





CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Creating a positive business culture is one thing. Keeping it is another matter entirely. Here's how to do both

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LONG READ = YOUR CULTURE



Whether you're heading up a team in a company or leading your own business, you'll need a great culture to ensure success.

But people often misunderstand culture. It isn't just about having table football in the office or a drink on a Friday. It goes much deeper than that. It's what drives the organisation and your team. It's about having a clear goal and working together to achieve it. It's about motivation, innovation and enthusiasm.

Businesses are starting to realise the value that a positive culture has. Indeed, research carried out by Deloitte found that 94% of executives and 88% of employees linked a strong workplace culture with business success.

Most leaders want to create a great workplace culture for the long term but, as their team grows, the day-to-day pressures of the business and a diverse mix of personalities and behaviours pose a risk that the culture will turn toxic.

It's an issue that entrepreneurs and team leaders alike constantly grapple with. So how can you create a brilliant culture and keep it? We asked experts from a variety of industries to share their insights.

Stuart Hurst
built a culture
of cloud
appreciation
at his firm



HOW TO CHANGE A CULTURE

Stuart Hurst started at UHY Hacker Young with the goal of bringing cloud technology to the firm. He was optimistic about the work and excited to get stuck in.

But he didn't bargain for the cultural barriers that he would face. He wasn't just bringing in new technology – he had to change mindsets and build a team as well.

Building a new culture is no easy task for a CEO, let alone someone in a middle management role, but Hurst has proven that is possible.

Hurst's story

Hurst oversaw the adoption of cloud software at Styles and Co, and expected the process to be much the same at UHY Hacker Young, a much bigger firm.

He also had the buy-in of UHY Manchester's managing partner,

three to six months, it goes in the opposite direction. In my previous company, those tasks went up to 21 hours in the bedding-in phase, because people are getting used to the system and you're spending a lot of time training. Without a vision for how to progress, I'd have been sacked in those first three months. It's tough to manage."

The next stage was to start winning people over. When Hurst initially came on board, his team consisted of him and one disgruntled bookkeeper who was extremely suspicious of cloud technology. "It was about reducing her workload. That was my sell," Hurst recalls. "She was overworked as it was."

Having finally won the bookkeeper over, Hurst needed to start changing the rest of

engaged, because they could then help businesses in real time, rather than just banging numbers into a spreadsheet."

All of this isn't to say that Hurst didn't meet continued resistance, though – big cultural changes will never be universally accepted. "If I had £1 for each time I heard 'That's how we've always done it, I'd be a very rich man," Hurst laughs. "Transparency is key. You need to share all the successes, as well as all the things that haven't gone so well."

The final ingredient for bedding in cultural change is bringing in new people. They will embrace the new culture from day one, and help to spread it.

"The younger generation are great for helping to instigate change," Hurst says. "They've got no preconceptions. It creates a sort of cultural change sandwich when you've got partner buy-in and champions at the bottom. It squeezes the middle."

Victory at last

Now Hurst has built a dedicated cloud team of 20 people, and they're all working to drive change. They've converted more than 400 clients so far, as the cloud-first approach slowly becomes the norm.

"We've gone from a workplace culture akin to ['80s kids' show] *The Raggy Dolls* to a motivated, highly efficient team of accountants," he says. "Staff are so excited about this way of working. They're no longer just whacking numbers into a spreadsheet. Staff can see everything in real time and connect the dots. Their work has become business advisory."

"You need to find what will get people excited about a new way of working. Show them the bigger picture"

Mark Robertson, which gave him the confidence to take his project forward. "He had hired me, so I had support from the top. The pair of us ran a presentation on day one about what I was there for, so people were aware of what was coming."

So Hurst decided the best approach initially was to explain the benefits and be upfront about the difficulties – a big change in culture always involves a few hiccups in the early stages. "I said: 'For the first month, you'll hate me.'

"Using the cloud, the average 18-hour job comes down to six hours. But, in the first

the culture, one person at a time. His relentless positivity and enthusiasm for what he was doing were definitely a big help. He was upbeat about accountancy in a way that was foreign to the firm at the time.

"You need to find what will get people excited about a new way of working," he explains. "Show them how they can see stuff in real time, and how they can spot what's gone wrong and address it there and then. It helps to see the bigger picture. Staff realised they wouldn't just be number-crunching – they'd be doing advisory. They became much more



1. STAY AUTHENTIC

A good culture starts with authenticity, says Sahar Hashemi OBE, serial entrepreneur and co-founder of Coffee Republic. “Businesses used to have cultures where employees couldn’t be themselves; they had to put a ‘work face’ on. But I think the essence of a sustainable workplace culture is having an authentic, human environment. We need employees to display true people skills like empathy, curiosity, experimentation and vulnerability. We don’t want a culture of fear – that should be a thing of the past.”

Hashemi has just published a book, *Start Up Forever*, which looks at how large businesses can rediscover the agile, sustainable workplace cultures of innovative startups. Too much bureaucracy, she says, can be particularly unhelpful. It means companies get too bogged down in doing things the way they’ve always done them, leaving little room for experimentation.

“The embedding of a workplace culture is constant. Discussions about the right behaviours need to start from the very beginning”



“Make sure new candidates fit with business culture, and carry out multiple interviews to make sure they’re right”

“It’s very much about the language that’s used,” Hashemi explains. “How often do we hear phrases like ‘It’s company policy’ or ‘We’ve always done it this way’? Successful leadership is about getting out there and immersing yourself in your client or customer base. It’s allowing yourself and your team to experiment with new ideas. It’s not being scared of failure.”

