

How Do You Build a Great Culture?

David Harding, President/CEO, HardingPoorman Group

It wasn't long ago that most leaders expected to run a company "with an iron fist." This sets up the workplace as an "oppressor versus victim" scenario.

Is it possible to lead your team into work that is intrinsically enjoyable? If you've hired the right people for the right jobs, surrounding them with other right folks in jobs they are ideally suited to do—without fear, intimidation, and open communication—your workplace can and will be happy.

Oh—and you might be more profitable, too.

Human Resources As an Asset

Do you have someone leading "inside talent development" within your company? If not, you should, and for several important reasons.

Companies that build a reputation for aggressively developing their talent keep more motivated, effective individuals from leaving to look outside the company for their next promotion. That keeps your organization moving forward, helps prevent employee stagnation, and saves money.

Someone needs to spend at least one day per week thinking about, tracking, scheduling, sourcing, and driving talent development within your firm.

The single most important thing you can do when hiring a new employee is to take your time. Finding qualified people who are a near "perfect 10" match for your company does indeed take time. Anything less than a "10" will drag down your business. And yet, more often than not, when a position becomes open, managers very often hire quickly. Why is that?

Some managers really dread the interviewing process. It is expensive, a hassle, an add-on to a busy day, and it is tempting to move someone into place quickly to get the job done. No matter what the excuse, nothing is more important than hiring the right people (no matter how long it takes).

It's also expensive. Estimates range from 1.5 times to 3 times the salary for the full hiring costs (including things like benefits, taxes,

equipment, training, office space, etc.). To put that in perspective, the cost range for a \$50,000 per year per employee might be \$62,500 to \$70,000. Even more expensive is hiring the wrong person. That can cost your company dearly, too. The position becomes open, you place ads, search, hire, train, they start the new position, and you realize they aren't a fit. That can easily waste a year—not to mention the \$70,000 figure—twice. Yet it happens all the time.

So take your time hiring. And do it right. When you hire the right people you have so much more time to work *on* the business instead of *in* the business.

Dumbing Down an Organization

Why are so many managers afraid to hire people who are smarter than they are? I suppose it's human nature to be afraid of the comparison and fearful of being seen as less astute, less creative, less experienced, less . . . managerial.

In reality, shouldn't your job be to hire people smarter than you are? Isn't it easier to manage people who don't need a lot of managing?

Think of it this way. If the owner of the company hires managers less smart than he or she is, and each of those managers does the same, pretty soon you have a pretty "dumb" company. I call it "dumbing down" the organization.

The more evolved idea is to hire the smartest people you can find. In fact, build your dream team—the folks who have the strengths you may lack—and have each manager do the same down the line. So if you or anyone in management gets hit by that metaphorical bus we keep hearing about, the organization will be just fine.

Are You Autocratic?

Does your organization have a culture of "defer-up" when decisions are to be made? If you are making way too many decisions in your organization—even having the last word on smaller decisions that mid-level and employees themselves could be making—something's wrong with the culture in your workplace.

A “defer-up” culture absolves people of making decisions—and keeps them from getting results.

Some people have observed that the prevalence of email in the workplace encourages many to “kick the decision upstairs” through the email chain of command instead of problem solving and making a decision at the level of the issue. The people who will be dealing with the issue should absolutely have the most say in solving the matter.

Leaders often say they want employees to make decisions and focus on execution, but their behavior speaks otherwise.

Is Your Team Really a Family?

It wasn't so long ago the companies we worked for were thought of as extended family and were treated as such. Changing corporate culture aside, it is worth mentioning that most of us spend at least 41% of our lifetime in the workplace—often more than we spend with our families.

Complex emotional relationships occur while working so closely over so many hours. The bonding provides a sense of belonging and some security. Usually, this is good. It can help inspire some and motivate others to succeed and go the distance for the company.

So are we family at work? Well, yes and no. Leaders treat their employees respectfully, considerately, and have the employees' “collective back.” They check in, listen, challenge, mediate, set a moral tone, and rally the troops as necessary. Most important, they set standards, goals, and lead by example. And they make a habit of thanking dedicated employees for their time.

Employees spend an incredible amount of time and emotion working to gain your approval. Whether they were deprived of it by their parents or need approval to bolster their adult confidence, it's a powerful force in the workplace. As a leader you should tap into this.

Recognize the importance your approval plays with your team. Whether it's a few lines of praise in an email, recognition for a job well done in a meeting, or personal thanks for extra time on a project, it doesn't have to be big. In fact, the simpler and more low key, the better.

Bureaucracy

I beg to differ with the phrase, “Two heads are better than one.” Not true. We need fewer layers of management, not more.

When you have bosses over bosses, it's simply a waste of time, not to mention titles. Have one person managing one department. That person is ultimately accountable for that department. End of story.

Assistant managers, executive vice presidents, associate divisional representatives, blah, blah, blah, blah . . . Get rid of these meaningless titles and circuitous chains of command! Just think—if every hire in your organization is *great*, why do you need managers of managers? That's right, you don't.

Is your company bureaucratic? If your organization has grown quickly, recently merged with another organization, or has been around longer than ten years, chances are good it is.

If your company is run as a bureaucracy, I can guarantee you that the layers of leadership and sign-offs make any kind of change more difficult and frustrating than it has to be. “Evolve or die” is the mantra of today's most successful companies.

When there is an issue that needs to be addressed, don't make a new policy or a new rule. Find ways to evolve to take on the issue at hand. Be inclusive, not autocratic. Ask for input at all levels.

Break through bureaucracy. It stifles new ideas and can strangle growth. Instead, lead with change in mind.

David Harding will be speaking on “Sustaining an Empowering Culture in the Face of Personnel Changes and Acquisitions” at the Continuous Improvement Conference, April 7–10, in Indianapolis, Indiana. To register visit www.printing.org/ciconference.

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