



Update

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Curating an Exceptional Culture

Andrew Carnegie was a Scottish American businessman and philanthropist. He led the expansion of the steel industry in the United States and became one of the richest men in the world. During the last 18 years of his life (which ended in 1919), he gave away the 2022 equivalent of roughly \$10 billion to charities, foundations, and universities. Carnegie-Mellon University? United States Steel Corporation? Carnegie Hall? That's him.

Always chatty and eager to share his wisdom, Carnegie once said, "*You must capture and keep the heart of the supremely able man before his brain can do its best.*"

It's a savvy assessment of the vital connection between heart, mind, results, and retention. How do we capture and keep the hearts of those we lead so they perform at their fullest potential year after year? A good place to start is curating an exceptional organizational culture.

Culture is horizontal gravity. It's what draws individuals into an organization, and it's what keeps them there. More simply put, culture is why people join and it's why they stay. Culture is a mindset, rooted in a philosophy. It's mission in action.

Every organization has a culture. It exists in the presence or absence of leadership. If there is a lack of leadership, the organization creates conflicting dynamics, and that becomes the culture. It's impossible to eliminate culture. Like matter, it simply changes form.

Create a Culture Code

As important as culture is, if you ask ten employees to define their organization's culture, you'll likely get ten different answers. Culture should be easily understood and articulated. A great way to achieve that is by creating a Culture Code. For example:

The Culture at ABC Corporation is:

- Sales oriented and results driven
- High-energy and fun
- Fast-paced and entrepreneurial
- Collaborative and transparent
- Committed to significant, rapid growth
- Driven by our individual and collective desire to improve people's lives

Once you have the Code, bring it to life. Create laminated copies for everyone, turn into a piece of office wall art. Put it to work for you. Use it as a cornerstone of your talent acquisition efforts. Make it a tangible, visible part of your organizational ecosystem.

Get Aligned

Once culture is defined, we need to align. Alignment requires two important shifts. The first shift happens within leadership. Leaders must realize it "isn't about them." The second shift is even more important and depends on the success of the first. This shift happens within the organization itself. Everyone must believe...that **leadership** believes...that it's not about them. Why? Because in the end, it's what **they** believe that matters. What they believe determines how they behave. How they behave will determine how they perform.

Make the Investment

Making it about them requires consistent, focused investment of time and attention. Start with understanding purpose. Purpose inspires and drives people. What's important to them personally? Professionally? Financially? Paint pictures of how exceptional performance will lead to outcomes serving the very things that are most important to them. The historical boundaries of location and time relative to work are forever blurred. Work/life balance has dissolved into...life. Listen. Learn about people. Within reason, the things that are important to them should become important to you.

Quit Managing. Start Leading.

Leadership Guru Warren Bennis defines leadership as, "the capacity to translate vision into reality." Let's add to that. The leader's role is to cast vision, provide resources, remove obstacles, drive execution, and deliver results. Most people would much rather be led than managed. What's the difference? Visualize standing over someone versus walking beside them. Don't just tell them you're in it with them – **they need to feel** that you're in it with them.

How? Here's something simple. Ask people, "*What can I do for you today?*" Ask it daily. And when they need something, do it. Promptly. This doesn't mean you're going to do their work, nor does it mean they aren't accountable for their results. Rather, it demonstrates to them that you've made that oh-so-important shift.

Keep Things Simple

The world is a complicated, noisy place. Inputs assail us all day long, competing for our attention and challenging our ability to focus. Culture creates clarity. Leaders who curate culture are consistently on-message. They remind everyone of fundamental truths about the culture and the business to keep people grounded during challenging periods of time.

Be the Cultural Immune System

Curating exceptional culture also means protecting it. Threats must be identified and eliminated. In "A Failure of Nerve," author Edwin Friedman likens organizational culture to human organisms. Our bodies are programmed to protect us from harm. Infection is met with an assault of white blood cells. Pepper in our nose triggers sneezes. Bad sushi is met with.... well, you know. Friedman draws a parallel with organizational culture and declares that leaders that must serve as the immune systems of their organizations.

Few organizations have an exceptional culture. That's because it's hard to do. But if you want to capture and keep the heart of supremely able people who perform at their very best, it's absolutely worth the effort.

Finding People Who Make a Difference®

Executive Search Review has recognized the totality of the Sanford Rose Associates® network as being one of the Top 10 Search Firms in North America with 160+ offices worldwide. To learn more about how we can help curate an exceptional culture with exceptional people, please reach out to your Sanford Rose Associates® executive search consultant today.

—Karen Schmidt