Best Friends

Training Playbook:
Culture Initiatives

Introduction

In this playbook, we cover what culture is, why you should care deeply about it, and how to implement a culture initiative that can maximize your employees' contributions while making each one feel exactly what they are: a unique and valued part of the team.

Company culture is one of those topics that can seem elusive and hard to measure. Many associate culture with break rooms filled with video games and beanbag chairs or complimentary cafeterias and coffee bars. While all of that may sound awesome, it's not what culture is about. Culture is how we talk to and treat one another, it's how we plan and make decisions, it's how we do what we do.

Every organization has an existing culture — most likely, multiple cultures. In the absence of an intentional culture strategy (sometimes called employee engagement), organizations leave their culture, and therefore the performance and longevity of their company, to happenstance.

Program Overview

Research shows that companies that prioritize having a positive culture as a central business strategy can experience improved teamwork, elevated productivity and efficiencies, raises in morale and heightened job satisfaction, just to name a few of the top-level benefits. New research is showing us that job candidates value a strong, thriving culture over a higher salary.

A thriving culture also has cost benefits related to turnover. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Center for American Progress, the costs to replace an employee can range from 16% (entry-level position) to 213% (senior-level position) of that person's salary. With substantial organizational budgets going toward compensation costs, it all adds up. That's why culture is at the center of the bottom line.

Initiative Composition

Culture starts at the top: A fundamental starting point with culture is top-level accountability. An organization's existing culture is a manifestation of how the leadership body thinks, acts and sets priorities. Leaders cannot only point to a list of company values on a website. They need to live those values intentionally and transparently in order to give their organization's culture initiative the credibility it needs for employees to buy in and actively exercise self-accountability.

Organizational values: Engage staff from all levels of the organization and stakeholders (volunteers, donors, rescue groups, the public, etc.) for their feedback on existing values or for their ideas on new values that fully characterize how you want the

organization to behave. Spend time having a conversation and really asking each other these questions: What does a thriving workforce look like? What values are most critical in accomplishing our mission? How do those values show up in action on a day-to-day level? What behaviors are leading us to the results we want to change, and how do we achieve different behaviors for different results? Leadership should then take that feedback and solidify the values that promote and align with the vision and mission of the organization.

People analytics: When there's clarity on who you want to be as an organization, it's important to use data to inform your strategy. We use data to make smarter, more strategic and targeted decisions in our shelter operations, and we can use that same philosophy to drive our culture initiatives. (For more about people analytics, watch this short video and check out these case studies.) Employee surveys and HR data can be used to pinpoint areas for improvement and highlight areas that are thriving. That data is even more powerful when combined with lifesaving and financial data. People analytics, like shelter data, doesn't tell the whole story and should be thought of as a compass and a starting point to show you where to begin assessing the dynamics at play that you want to solve for or duplicate.

Define your baseline and set goals: Once you have your baseline employee engagement data, set some goals for where you want to be in a specific period of time (e.g., six months, a year). Monitor and report out those goals with the same level of importance and emphasis with which you track lifesaving goals, fundraising goals, your budget and other metrics that your organization prioritizes. This ensures that your culture initiative isn't simply a project with start and end dates, but rather an ongoing philosophy or approach that engages the people who activate and accomplish your mission daily.

Influence of culture on staffing: Culture work is people work and it should directly inform how you bring new staff on board, who you bring into your organization, how you set them up for success, how you consider people for advancement, and when it may be time to move someone along.

Recruitment: When recruiting new staff, focus on attitude over aptitude — or, at a minimum, make sure they are weighted evenly. Pivot away from hiring predominantly for skills and focus on hiring people who embody the values that your organization has prioritized. Start by evaluating your entire recruitment strategy, from the questions you ask applicants to the platforms and processes you use to filter candidates. Consider incorporating tools like emotional intelligence assessments to help you determine if someone is a good cultural fit. (Many such tools are available, such as this quick and free option from MindTools.) Make the interview process comfortable and really try to glean who the person is rather than what they know and where they've worked.

Onboarding: Recognize that the current "sink or swim" onboarding approach is not working for us in animal welfare. Studies have shown that the experiences of

employees during their first 30, 60 and 90 days greatly inform an employee's life cycle with the organization and their overall engagement with and attitude toward the organization. Think of onboarding itself as a retention mechanism and strategy. Map out what new employees need to know about the organization, other departments they will interface with the most and their daily work. This integration should go beyond the first 90 days, as you want to avoid overwhelming new staff with too much information. Develop your onboarding as an interactive and engaging process, rather than a checklist. Consider pairing each new employee with a mentor who will help the new staff person navigate your organization.

Professional advancement: Promote employees who are champions of your culture and values, and who demonstrate those values in their everyday interactions. Pivot away from equating "high performer" with someone who simply gets results (regardless of how they get them). You want to integrate your culture and values — the "how" — into your definition of high performance. Recognize, advance and promote staff based on this fuller definition. The makeup of your leadership and management team is essential to creating an environment for a thriving culture, so promote wisely.

Exiting: You'll want to exit staff who are not a cultural fit. Before you go down this path, however, it is critical to work with your HR department on developing what this looks like. You want to ensure that you are being fair and reasonable and making efforts to bring the employees in question along before determining that they are not a cultural fit. With that said, staff who are not a cultural fit (i.e., those who are unable or unwilling to make the needed changes) should be exited in accordance with federal, state and organizational policies — and according to your values.

Training for staff: It's important to set people up for success, so you'll want to develop interactive trainings that give your team the skills, language, experiences and knowledge to act in accordance with your culture. Some of this training should happen during the onboarding process, but reinforcement and trainings should be ongoing.

In conclusion, love your culture like you do the animals and it will love you back. How we work to achieve lifesaving success can give us the energy, positive interactions and good feelings that we need to be our best for each other and for the animals.

Resources

Here are some resources that give more insights on how to approach your culture initiative:

- Why Company Culture Matters
- Gallup (industry leader on culture work)
- Sample workplace culture agreement

Brené Brown has many different resources for leaders to use with their teams:

- [Dare to Lead website](#) (for "developing brave leaders and courageous cultures")
- [Daring Leadership Assessment](#)
- [Operationalizing Your Organization's Values](#)
- [Free Brené Brown workbook, art pics and glossary](#)

Some additional resources:

- [Simon Sinek interview on impact theory](#)
- Awesome article about [understanding your own personal values](#)
- [The Four Tendencies:](#) great book and quiz for leaders and their team members to take to better understand expectations

Great articles about leaders using coaching skills:

- [Harvard Business Review: "The Leader as Coach"](#)
- [ICF: "Anyone Can Lead"](#)

Webinars:

- [Transforming Your Culture with Conversations](#)
- [Harvard Business Review](#) (enter "culture" into the search field to find the latest articles and webinars)

Great resources for engagement:

- [Seventh Level Engagement Framework](#)
- [Seven-Minute Seventh Level Checklist (for ensuring high engagement with a particular audience)](#)