



Principles For Building An  
*Unstoppable Culture*

GINGER HARDAGE





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3** Whose Job is Corporate Culture Anyway?
- 4** One Size Does Not Fit All
- 5** The Rituals That Bind Us
- 7** Turn Problems Into Positive Culture Change
- 8** Middle Managers are Essential
- 9** Employee Communication
- 10** Working with Entrepreneurs
- 11** Onboarding Nightmare : When Your First Day is a Bust
- 13** Get Out of the Office

# Whose Job is Corporate Culture Anyway?

*The topic of corporate culture has been active in some organizations for decades, but it is now going mainstream as more institutions are addressing organizational health. Recent headlines around sexual harassment and equality in the workplace highlight the critical need to set the right tone in our organizations. Rightfully so, employees are demanding that our workplaces live up to the hype.*



Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum of interest about corporate culture, my contention is: *Culture is everyone's responsibility.* But how this priority plays out can look differently depending on your “seat on the bus” (to paraphrase Jim Collins).

So how does that break down? And, what should that practically look like in my organization? There are a few critical roles that must all work in parallel for this to become a reality.

## **Senior Leadership**

Usually, when I'm approached about a potential consulting opportunity involving corporate culture, it is from the CEO or a senior leader in the organization. So there is no question about the priority placed on culture by the C-suite. But when the outreach does not originate from the C-suite, my first question is about the buy-in from senior leadership. If the leaders of an organization are not signed on about cultural change and do not see the importance of modeling the behavior that is expected in the organization, then it's a lost cause. Employees immediately see through a leader who is “all talk and no action.”


## **The Right Leader**

Rather than debate where Culture should reside in a company, focus on identifying the right person to lead the charge. That individual should embody the values of the organization and have the level of influence to assure that policies, practices, and programs are driven throughout every level of the company. My title at Southwest Airlines was Sr. VP of Culture and Communications and that structure is still in place. At other organizations, Culture may fall under the Human Resources umbrella. Regardless, creating and sustaining a healthy environment will take discipline and cooperation between multiple departments. So focus on identifying the right individual who can collaborate with others to push for change.

## **Every Leader**

Culture is everyone's responsibility. Every leader and employee in the organization should be held accountable for living the values of the organization. Best-in-class organizations make sure that measurement against the values of the organization are part of the performance evaluation process. One of the preeminent communications associations espouses: Realize an enterprise's true character is expressed by it's people.

# One Size Does Not Fit All



*When a CEO comments to me that she or he wants their company's culture to be just like Disney (or another organization recognized for their world-renowned work environment), I've learned to calmly nod my head and gently start asking clarifying questions. Instinctively, I know the CEO doesn't want to copy Disney's culture and create their own version of Mickey greeting guests who walk through their lobby. What the CEO typically is desiring is a higher performing culture that reflects the best of the organization and one that is based on shared corporate values in both Boise and Berlin.*

One of the biggest misconceptions about workplace cultures is that one cultural style will work for all organizations. What works for a company with a strong customer service focus will fall flat with a company style based on planning and caution.

In **this cover story** in the Harvard Business Review, the authors describe eight distinct styles of culture: *Purpose, Caring, Order, Safety, Authority, Results, Enjoyment, and Learning*. One of the best teaching moments in the article was when the authors illustrated these styles based on quotes from CEOs.

### ***Caring Example by Disney CEO Bob Iger:***

"It is incredibly important to be open and accessible and treat people fairly and look them in the eye and tell them what is on your mind."

### ***Results Example by GSK former CEO, Sir Andrew Witty:***

"I've tried to keep us focused on a very clear strategy of modernizing ourselves."

When you read the article, don't miss the chart that ranks how often these styles appear as a defining culture characteristic among the companies in the study. Spoiler alert: Results style, characterized by achievement and winning, ranked the highest


Which culture style do you identify your organization with? And which do you aspire to be (if you are not already there)?

You already know this, but our cultures are as distinctive as our business models... or a sizing chart...and one size does not fit all.

Wherever you find yourself on your culture journey today, be encouraged that every organizational culture you admire was pioneered by someone just like you, who was willing to blaze a new trail.



