

Aligning Your Vision with Your Culture

Every organization has a culture, as humans we bring a culture to any group we form. For businesses, it's important to understand what culture will gain the most benefit. Your culture aligns with your brand and if they are in alignment, you are delivering on what you promise to your customers and employees. Whether you claim that to be a great service reputation, a caring organization, a quality organization, you will have a culture that will either fight or support the brand.

As a small business owner, you are in control of the culture in your organization and often that means you need to assess the current culture -- the one that came into being as you added employees -- and identify changes that needed to create the culture you want.

Culture is how you say you do things as they align with how you actually do them. This is a specific challenge for small business owners because you start with just you. Then you hire one person, then another, and suddenly you have a company culture that grew organically. And you might have one that isn't reflecting what you want about you and your company.

The culture of your business is entangled in everything. It's how people see your business and how they differentiate you from your competitors. Large corporations have learned to align their culture and the brand. Think about cars. Toyota is known for quality and their culture is one of continuous improvement. Do you think Cadillac and Kia have the same culture? Cadillac is about luxury and Kia is about affordability. Would Cadillac be likely to have a culture of thrift?

Identifying the culture you have in place

The culture that currently exists in your business likely grew organically as your organization added employees and became bigger. Often this organic culture is hard to pin down, and rarely does it align with the future you are trying to create.

After assessing your culture, you'll have an understanding whether you want to make simple changes or make fundamental changes to the organizational culture, or simply communicate with employees to ensure they are on board with your findings and vision.

Culture is your business personality. If you watched the commercials for Apple where they had two actors playing the Mac and PC roles, you'll notice that they were showing you the different company cultures. Even though this ad was from the Apple point of view, you can see the difference between the two cultures displayed.

The Mac actor was cool and seemed creative. The PC actor was more uptight and businesslike. What is interesting here is that the two different cultures reflect each company's approach to customer attraction. Apple sells to the creative market, Windows sells to the business market.

So, culture is engrained in the way you structure your business and the values you treasure and recognize in the way you identify your customers.



The Aspects of Culture

Organizational structure: How is your organization structured to support the business you do? If you have a hierarchical structure, it's difficult to have a collaborative culture.

The level of urgency to get things done is aligned with culture. For example, if you want to be nimble, you need a culture of urgency for change.

Your value of people over task is part of your culture. If you value tasks, your culture is likely to be more about getting things done than the work-live balance.

When we talk about culture, it's a good thing to remember that there's always an unofficial structure. It could be the politics of your group or the strongest personality that determines the culture and is influenced by the culture. That's not to say when you determine what you want the culture to be, that you won't have organizational politics, or have strong personalities that influence the way things get done. The difference is that with a conscious culture, you have something for people to see and follow.

Culture is also found in the simplest things like the level of courtesy within the group. If your business is manufacturing machine parts, your courtesy level will be very different than that of a bridal shop.

Assessing Your Culture

Assessing your company culture is the first step in creating the culture you want and there is a tool at the end of this article that allows you to assess your culture. The tool is in two versions, one for the owner and one for the employees.

You use your version first to identify what your culture is from your point of view. Then you redo the assessment from the lens of what you want your culture to be. At the same time you ask your employees to complete their version of the assessment. When you have the documents finished, you have a more complete picture of the current culture and you can see where there's a gap between that and the culture you want.

There are several components that need to be in place so that you can create or align your own company culture.

Your Vision for your business is the statement about how you do business, what business you are in, how you want to show up in your industry. It's not an easy thing to get down. The vision needs to be inspiring; after all it's called a vision not a policy statement.

The commitments you make are aligned with your vision and your actions are driven by the commitments which are driven by the vision.

For example, if your vision is that you will be the best coffee shop in town, your commitments might be something like, we only buy high-quality coffee, we locally source organic treats, and we train our staff to provide excellent service. So now your actions

would be to find a supplier of organic treats, train your employees on service and order high-end coffee. The actions can be connected directly to the vision through the commitments.

Your guiding principles are the things that guide your decisions and choices.

Creating Your Vision Statement

Your vision is a statement of what you imagine your business will be in the future. Think of it as the direction you are taking. Visions evolve as time passes, but they are always future statements.

You may have heard about a Mission Statement and wonder what the difference is between them. A mission statement is about how you will achieve your vision, which is where you want to take your company.

The vision is also about how you act, how you talk with your employees, and how you deal with customers. It guides the way you approach everything and is a reflection of your values and culture.

Your vision can also be driven by the market you are competing in. For example, if you are running a restaurant and your vision is about getting people fed quickly, you are competing in a market of fast food. If you try to compete with that vision in a high-end restaurant market, you will struggle.

Visions and cultures can also include the level of transparency or secrecy in your company. Your vision is different, or needs to be, depending on whether you include your employees in decisions or simply give orders.

Creating Commitments and Guiding Principles

Commitments are statements about the actions and behaviors displayed by you and your employees. Your employees need to display these actions when they are representing the business. You need to display them all the time because your customers won't distinguish you as the business owner from you as 'the everything else you do' role.

As an example, perhaps your vision is to be a leader in your community, providing services and products that help make it easier for elderly residents to enjoy life. This is a good basis for your commitments because it's concrete, and it differentiates you from your competition as long as you follow through on them.

In this example, the company commitments may be communicated in three statements.

- We will listen until we find a solution.
- We will care about the quality of life our clients achieve.
- We will help increase joy in your life.

These commitments align with the vision, giving you a better chance of delivering on your promise.