2. NO SILOS

People working in silos can be detrimental to a sustainable workplace culture, Hashemi warns. Employers, she advises, should discourage elitist, closed-knit groups and instead encourage a more open dialogue between staff and management.

3. GET ‘GUARD RAILS’

David Carry is CEO of leadership coaching business Track Record. His staff, who all have Olympic sports backgrounds, work with management teams for over a year to develop their purpose and values. He says entrepreneurs and startups should talk to employees about the identity of the business and acceptable behaviours and values right from the start. He calls this list of behaviours and values “guard rails”.

“It’s important to establish guard rails early on,” he says. “Staff need to know which behaviours and values are acceptable and which aren’t.”

Heather Wright, director at corporate training consultancy Advance Performance, agrees. “The embedding of a workplace culture is constant. Discussions about the right behaviours need to start from the very beginning. So buy-in from everyone within the business is essential,



as they will be the ones to either underline it or undermine it.”

4. FOCUS ON ‘THE WIN’

“The win’ is what you want to achieve with your business. It will tell everyone in the firm what they want to “race towards” to ensure business success, says Carry. “You want to be super clear what that win is,” he explains. “No fudging numbers and no dodging halfway through. It will give staff a real sense of ownership and clarity about what they’re driving towards.”

5. HIRE SLOWLY, FIRE QUICKLY

Paul Ellis, managing director at e-procurement solutions provider Wax Digital, advocates due diligence when hiring: “Make sure new candidates fit with business culture, and carry out multiple interviews and written assessments to make sure they’re right. But it’s equally important to remove staff who aren’t the right fit as quickly as possible. Disgruntled employees will influence others and have a negative effect on the working environment.”

Top left:

A culture that lets staff express themselves is a good thing, says Sahar Hashemi. A culture of fear? Not so much

Bottom left:

Heather Wright says culture needs constant cultivation

Above:

Don’t forget to check that candidates suit your culture, advises Paul Ellis

SET A PROBLEM AND LET THE TEAM SOLVE IT

David Carry recommends that you give your team the independence to solve problems for themselves.

“To get the best from your team,” he says, “you need them to think of new ways of solving existing problems. So, while

there is no negotiation on what the team needs to achieve, people need free rein to figure out how best to get there.”

GET THE RIGHT KIND OF FOLLOWERS

If you've got leaders, you're going to have followers. But, while leaders are often discussed in business books and articles, relatively little is written about followers.

According to Dr Shaun Lundy, technical director at 4site Consulting and a chartered safety and health practitioner, this is an error, because knowing how followers work is crucial to ensuring a positive culture.

'Follower' may seem like a derogatory term – ask a room full of professionals if they'd rather be a leader or a follower – but to see it that way is impractical, says Lundy. Even top leaders need to follow someone.

The five followership traits were first defined by social scientist Robert Kelley: alienated, passive, conformist, exemplary and pragmatic. Some of these traits can be problematic in the workplace, Lundy explains.

Alienated followers may display negative behaviours, and can become informal leaders within their peer group, causing significant disruption to the team culture. Passive or conformist followers don't have the same toxic effect, but they can still hamper progress, as they require constant supervision and micromanaging.

"Being a good follower does not simply mean being a sheep," says Lundy. "Exemplary followers in particular are often the leaders of the future and tend to be independent, critical thinkers.

"The modern workplace is a sophisticated mix of well-informed employees who have a strong influence on each other. Employees can make choices whether to do the bare minimum or to go that extra mile, inspiring others into action."

"You as a manager are looking through a different lens from the person you're working with, so it's about fostering a learning culture"

6. LEARN TO LEAD

The transition from team member to manager can be difficult, says accountancy coach Carol McLachlan; you need to change your mindset and keep your hands free to focus on your new team. "There's a real temptation to carry on as before. It's almost a cultural thing," she says. "A lot of people are used to measuring their worth in chargeable hours but, after promotion to manager or team leader, you can't actually be measuring that any more."

Carry agrees: "It's the difference between being selfish and selfless. It's not about you delivering your best results any more. It's now about maximising and leveraging the best results for the team."

7. LEARN WITH YOUR TEAM

McLachlan urges managers to adopt an enquiry-led approach, where they learn and grow with their team, rather than a more autocratic approach. Doing so fosters an environment of positive collaboration, she says: "Simply telling someone to do something in a particular way won't land very well. You as a manager are looking at the world through a different lens from the

David Carry learnt many valuable leadership lessons as an Olympic swimmer





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Always foster
collaboration in
your team, says
Carol McLachlan

“It’s important to establish ‘guard rails’ early on. Staff need to know which behaviours and values are acceptable and which aren’t”

person you’re working with, so it’s about fostering a learning culture, where everyone works together and helps each other out.”

Also spend time getting to know your team to get an idea of how each individual performs best, Wright advises. Identify the ‘unofficial leaders’, the influencers who can play a key role in getting buy-in from the rest of the team and keeping everyone focused.

8. DEAL WITH PROBLEMS AS THEY ARISE

“Don’t wait until the annual appraisal to tell someone they’ve been doing something wrong for the past year, because that’s bad leadership,” says Carry. “There need to be upfront conversations around behaviour so staff are on board with what’s expected of them and each other.”

Managers should address both good and bad behaviours as they happen, making sure to give specific examples. “It’s important to do both, as one without the other is counter-intuitive,” Carry adds. ■