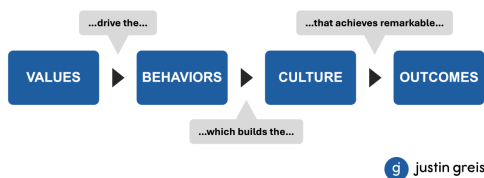




The secret formula for culture

The concept of “corporate culture” has been described as a mythical creature by many business executives. A unicorn or leprechaun of sorts, that only appears on the odd occasion at happy hours, team events or quarterly meetings. The truth is: culture is actually the bi-product of many aspects of an organization and it is built one conversation, email or hallway encounter at a time. I offer to you a simple formula for culture: *VBCO*. Let’s explore just what I mean by this cryptic acronym...



The source of a company or organization’s culture can come from many places. People bring all sorts of experiences and behaviors into work each day. Our experiences – be it good or bad – have shaped what we do and how we do it every day. Are you an asker or a teller? Do you send email acknowledgements or assume the recipient knows you got the message? Do you say please and thank you or just give the courtesy head nod? Do you smile or are you “all business?” I could go on but folks like Myers and Briggs

are much better at telling you about your personality than I. But there is no doubt that all these little traits are important and all of them swirl together to form the soup that we call “corporate culture.”

The best companies, I have found, are those who are very intentional about the type of culture they want to create. They “own” their cultures. Like parents, everyone in the organization realizes they are setting an example for one another and live what they believe. But where do you start and how can you “own” something so ethereal? I believe it exists in the fundamental values (***V*BCO**) of an organization. Values represent the core principles and norms of what a company believes to be important. Stated values let your people know what you expect from them and provide a guidepost for decision-making during those defining moments where you decide whether to listen to instinct or challenge your internal biological response to ask “is this what my values say I should do?” This is the hardest part about values – fighting years of conditioning and holding back instinct to challenge whether your response is aligned to your company’s value structure (*note: methods like R-factor are fantastic for exploring this concept*). Let’s not kid ourselves, fighting our instincts is tough...

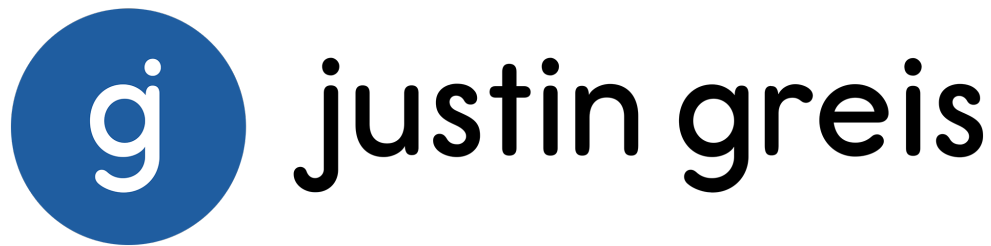
But values alone are just words on a page without the actions to back them up. From values comes behaviors (**V*B*CO**). Ideally, behaviors are the outward manifestations of a person’s belief in a set of values. They provide very action-oriented guidance as to what we expect from our people. These actions form the fabric of a culture when looked at in aggregate. The challenge we often encounter is we dismiss individual behaviors as unimportant. When someone exhibits a toxic behavior that is counter to the values of an organization, it can spread like a virus. In times like these, a cultural intervention may be required.

When a team’s actions are aligned to the shared values, you can almost feel a culture envelop you like a warm blanket when you enter the lobby. But when the people “go rogue” or behaviors start to “turn toxic,” a once beautiful tapestry of good deeds can quickly come unraveled. The fact is: the behaviors our employees carry out every day, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, form the basis for our culture.

The leader of my practice repeatedly tells us that “culture eats strategy for lunch,” and boy is that true. You can create the best strategy, make the biggest plans and have the most ambitious vision, but if your culture does not support your strategy, you will fail every time. That is the final aspects of the formula. The culture (VB***C***O) helps us achieve remarkable outcomes (VBC***O***). Be it a strategy to grow revenue, become more profitable, gain efficiency, innovate your products, you name it... Whatever the strategy or ambition, you must have the right values in place; those values must encourage the right behaviors; and those behaviors should create the culture to support your strategy. And that’s the secret formula: **values** — *drive the* → **behaviors** — *which builds the* → **culture** — *that achieves remarkable* → **outcomes**.

So, culture is not a mythical creature after all; rather, it is smack-dab in the middle of a formula that requires deliberate inputs in order to create defined outcomes. So, next time you are in a meeting talking about strategy or undertaking a new venture for your business, organization or department, ask yourself: “do we have a culture that will support this plan?” If not, take two steps back and look to your company values for guidance on the behaviors you want to encourage. I am sure you will find it time well spent and it may make the difference between fighting to salvage minimum success criteria and harnessing the power of your high performing culture to surpass your wildest expectations.

For some extra fun, check out the following [video](#) where David Holmes, the rapping Southwest flight attendant, shows us what a strong company culture is all about.



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