



FORGET EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT

CULTURE

Denise Lee Yohn

Collaborative. Fun. Family-friendly.

Who wouldn't want to work for a company's whose culture is described by those words?

Well, actually, me.

Please don't misunderstand me. It's not that I wouldn't want to work in a collaborative, fun, and family-friendly culture—it's just that those values aren't important to me.

I do my best thinking when I work alone, so making me collaborate with others sometimes means I don't contribute as much value as if I were engaged in a culture that values individual contribution more.

And, fun? Well, remember the Seinfeld episode when Jerry dates Sandy, the “non-laughter?” That's me. I'm not a let's-joke-laugh-and-have-fun kind of person. I really enjoy my work and try not to take things too seriously, but working in a “fun” culture isn't a priority for me.

Plus, while all companies should support employees who are parents, I don't have children and my father and other relatives live far away, so being family-friendly wouldn't make an employer any more or less appealing to me.

I'd rather work for a company that nurtures a high-performance, intense, work-hard/play-hard culture. One that sets aggressive goals and then expects its people to figure out how to achieve them. But this isn't about me.



Here's the point: Different workplace cultures fit different people. Moreover, different cultures fit different organizations. There is no one single right culture.

Most of the existing rhetoric on culture says that managers must be warm and nurturing and they must treat their employees like family, being encouraging and inclusive. That's just wrong. You don't need to offer a supportive, benevolent culture to be a great manager, organization, or business. And anyone who insists that you must have a certain type of culture gravely misunderstands the role culture plays in an organization.

Culture is what enables your company to execute on its strategy and achieve its goals. It's part of what differentiates your organization. It helps you attract, develop, motivate, and retain the right employees.

Just as there isn't a single brand identity that fits all companies, no one type of culture is right for all organizations. And just as it would be ridiculous to try to imitate another company's brand, it doesn't make sense for you to try to copy another organization's culture.

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Your internal corporate culture should be as unique as your external brand identity. In fact, your culture and brand should be closely aligned and integrated. If your culture and brand are driven by the same purpose and values and if you inextricably link them into a single guiding force for your company, you fuel your growth and future-proof your business.

Brand-Culture Fusion

When you tightly weave your culture and brand together, you achieve what I call brand-culture fusion.

In nuclear physics, fusion is the reaction that happens when two atomic nuclei come together. Nuclear fusion releases large amounts of energy—it's what powers the sun. When fused, the two nuclei create something entirely new.

In the same way, you unleash great power when you fuse together your organization's two nuclei: your culture—the way the people in your organization behave and the attitudes and beliefs that inform them—and your brand or brand identity, how your organization is understood by customers and other stakeholders.

Brand-culture fusion is the link between culture and brand that great organizations develop and leverage to power their performance. Instead of treating brand and culture as separate entities and losing the full potential of each in the chasm that forms between them, savvy leaders know that there should be an interdependent and mutually-reinforcing relationship between what their organization does on the inside and how it is perceived and experienced on the outside.

So, deliberately cultivate your culture and build your brand from the same foundation: an overarching purpose and a single set of core values.

Your Overarching Purpose

If you're like most business leaders, you understand your organization should be purpose-driven—you must “start with why.” But most leaders take the wrong approach to identifying and articulating their company's purpose.

Some solely focus on the financial rewards of running a successful organization. They make creating shareholder value their top priority—whether explicitly through a market-friendly mission statement like, “To build shareholder value through industry-leading products and effective cost control,” or implicitly through their management of the organization through a shareholder filter, regardless of what the official statement says.

Others adopt a purpose statement that prioritizes their employees, saying something like “We exist to provide a safe, positive working environment so that all employees can grow and succeed.”

And still others adopt a purpose or essence for their brand that describes what they want it to be known for by customers but doesn't relate to the aspirations they have for their organization.

None of these approaches provides the motivating, clarifying, and unifying foundation that your organization needs. Setting financial targets is important, but those measures alone won't inspire your people. On the flip side, providing for and developing employees is a noble pursuit, but your purpose should speak to the value you and your employees create in the world. By having a brand purpose that is irrelevant or tangential to the way you run your company, you fail to establish a connection between employees and customers and confuse both groups.

Your purpose should seamlessly integrate and tightly align all your priorities into a single overarching purpose. Engage and unify all your stakeholders—external and internal—behind

a single cause. Adopt and articulate a purpose that explains the mark you want to make in the world—a higher purpose that transcends yet connects market, employee, and customer needs. Here are some overarching purpose statements that effectively describe the impact the organization makes on people inside and outside the company, and ultimately, the world:

- **Nike:** To bring innovation and inspiration to every athlete (if you have a body, you are an athlete).
- **Zappos:** To deliver happiness to the world.
- **Sony:** To create technologies that inspire people to dream and find joy.

An overarching purpose is important for all types of organization. You don't have to be a large corporation or operate in emotionally resonant sectors to have a compelling purpose. In fact, the less your company or product naturally lends itself to inspiration and imagination, the more important it is for you to elevate its influence through your purpose.