Your guiding principles help you when you have difficult decisions to make, or in fact, when you have choices. The principles need to be concrete and applicable to the work situation so when your employees embrace the guiding principles, they will know how to act.

In our example, the guiding principle that aligns to the commitments might be something like this. We will always choose the option that benefits our clients.

Sharing the Vision and Commitments

Now you have your vision, commitments and guiding principles, let's take a look at how to share all of this with your employees so they can align with what you see as the image of your business.

Some organizations build their vision, commitments, and guiding principles with their employees, and some business owners take on the work themselves. Regardless of how you came to the end result, you need to communicate and share with the employees when you feel the work is complete.

When employees are part of the process of creating the building blocks, the sharing can be more about launching the results. When the building blocks are created by the owner, the employees may be totally in the dark about what is coming. Either way, you want to be sure everyone is on the same page with the changes they need to make.

You share your vision when you have employees, because they will be delivering on it with your customers. If your employees don't know what direction you want to take, they can't join you on the journey. If they don't understand the actions that align with the direction, they don't know how to deliver on it.

The other reason to share the vision, commitments, and guiding principles with your employees is for the image they portray to customers.

When your employees are aligned with your vision, their actions never clash with the way you are portraying your business. If there is a clash, your customers will be confused. And customers don't like to be confused; they prefer to deal with strong confident companies.

To share your vision, you need to create a message. The message and delivery channel need to align with the culture you are creating. Remember, as the owner, everything you do needs to align.

For example, is your vision to be inclusive and collaborative? Then sending a memo isn't aligned with what you want.

Or, is your vision to be the most exciting organization in your market? Then maybe an event where you announce the vision to everyone would be the best way to align the communication to the vision.



Different Cultures

It's important to understand that no culture is innately bad or good. What makes it confusing is when your actions run counter to your words.

For instance, if you are a command and control culture, then you need to command and control. You need to give clear statements of the goals you want to achieve. Because when you are in a command and control culture, asking for input or advice doesn't work. That's because the employees you attract and keep will thrive in a command and control environment.

Think about how an employee in a fast food outlet would react if they were able to discuss and provide input into the menu? No, this is a command and control environment because you need everything standardized to meet the promise you make to your customers.

What about the opposite environment? When a design firm hires designers, they are looking for creative people. These people expect not only to give input into the products but they expect autonomy on their projects. A firm that wanted to command and control in this environment would have a very hard time attracting designers when the word got out.

As The Owner

Your behaviors need to model what you want. For example, if you want your employees to show up for work on time, you need to create and use a regular schedule. It doesn't have to be the same schedule as your employees, just a consistent one.

Talking the talk is about saying things that align with your vision. If you say you are customer-centric, you need to speak about your customers with respect. If you say you are a caring organization, you need to make time to get to know your employees.

Even more important, if you say that you want people to learn from their mistakes, you need to allow them to make mistakes.

Walking the talk was mentioned before. It's about being consistent with what you do and what you expect from your employees. It's about dealing with behavior that doesn't align so employees get the message that you are serious about what you want.

Walking the talk is also about inviting people onto your bus, but being clear about who the driver is and where you are going. Too many times I hear business leaders complain that their employees won't get on the bus. With a little digging I often find that the leader hasn't clearly defined the bus they are driving, and they haven't invited their employees to get on board.



Successful Implementation

As you can see here, the basis of successful implementation is making sure your vision, your expectations and your outcomes are aligned.

If they are aligned, you'll have an easier job living up to them. If they aren't aligned, you may lose business and good employees. If you have trouble aligning these components and behaving in accordance with what you want, you may not be aiming for the real vision and aligning the real culture.

Let's walk through two examples. The vision for two companies is the same: "We care about the environment." The companies have shared the vision with their employees and incorporated it into their brand. So both employees and customers are aware of it.

The first company implements standards for reducing waste, allows telecommuting, and focusses on reducing emissions. The outcome is a solid image and they are able to attract employees that align with their vision. And the customers they attract are more loyal because they are aligned.

Company number two does install recycling bins, but they are in the basement. They insist that employees come into the office to work, even though most of the work is done online. And the company fleet is comprised of Hummers.

The result here is a confused image, and in that case, employees will become disengaged. And it's easier for customers to leave for the competition because they aren't getting the company they thought they would get.

In this example, the vision and culture clash with the reality. Perhaps the vision of company two really is more about the appearance of strength and continuity than about the environment. If that's the case, it doesn't mean that the culture needs to change. This vision can be supported just as successfully with a command and control culture as it can be with an open and collaborative one.

Take care that your vision comes from your heart, and not from the latest business trend.



Owner Culture Assessment	Describes the culture now	Describes desired culture	Adjustment needed
Structure and market			
Well defined hierarchy: approval, communication, and feedback through channels			
Hierarchy in place, but often works around the channels			
Shallow hierarchy, loose role descriptions, able to voice opinion			
High level of urgency. Need to respond to rapidly changing marketplace			
Medium pace of change in marketplace allowing you to develop responses to change under a controlled environment			
Low change in the marketplace, roles and duties are relatively unchanged			
Value people before tasks			
Value tasks before people			
Equal value placed on people and task			
Business personality statements			
Play as hard as we work			
Push through the challenges			
We're more like a family than a workplace			
We work together as teammates			
We lead the innovation in our market			
Our products/services are high quality			



Owner Culture Assessment	Describes the culture now	Describes desired culture	Adjustment needed
Value balance of work and family time			
Real improvement takes time, effort, and thought			
It's cutthroat in our market and we've got the knives			
The customer is right and knows best			
We have the knowledge and the customer wants our advice			