

Cultural Commitment: Creating a Workplace Where People Feel Valued

By Morgan Hunter, Geneca Vice President of People

I have always rankled at the much over-used corporate phrase, "People are our greatest assets." I've heard the words pass the lips of senior executives in both large and small companies, across industries and geographic boundaries, yet time and again I witness that quiet sigh of contempt and disbelief from the listeners.

So, why do corporations say it and why does it evoke such a negative response? I believe the executives delivering those words really do believe them, and also think their companies are taking active steps to create a culture where employees feel they are valued. However, the employee's impression, more often than not, is that the company has fallen short.

There is gap that exists between saying the words and living them. You have to Walk-the-Walk, and that means your commitment to people and culture has to be baked into everything you do from on-boarding to strategic planning. The commitment to people and culture has to be your corporate "true north."

While there is no single defined path a company can follow that will magically result in a great culture where people feel valued, there are certainly best practices and traps to avoid. These include:

- 1. Consistency between mission/values and daily execution:** Quite simply -- if you say it, do it. If you say you have a culture where people feel valued, define what that means to your company in specifics, put people systems in place to insure it gets done, and measure your execution on a regular basis. In other words, have a culture strategy. Culture needs the same commitment as any other strategic objective to insure its success.
- 2. Contingency Planning:** It is critical that a culture strategy include contingency planning to allow for unexpected changes in the business. A culture strategy should tell you in advance what you are willing to sacrifice and what must be safeguarded. A cultural contingency plan can be built for things like, mergers and acquisition, tough economic times, and rapid growth periods. Share these culture contingency plans with your employees so when choices need to be made people aren't surprised. If you don't have cultural contingency plans avoid trying to convince your employees that it's, "business as usual" when a business-changing event happens. Acknowledge the change and its specific impact on culture and people. Have a plan to mitigate cultural risks and share it with your employees.
- 3. Transparency:** Communicate early and often. Share your plans and any changes in plans. Share good news and bad news. If there is a change, remember to tell employees "why" the change must be made. Don't underestimate the intelligence of your employees and their desire to understand and support the inter-workings of your business.
- 4. Everyone owns culture:** In every great company, there is a leader or a select few individuals that everyone agrees exemplifies their corporate values and culture. Cultural evangelists are a huge asset, but they cannot be alone in their mission. Everyone must own culture for a culture to be resilient and viable. Every employee should embody your corporate values and be passionate about maintaining the culture.
- 5. Hold management accountable:** Empower everyone to protect your corporate culture. Create an environment that is safe for employees to raise concerns, voice opinions and challenge threats to your strategy. Test management's ability to withstand challenges and put away the egos. Common vision means we all want the same thing: To maintain corporate culture and insure the ongoing success of the company. The best decisions are made through open dialogue and exploration of diverse ideas.
- 6. Set yourself up for success:** In every project, business commitment, or customer engagement, set yourself up for success. If you don't believe you can take on the work without compromising your corporate values and quality of outcome, then restructure the project, the approach, or turn down the business. Strive to make death marches a thing of the past. Nothing is more demoralizing then being set-up to lose.

7. **Be willing to make hard decisions:** You've found the perfect candidate from a skills and experience perspective. You've been looking to fill this position for months but the candidate is not a cultural fit. Do you hire them? Alternatively, the deal-of-a-lifetime has presented itself. You can take on the work but an aggressive "go-live" date means you will have to burn-out several key contributors and maybe even sacrifice some quality on delivery. Do you take on the business? Every time you make a decision that doesn't support your culture and values you widen the gap.
8. **Raise the bar:** Never settle for "Good-Enough." Whether it's your products, your people, solutions, service, or corporate strategy, set the expectation and demand excellence. Every individual in the company should be empowered to expose and eliminate mediocrity.
9. **Create awareness:** From the individual to the board of directors, being aware of how actions, interactions, and decisions impact people and culture is key to success. Make awareness habitual; remind yourself and your organization to ask repeatedly, "How does this impact our peers and employees, the quality of our products and services, or our reputation with our customers or market place? Do the decisions and actions we make support our corporate culture and values?"
10. **Don't panic:** There are many things that can force an individual or organization to panic: Changing economic times, a set-back on a project, a challenging customer, or the everyday demands of the business. It's in the midst of these pressures that people most often panic and revert to their old bad habits. Don't panic. Take a step back. Look at the problem in the context of your corporate culture and values and take action accordingly.

Valuing your corporate culture has to be systemic. It has to be a strategic objective and it has to be reinforced with people and systems that insure culture is preserved. Both the company and the people need to invest in and commit to maintaining the culture. Will you be challenged to break old habits? Sure. Will you have to be reminded from time to time where your cultural "true north" is? Absolutely, but building culture into the way you do business means you have checks and balances that allow people to correct course before it damages what you value most...your **People**.

About the Author

Morgan Hunter, Vice President of People at Geneca

The role of Vice President of People was created at Geneca to demonstrate its commitment to building a culture where talented people can flourish delivering world-class services to clients. In this role, Ms. Hunter directs and grows the practices that support every employee's opportunity for a challenging and fulfilling career, personal growth, and the support they need to be successful. Ms. Hunter also helps navigate the unique challenges facing high growth organizations like Geneca. To learn more about Geneca visit www.geneca.com or contact morgan.hunter@geneca.com.

About Geneca

Chicago-based custom software development firm, Geneca, helps its clients meet their business challenges by bringing predictability to the software development process. Getting PredictableSM, Geneca's pioneering approach to Requirements Definition and Management, has an outstanding success rate in helping its clients drive clear business alignment by identifying project objectives and success criteria. Learn more about Getting PredictableSM and Geneca's other software services at www.geneca.com.

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