

'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'

 By [Jane Stevenson](#)

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Companies spend an incredible amount of time creating a strategy for their business and I think we can safely assume that most have done the "tick box" exercise of having a document entitled "strategy" that is laden with papers that speak about objectives, research, goals, and direction. Sadly, few of these documents speak about the actions and ownership required to achieve this strategy and therefore few companies are able to celebrate its successful implementation.

I believe it's largely to do with two aspects - the lack of clarity of "how" and the lack of articulation as to "why". If your staff cannot see the bigger picture or vision for your business - they certainly will not get excited about your goals.

There is a competitive advantage out there, arguably more powerful than any other is. Is it superior strategy? Faster innovation? Smarter employees? No, *The New York Times* best-selling author, Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Advantage*, argues that the seminal difference between successful companies and mediocre ones has little to do with what they know and how smart they are, and more to do with how healthy they are.

An organisation is healthy when it is whole, consistent, and complete. When its management, operations and culture are unified. Healthy organisations outperform their counterparts, are free of politics and confusion, and provide an environment where star performers never want to leave.

The type of company where they train staff well enough so they can leave but they treat them well enough so that they never want to.

Culture is one of those things that companies see as "soft" and an issue for HR to resolve. However, culture is defined and led from the top - whether conscious or not - it is happening in your organisation based on how you as a leader are behaving, today.

Culture comes alive when you live your values. Sure, you can put a nice placard on the wall that outlines your values - but honestly, that means nothing if it's not intrinsically engrained in the day-to-day behaviours in your business.

Leadership

It starts with defining who you are and who you want to be as a company. What do you want to be known for - beyond product, service, etc? It is the set of behaviours that guide your daily decisions in the business, ensuring you are consistent and authentic. These need to be clarified and articulated to every single individual in the organisation.

If your leadership is united and aligned, you may find this happens naturally. More often than not, it requires dedicated time and discussion to filter the needs of individual personalities for the greater good of the company.

Hiring is key

Develop a process that ensures you hire new employees based not only on ability, but also on culture. If the individual personality conflicts with the organisational culture / values, there will be trouble ahead. It brings to mind the old adage "hire for attitude, train the skill".

Culture and values need to be measured, so make sure you have included it in the performance appraisal - and in every discussion you have.

Start with you

Whatever position you have within an organisation, you have a role in creating and maintaining a culture. Look at what your actions and words leave behind, and the chain reaction amongst your team. Dr. Henry Cloud uses the analogy of a wake. Consider a boat sailing at sea - it leaves behind an even wake if all is well. In business, that wake is seen in two parts: results and relationships. If you focus too much on results, the "boat" will tip and relationship may suffer. If you focus purely on relationship, results may suffer. We need to give clarity and even focus to both.

Culture captains

It sounds simple, but you need someone who is directly responsible for culture. At Boomtown, we have "Culture Captains" and as one person cannot do it alone we rotate responsibility around the agency. Working in cross-functional teams, they create activities that focus on our culture and values and bringing them to life. This ensures that the responsibility belongs to everyone to push the team in the right direction using a variety of platforms to drive home the agency's mission, values, and overall strategy.

Over-communicate

Drive the message home at every opportunity you can. Most of us are so busy "doing" that we simply don't give time to thinking about the important, yet not urgent issues.

As your company grows, culture will help keep it on track, steer hiring decisions for the people who will maintain that success and safeguard your company from spiralling out of control, and into something you don't recognise - even if you no longer know everybody's name.

Richard Branson has this to say about culture at Virgin:

"I started Virgin with a philosophy that if staff are happy, customers will follow. It can't just be me that sets the culture when we recruit people. I have a really great set of CEOs across our businesses who live and breathe the Virgin brand and who are entrepreneurs themselves."

If building a great, solid, authentic culture is what makes a company successful, isn't it time to start investing wisely in this space?

ABOUT JANE STEVENSON

Named by CEO publication as SA's most influential government businesswoman in the SME sector in 2012, she's big on vision, strategy and effective communication. Start with a successful business strategy and executive coaching consultancy to leading national brands... add the experience of being a Board and EXCO member of the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber; and stir in some fearless Scottish roots and a dedication to building organisational vision. The result? A motivating, passionate team player.

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