

Company culture cornerstones: Making culture 'go viral' across large workforces

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While developing a healthy internal culture in an SME is certainly no easy feat, instilling a common vision, purpose and values in a company of 500 or more employees presents a hurdle that many large organisations grapple to overcome.

Tracey Jager, Human Resources Director at Ackermans – a retailer with approximately 7,000 employees – explains: “It is vital to create a strong, unifying and authentic message that people can identify with, weaving a golden thread throughout the business.



Tracey Jager, Ackermans Human Resources Director

“Leaders must believe in it, and lead accordingly. It’s an enormous challenge for culture to ‘go viral’ throughout an organisation of scale, but a critical one. And while it starts with the company’s leadership, each employee plays an important role.”

Aside from establishing a core message which must resonate within a large employee base, external factors that potentially hinder delivery also need to be taken into account. “Multiple and widespread store locations, varying levels of access to internal communication channels, and infrastructure challenges all complicate the delivery, and need to be managed,” says Jager.

Strong sense of purpose

Businesses with the highest levels of employee engagement and satisfaction are those with a clearly defined and communicated purpose. Business strategy is ever-evolving and dependant on a range of variables – including economic climate, consumer needs and organisational priorities - but the company’s purpose is largely fixed.

Remaining faithful to this purpose as the organisation expands and the business strategy adapts is what contributes towards a favourable business outcome, explains Jager.

“For example, Ackermans’ purpose is ‘Bringing Value to Life’, which applies to our stakeholders, customers, industry, community, and, critically, to our employees. We strive to build an organisation that offers opportunities to our people, making new possibilities come alive.

“These are not just words; this purpose comes into play every day, and is the driving force behind all we do.”

Self-sustainable development

In larger organisations, it is easy to lose sight of employee development and upskilling, but when neglected, staff morale, workforce capability and productivity suffer.

Ackermans treats employees’ careers as a life-long journey of learning and development. “We focus first on the individual and then how they relate to others and the business as a whole.

“Our goal is to provide staff with relevant opportunities at every stage of their careers – positioning them for life-long success.”

Jager believes that a healthy development programme, particularly relevant to large organisations, should at all times:

- Motivate employees to take charge of their own development.
- Assist employees in assessing their own behaviour and performance, while self-diagnosing any problem areas or development gaps.
- Provide a customised plan to address these areas of development.
- Help develop leadership capability, equipping leaders to assist in the career growth of their team members through authentic, constructive feedback and coaching.

Finding meaning

Finding significance in the work that you do is different for everyone; what constitutes an unfavourable task for one could be hugely rewarding to another.

“We aim is to create opportunities for our employees to engage in meaningful work. Human beings do not only want to feel valued, they also need to feel they are delivering value.

“Work has to be meaningful for it to be loved and enjoyed – both to the individual, as well as the company. We enable a workplace where every employee is part of a cohesive whole, creating a culture of performance and growth that breeds success.”

While Jager believes that personal progress is important, it's “equally rewarding to put one's heart and soul into something you believe in, and then execute it relentlessly.

“Ultimately, if businesses remain true to their purpose, create an environment where self-development is encouraged and facilitated, and employees are provided with opportunities to engage in meaningful work, this starts to establish a healthy, thriving employee culture that permeates through the full spectrum of the business – regardless of size,” she concludes.

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