. As you’ll see, the differentials range from 1.5 to 4 times higher for high performing companies, showing the impact and correlation it can have to company performance.

Traits of a Healthy Culture



4. Evolve your culture

And finally, keep in mind that a garden is never static, changing as the seasons and years pass by. And the same is true with culture, as it needs to change as your business, your workforce and the world around you changes. Successful companies understand this, and continually evolve their culture in response and to support this change.

“Our ability to change our culture is the leading indicator of our future success,” Microsoft
CEO Satya Nadella.

“We keep improving our culture as we grow. We try to get better at seeking excellence”
Netflix Culture deck.

Never has this concept of change been more apparent than during the COVID-19 pandemic, when company cultures have been tried and tested, reacting by changing in both subtle and tangible ways. Is this bad, absolutely not, as long as the changes relate back to your purpose and your beliefs, acting them out in different and more relevant ways, staying true to who you are and who you want to be.

“With continuous disruption as the new normal for business, companies must constantly develop their strategies, business models and market position. Significant change to any of these will require a corresponding evolution in corporate culture”

Kevin Martin, chief research officer at the US-based Institute for Corporate Productivity.

Creating a culture of excellence at KPIT

KPIT, a global software solutions company with a vision of “reimagining mobility with you for the creation of a cleaner, smarter and safer world” wanted to create and nurture a culture of excellence. A culture where all 6,000 of their employees, or what they call “Automobelievers”, would individually and collectively take responsibility for everyday thinking and actions through newly created seven behaviors.

These behaviors have been launched through a series of digital modules to bring them to life and to weave them into the culture at KPIT. According to Rajesh Kuman Singh, Global Head of HR, “We are on a cultural journey, and despite challenges of Covid, we are on the right track and have made much progress, but there is still work to be done.”

Some of the things they’ve done on their journey are as follows:

-  **Launch** - the behaviours were launched to a focus group, and were done through a two-day workshop to ensure employees were clear on what the behaviors were for each role and what they meant to them individually. They later shared digital modules where senior leaders shared their personal experiences and stories.
-  **Leadership** - they started their journey at the top, getting the commitment from their leadership team to ensure they role model and demonstrate them to others. One way they’ve done this is through 360 degree feedback, with each leader having this done against the behaviors, having a development plan focusing on at least one behavior to improve.
-  **Recognition** a recognition program using Xoxoday’s Empuls platform has been put in place to recognize and celebrate employees who live the behaviors. This, along with weaving them into their performance management system, will ensure that employees are encouraged and rewarded for doing their part to build a culture of excellence through their behaviors.

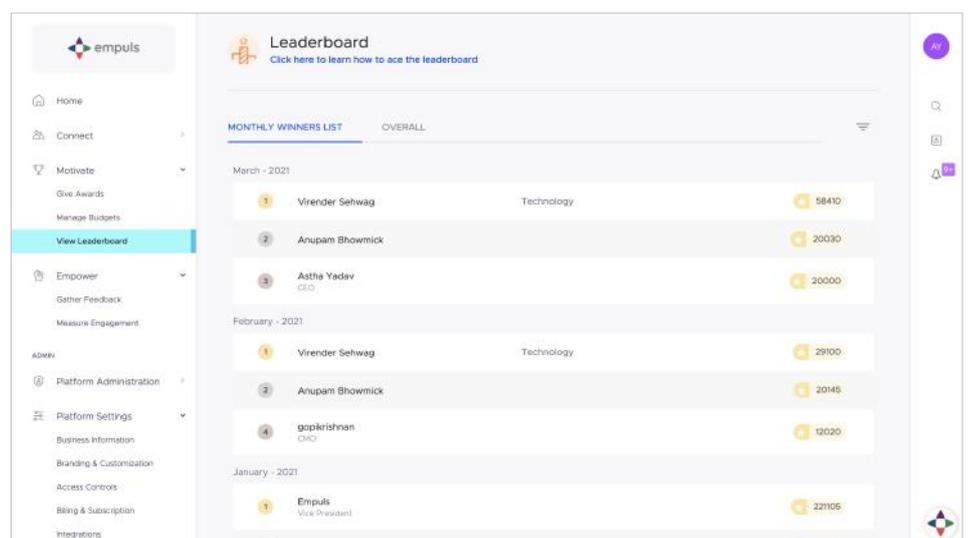


Maintaining culture during the pandemic at Royal Cyber

A big part of Royal Cyber’s culture is their exciting work environment and the many fun things they do together - from Friday lunches, to gaming activities, to events and parties. But with the pandemic, they were forced to find alternative ways to maintain and keep their culture alive, and so from the start they put a real focus (and a lot of creativity) into virtual social activities to bring their people and culture together. From lunch and learn sessions, to competitions and games, to children’s storytelling sessions, to exercise classes, to magic shows, they’ve shown their employees over and over again that they’re committed to their culture and to them.

Another key driver of their culture is their approach to recognition, having a variety of programs that align with their values as well as to celebrate key milestones.

Using the **Xoxoday platform**, employees live their value of “helpfulness” by helping one another through recognition. From eCards to points-based recognition, it’s helped create and maintain their culture and their commitment to supporting one another in fun and meaningful ways. And speaking of fun, winners of virtual games and competitions are given points to spend through the recognition platform, bringing these two elements of their culture together through the one platform.



Xoxoday Platform, Empuls

Cheers to a happy & engaged team!



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