# The Rituals That Bind Us



*On a recent visit to Dave Ramsey's EntLeadership team in Nashville, the Unstoppable Cultures team was treated to a tour of their offices. At every turn, we encountered symbolism that reinforced their team-oriented culture. To chart sales goals, a stylized climbing wall marked progress. Associates' photos were posted nearby and decorated with carabiners to denote milestones such as years of service. You could almost hear chants of "Belay on" in the background. Yet another symbol that is probably a more pervasive feature in offices across the globe was a bell in the middle of EntLeadership's office. This bell was large, elaborate and could be heard throughout the office when goals were achieved.*

This encounter with the bell caused me to remember how as a young leader, I used a less grand bell to gather my team when a joyful or critical announcement demanded everyone's involvement. Yes, this was before the days of sending an email meeting appointment or a group text. There was something exciting and urgent about hearing that bell, and I suspect it would be a novel throwback ritual in most offices today. The bell. The climbing wall and earned carabiners. All are examples of rituals that bind colleagues toward a common goal or common understanding. Rituals can also serve to bring people together who might not commonly work alongside each other.

At Unstoppable Cultures, we talk about three pillars that mark cultures of enduring greatness, with one being nurturing cultures through systems. Workplace rituals are just one example of an intentional system leaders can and should put in place to connect employees with a core value or purpose.

## ***Companies practice all types of recurring rituals:***

- At Walmart stores, workers begin the day with a company cheer.
- Flipboard has "Mock O'Clock" where employees share informal demos of their projects as a means to encourage collaboration.
- At Yelp, salespeople bang a gong when they close a sale.
- One of the most unique rituals can be found at Ideo: **Wednesday tea time.**

For further inspiration regarding rituals I looked to Laurel Harper, a leader in People Operations at Whataburger, who provided an expansive description of a ritual called WhataGames that has been a part of that company's culture since 1996. Laurel said, "It's an intense six-month long bi-annual competition where employees, who we call Family Members, compete to win more

than \$200,000 in cash prizes to all members of the Gold, Silver and Bronze winning teams. The friendly, spirited competition is a way to support Whataburger's commitment to freshness, quality and customer service while investing in our Family Members.

"During the competition, restaurant teams demonstrate their knowledge of company history and restaurant procedures, how they deliver customer service and build high performing teams. Every restaurant system-wide, now more than 820, starts in the competition before being narrowed down to semifinalists. Then the finalists head to WhataGames where the winning teams take home the prize along with cash for the team members that stayed behind to operate their restaurants.

"What started as a training exercise over 20 years ago has become a big part of Whataburger culture. We've heard feedback that our Family Members love being able to connect with one another and are proud that Whataburger is genuinely investing in them in meaningful ways."

In some cases, a well-worn ritual may require a facelift. Southwest Airlines had held an afterhours Friday Deck Party on its headquarters' outdoor deck for decades. It provided a way for employees to interact and let off steam after a long week. But as the company grew, this practice morphed into a Monday Deck Party which allowed newly hired employees who arrive for training each Monday to interact with more tenured employees and gain a deeper understanding of the culture.

Let us know about your company rituals. Is there one you've been doing for a long time that's ready for a facelift? Or perhaps it's time to start a new ritual that nourishes the culture you wish to be.

Whether your rituals are about eating, celebrating, competing, or collaboration, it's certain that employees forge a stronger bond and deeper appreciation for the organization because of these meaningful practices.

# Turn Problems Into Positive Culture Change

*Problems aren't always "bad," per se. The right solution to a problem can become an opportunity for positive culture change. Use the conflict to your benefit by responding appropriately.*

For example, at Southwest Airlines headquarters, we needed to acquire more space to house employees, but couldn't add real estate. We were literally reducing the average amount of square footage every employee had.

## ***How do you do that in a positive way?***

We started with focus groups; we asked employees to talk about what they needed from the space. From the focus groups, we learned that we didn't have enough collaboration or meeting space. Surprisingly, people were fine with reducing their own personal, office, or cube space if they had an alternative location that they could go to.

Our building was built more than 25 years ago at a time when people worked differently. Now, people collaborate more than ever.

One of the ideas that came out of the focus groups was to create large gathering spaces. We named these locations "Culture Centers". These designated areas served several purposes. One, it created a place for community and, two, it reinforced and preserved our company's culture, telling its history.

For example, one of the centers is named "Fun-Loving Culture," which is also one of Southwest's values. It features our founder, Herb Kelleher. At the station, there's a button you can push, similar to the Easy Button, that plays an audio recording of some of his different laughs, characteristic to him. It's a wonderful way to tangibly reinforce values.

"The First 40" is another Culture Center. As the name suggests, it features the first forty years of the company's history. It helps employees understand the challenges and trials that we faced in the early years, while also preserving our past. Repeating the history of your organization and finding ways to tell that story is important to the long-term preservation of your culture.

Don't look at the issues facing your organization as simply problems to be solved, but as opportunities for positive culture change.

