

# CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF SUCCESS

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## INTRODUCTION

Consider two Kansas farming operations. Both have one thousand acres of riverbottom land. Both have two generations actively involved in the operation. Both are raising the same crops, driving the same equipment, utilizing the same production practices. On paper, these two operations may be a perfect match. Now, imagine stepping foot onto those farms. Will they be identical then?

There is one very strong factor that we simply can't quantify and that's the factor that people will see, hear, and feel as soon as they open the car door: culture

Culture is something every business has, and yet it never shows up on a balance sheet. It's something we all feel, but few people ever take the time to recognize it. For farmers and ranchers who already complain about there being too few hours in a day, culture is something that will surround people, but they'll never stop to look at it. And most of all, during hard times, culture is something that can't make it rain, and yet it has *everything* to do with how you handle the drought.

That's why it's important that progressive managers that managers take both the time to be aware of the culture currently present within their businesses, and also develop the skill set to create and cultivate a culture of success.

## THE ORIGINS OF CULTURE

So where does culture come from? The short answer is simple: people. In the strictest sense, culture is the only business output that has no other inputs. Consider those two operations from the introduction. If you were to switch the people present on those two farms, would the culture switch as well? Those individuals' personalities, histories, experiences, fears, beliefs, and values *are* the culture of the business. Without the people, the culture will fade. And furthermore, if you change any of those individual aspects of those people, the culture might seriously change as well.

For example, someone who lived through the Great Depression is likely to place a very different value on waste and money than someone who has never wanted for anything. A person who has seen someone they loved seriously injured in a farming accident is likely to take a much more serious stance on safety and equipment upkeep than someone who has never really seen the full danger of our industry.

In both of those instances, if those people are in management or ownership positions, their personal beliefs are almost certain to be transferred to the people surrounding them by the things they say, the decisions they make, and most importantly in many instances, their own actions. If and when the other people in business accept those unwritten "rules" regarding waste or safety, those things become a part of the culture.

As Bernie Erven of Ohio State University says, organizational culture is a company's pattern of shared values and norms. In short, the culture is the personality of the business.

Think of the business as a family. If the parents do not tolerate some things and reward others, it's likely those stances are going to influence the behaviors and beliefs of the children. Every person within the family won't have the exact same belief and value system—they certainly won't have identical personalities—but they will have or express common ground with the family when it comes to those very important items.

## HOW CULTURE IS GROWN

Now that we know that culture starts with people, it's important that we consider how culture is passed within a business, and perhaps more importantly, how it evolves.

To understand this, you must first appreciate that culture operates at three basic levels: what you see; what you hear; and what you feel.

1. **What you see.** According to Erven, this level is perhaps the most easily recognized way in which culture is expressed. The physical appearance of buildings, equipment, and grounds can send a clear message about the priorities of the operation. The way a manager may speak respectfully to, as opposed to yell at, an employee may tell you how the people within the organization are valued. Where people eat, how the office is organized, how the phone is answered...all of these things are great visible indicators of what is and is not important to a business.

On a personal note, when I was in graduate school I spent two months visiting dairy farms in the Northeastern United States. These operations were sometimes separated by as little

as a few miles. They frequently had nearly identical herd sizes. And yet as soon as I opened the car door I could hear and see differences in their organizational culture.

Despite the nearly identical phone calls and letters the farm managers received from me arranging my visits, no two farms greeted me the same—and some didn't greet me at all. Some operations had clean, organized meeting rooms and break facilities where I met with employees. Some, it was obvious, never held a meeting or allowed employees to take a break at all. In almost every instance, it was obvious almost immediately the places where I would want to work and the places I wouldn't—all from what I saw and heard in my first few moments on the farm.

2. **What you hear.** People within a business frequently have mantras, or expressions of their belief systems and values and, in the end, culture. Hang around any feedstore or coffee shop and you're like to hear farmers and ranchers talking about their business philosophies. "We never work on Sunday if we can help it." "At our farm, nothing's more important than family." "We have an open door policy—anyone can come to me at any time with any thing."

These expressions of a business culture are an important way in which your business is portrayed both inside and outside the business. By communicating these beliefs to the community through your conversations with neighbors and friends and to your employees and family members through training, orientation, or just talking as you're driving down the road, you ensure that the people know what your business stands for.

3. **What you do.** "Your actions speak so loudly I can't hear what you're saying," is an old cliché, but like many clichés, it's firmly rooted in the truth. No matter how we represent our business, and certainly regardless of what we say, ultimately it's our actions that truly communicate our core values and beliefs.

Take, for example, the manager that routinely tells employees (and really anyone who will listen) that farm safety is an area he's passionate about, and yet he also routinely yells at employees for being too slow and not taking enough shortcuts. What we do is perhaps evidence of the most deeply engrained elements of our culture.

According to Erven, "These values are rarely stated explicitly yet they are widely shared and considered nonnegotiable. They are so deeply ingrained that questioning or discussing them would surprise employees. These core values serve as automatic and subconscious pilots to guide behavior. Core values are more stable than expressed values and the visible part of the culture; therefore, changing them is difficult and slow."

## TRANSITIONING CULTURE

Transition is never easy for any business—no type of change is. But perhaps different people are now playing different roles, perhaps making different decisions, and ultimately making different inputs into the business culture.

Many new managers find themselves and those around them struggling in those circumstances. No culture will change overnight—even when ownership does. "The way we've always done it" will likely be a major argument for many years to come. In some instances, that's perfectly acceptable and possibly even preferable. In others, however, it could be an impediment to success. It's up to managers to be open, observant, and honest about what aspects of culture are important to the success of the business and to take the steps to gradually ensure that everyone within the operation is on the same page about big picture issues.

## WHY CULTURE MATTERS

Farming and ranching is a stressful, competitive business, and if culture is a business aspect that people control entirely then it's something that a business can and should utilize to gain a competitive advantage.

Consider for example the retiring farmer who has to choose which neighbor will get to rent his ground. Think about the hard-working potential employee with the great reference--he's going to have to decide where he wants to work. In the end, those potential business partners are going to be influenced not just by dollars and cents, but also by personality and reputation and just how well your business's values, beliefs, and norms align with their own.

In conclusion, perhaps what makes culture important is the very thing that makes it so hard to quantify. Culture is the feel of the business. In an industry where most of our managers literally live and breathe the business, where a business's entire management team is around the table at Easter dinner, where our next generation of managers literally learn the business from the cradle on, isn't it important that that business feels like a place where people want to be, think, feel, and live successfully? If the people we are on the inside do not match with the roles and culture we have to be on the outside, then how can we thrive when the business struggles?

Managers who are aware of the culture and strive to manage it well have the potential to make it a valuable business asset. Managers who don't recognize cultural problems may never manage to create a culture of success.