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Consider examples from companies whose products or services may seem more mundane:

- **Squarespace**, a software-as-a-service based content management system: Giving voice to ideas.
- **Xradia**, provider of microscopy products for life sciences and materials research: To advance innovation, science, and industry by providing unique insight through superior X-ray imaging solutions.
- **Hagerty**, an automotive insurance company: To protect the physical connections to the best moments in your life.

These purpose statements are bold yet definitive. They aim to inspire and guide everyone the business impacts.

Identify and articulate your purpose with this same intent. With an overarching purpose, you provide a North Star for your organization and a foundation for a culture that is aligned and integrated with your brand identity.

Single Set of Core Values

An overarching purpose unites brand and culture with an expression of the ultimate why of your company; a single set of core values does the same by conveying the how.

Core values—the essential and enduring principles and priorities that prescribe the desired mindset and behavior of everyone who works at your company—provide the “operating

instructions” for your organization. That means they need to be prescriptive and actionable. They have little value as words on your website or on posters in hallways.

Your core values should also be unique to your organization. There are no right values that every company should adopt.

Category values articulate the principles that everyone in your category must adopt if they want to be viable competitors. Core values must embody what makes your company uniquely “you”—what makes you stand out from all the others in your category.

The importance of unique core values confounds many leaders because they only consider the role of values in the internal modus operandi of their organization. They prioritize values such as respect and teamwork because that’s how they want employees to behave. But those principles actually only function as a low-level baseline that all organizations should operate by and they don’t provide any connection to the external identity of the organization.

Or some leaders state values like integrity and responsibility because they think that’s what their shareholders want to hear. But the “audience” for your core values is your employees—the people who must live them out every day. And core values aren’t a shield to hide behind when your actions are questioned.

The real power of core values is unleashed when they inspire and inform specific attitudes and behaviors so your employees produce customer experiences that define and differentiate your brand. If you want to offer a unique customer experience—one that people remember, are willing to pay more for, and go out of their way to experience—then you must embrace unique core values.

In fact, your values should correlate with the customer experience you want to deliver. Consider working backwards from your customer experience: start with the defining attributes that make your customer experience unique and valuable and the interactions that you want to excel at, then determine the mindset and actions needed among employees to deliver on them, and then identify the core values that will lead to those attitudes and behaviors.

Using distinctive words or manner to articulate and describe your core values makes them even more unique. For example, instead of stating a generic commitment to customers such as “customer-focused,” Google’s values proclaim “focus on the user and all else will follow.” In place of “have fun,” its values statement declares “you can be serious without a suit.” And to promote excellence in performance, the company declares, “Great just isn’t good enough.”

These differences are more than semantics. By reflecting the spirit and personality of the company, they prescribe the unique way the core values are intended to be lived out.

The way your core values are lived out is probably the single greatest influence on your culture and your organization’s ability to achieve brand-culture fusion.

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The Power of Fusion

Brand-culture fusion propels your business forward and enables your organization to flourish and endure over time. When your company culture is channeled toward, aligned with, and integrated with your brand identity, it enables you to:

- Increase the efficiency of your workforce and the quality of its outcomes. When everyone is working toward a clear, single goal and using a common set of values, they're less likely to use conflicting standards and work at cross-purposes. With brand-culture fusion, you create clarity and alignment throughout your organization in place of the confusion and disconnects that arise when the two are managed as separate functions and priorities.
- Improve your competitive advantage because you operate in a way that's difficult to copy. Competitors may be able to re-produce what you offer to customers and employees, but your culture and brand create a unique how that's much harder for competitors to match. Moreover, your competitive advantage is more sustainable because it doesn't ebb and flow with product cycles and marketing tactics. Your brand and culture provide a more enduring, stable platform.

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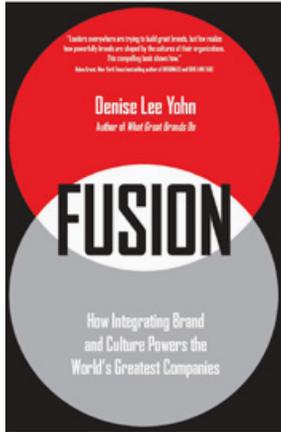
- Achieve brand authenticity because aligning internal culture and external brand means you operate the same way on the inside and out. Customers seek out authentic brands and can easily judge whether or not you do what you say and say what you do. Likewise, employees want to work for authentic companies, and given the rising influence of job sites including Glassdoor and LinkedIn, they don't have to wait until they start working somewhere to discover what it's really like to work there.
- Mobilize your company toward your vision more quickly and successfully. You attract and retain people who are motivated by your overarching purpose. Everyone who works in your organization is committed to the contribution you want to make to the world. While perks and parties are notoriously unreliable at inspiring employees to produce the right results and managers and colleagues come and go, a compelling purpose consistently compels people to do their best work.

You need more than a healthy culture that increases employee satisfaction and retention—you need a unique culture that helps you achieve the specific results you seek. So stop trying to cultivate a good culture or to make your culture better—make it unique.

Better is unsustainable; unique is unstoppable. 📌



Info



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About the author

Denise Lee Yohn is the go-to expert on brand leadership for national media outlets, an in-demand speaker and consultant, and an influential writer. Denise is the author of the bestselling book *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest* and the new book *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*.

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