# Middle Managers are Essential

*Middle managers are usually the most neglected area of any company – which is unfortunate. Middle managers are the true leaders of organizations and responsible for making things happen. They are often tasked with employee satisfaction, but aren't given the the tools, training, or attention to do it effectively.*

Throughout the years, I've experimented with different strategies and tactics. Surprisingly (or maybe not depending on the seat you sit in), employee satisfaction is directly linked to the level of communication a direct leader has with their team—good or bad. When testing an employee's view of communication, it's not about the formal channels: intranet, magazines, emails, fliers, etc. Employees view their direct leader as the most important communication channel.


At Southwest, we put a lot of effort into helping direct leaders make communication a turnkey process. These leaders are extremely busy and might be running a factory or managing part of your operation remotely in another city, but they are the most influential piece. It's crucial that companies support them in their communication efforts.

One of the solutions we implemented was to develop a communications system specifically for middle managers. As upper leadership, we realized we needed to be intentional in how we communicate with middle managers, in order for them to effectively communicate with their direct reports. We modeled the behavior we wanted to see. Then, we provided them with the training and tools they needed to communicate effectively. The mode can be flexible depending on the amount of news, how much they need, and the specific items that need to be reinforced for that particular week or month.

Middle managers are essential. Make sure you're giving them the attention they deserve and equipping them through communication to do their job. Employee satisfaction relies upon it.



# Employee Communication



*Look for ways that you can communicate on a regular basis with your employees. Admittedly, it's hard to do and do it well. It's not like a faucet you turn on and off. The last thing you want to do is start any program that you won't have the perseverance and the dedication to continue.*


At Southwest, every Sunday night, the CEO records a message for employees. The longevity of this routine is a testament to the strength of our CEO and leadership team. In fact, it started so long ago that it was an actual recording that people would listen to on their flip phones. Today, this system has evolved. Anybody with a smartphone can listen to the audio or read a transcribed message online or email.

During the message, the CEO talks about the previous week's events and what is scheduled for the upcoming week. As a signature, the end always includes a shout-out to a specific employee that's really living the "Southwest Way."

I would encourage CEOs and startup organizations to consider the kinds of values that you want to reinforce within your organization. Feature employees, celebrate them, and hold them up for the way that they're living as an example. It's a wonderful way to model the kind of behavior you're looking for in your organization and how you're looking for employees to follow. Model the kind of behavior expected and prized within the organization.

Find a way for senior leadership to communicate regularly to employees at every level of your organization they can commit to for the long haul.

# Working with Entrepreneuers



*Entrepreneuers are great to work with, because they are working with a clean slate. It's easier to do it right from the beginning, laying the foundation correctly, than it is to turn around a toxic culture.*

Entrepreneuers should document the phases that they are going through as a company. They are growing very quickly, experimenting with different tactics. Something that may have worked for one organization, might not work for theirs. Regardless, it's a tremendous opportunity to put the right building blocks in place to ensure that the culture stays true to its values as it grows—especially at a rapid pace. The important thing to keep in mind is that it all starts with recruiting: how you are recruiting the kind of employees that will fit your culture, how you are hiring them, how you are involving and encouraging peer interviews.

If you are hiring a financial analyst, as you are interviewing that person for that particular job, you're also threading company culture throughout every experience and every touch point. It reaches from recruiting, to hiring, to onboarding, to training, to the delivery of the employee and customer experience, and the performance evaluation at the end.

For example, at Southwest employees are evaluated by how we live the Southwest way. Even as a Senior Vice President, I am held to that standard. In my performance appraisal I am evaluated by how I am living Southwest's values.


To illustrate, we're in the customer service business. Therefore, one of our values is to **have a servant's heart**. Am I truly exemplifying a heart of service? How do I turn around and serve the customer?

Here's another: **Have a fun-loving attitude**. We don't want people to take themselves too seriously. We want people to lean toward the customer and have the confidence to have a good time and enjoy the customers.

Another value: **have a warrior spirit**. Even though we have a good time, the airline business is a tough business. You are working in a variety of weather conditions, whether you are out loading luggage or piloting. It really does take a warrior spirit to keep the airline on time and getting people to their destinations, in a timely manner.

If you are an entrepreneur, seize the unique opportunity you have to build a strong and intentional culture from day one. Find ways to reinforce the values of the company, beginning with the company's inception, through every step of the process, and through every position within the organization.

# Onboarding Nightmare : When Your First Day is a Bust



*We can all remember the anticipation and nervousness of the first day at a new job, especially when it's the first day of your first real job. My first assignment after graduating from college was to establish a marketing communications function for a regional life insurance company, so I thought I'd landed a job coup. I'd practiced the commute ahead of time and thoughtfully selected a grown-up outfit to make the right impression. But when I reported for duty, my hiring manager was "out of the office" and I could sense that the string of individuals who greeted me weren't sure what to do next. It turns out my hiring manager had been terminated without leaving a solid paper trail about my hiring. It was a nightmare first day in the "professional world" that had me wondering if the job was real. I ended up staying at that company for three years, but vowed to create memorable, encouraging first days for others for the remainder of my career.*

Organizations today recognize the direct correlation between a solid onboarding program and retention. In some industries, turnover for hourly workers is a major problem in the first 120 days when approximately 50% leave their new jobs. When you compare the cost, time and effort to replace employees, it is easy to build the case for a system that gets new hires started off right.

Onboarding is a critical link in setting up employees for success. The following organizations have personalized the process to fit their companies. Here's to amping up our culture game by learning from these trendsetters:

Warby Parker sends new hires an electronic welcome packet with a list of expectations for the first day, week, and month.

Amazon provides all new employees a **"Launch Your Career"** roadmap that outlines what to expect in the coming years.

New hires at Disney find out right away that they are not employees—they are "cast members". The first day on the job includes a Disney Traditions Class that touches on what "cast members" need to know about their specific roles, but also about the history and legacy of The Walt Disney Company.

Southwest Airlines knows onboarding is not simply about paperwork and forms. They onboard with an emphasis on helping new hires see how they can make a difference, inspiring their new employees with tales of past remarkable employees who were able to make a huge impact. Southwest also has a “Sponsor A New Hire Program” to make sure every new hire is accounted for and someone is investing in their success.


Throughout the **Ritz-Carlton onboarding process**, they know how to make sure new hires feel special and emphasize how lucky the Ritz-Carlton is to have them. In fact, they tell their employees that they know “work is the second most important place where an employee is” (second only to home) and that they feel blessed the new hires chose them as their “second place.”

Other organizations take the onboarding process to a whole new level with formal mentoring programs. According to the Gloop.com blog, 71% of Fortune 500 companies offer mentorship programs. Of course, that doesn't mean that every employee at those companies is involved in a mentorship program. But check out these companies that are putting resources behind orchestrated mentoring: Google, General Electric, and Intel.

According to **Where Women Work**, corporations like Caterpillar are making sure to include training past the typical “on-the-job” stuff. ““Each of us wants to be better at our job and a more valuable contributor to Caterpillar, no matter where we are in the organization. There's no mystery to making this happen. Simply engaging purposefully with others in the interest of continuous improvement can spark positive growth...both personal and professional. Caterpillar is a rich source of human connection. If you want help, or have help to give, look around you. There are opportunities for intentional partnership and guidance abound.” said Tana Utley, Vice President of Caterpillar's Large Power System Divisions.

As with every topic we have discussed, the goal is not simply to replicate the approach of successful organizations. Let these examples inspire your own creative thinking. Ask yourself, what unique way can our onboarding experience reinforce our culture? The most important day on the job for a new employee is the first day. Make sure it's a memorable one for your employees....and not a nightmare.

# Get Out of the Office



*One of the most important things a leader can do is get out of their office. Go to the frontline of the organization, see first hand the challenges people are facing, understand their needs, and help them remove those barriers. This will allow your employees to be even more effective.*

In 2010, there was a historic flood in Tennessee. Just to give you an idea of it's impact, the Federal Government declared 30 counties major disaster areas (52 counties applied to receive this status). This translates into 31% of Tennessee designated as a major disaster area.

Southwest wanted to do something. Our CEO came to Nashville to visit with as many employees as possible.

There was one employee in particular, that stood out. His job was loading luggage. He worked in the T-point, where all the baggage from inside the airport is divided to go to the specific plane it needs to be loaded on. Through this leader, we became aware that he and his wife were raising their granddaughter. Their house was completely flooded and they had lost almost everything.

Southwest provided his family with a care package to replace a lot of things they lost. It included kitchen items they needed, and clothes and belongings for his granddaughter.

Here was a Tennessee mountain man, crying because of this “small” gesture of caring for his family—showing empathy, truly caring, and understanding even in the most difficult times. Through tears, this man told us, he would never forget Southwest Airlines and what we did for him and his family, and how we met his family's specific needs after the flooding.

There is power in focusing on your employees and taking care of them in the good times and bad.





Learn more from Ginger about helping organizations create and sustain cultures of enduring greatness at [\*\*unstoppablecultures.com\*\*](https://unstoppablecultures.com)