

# Culture Eats Strategy For Lunch

By [Shawn Parr](#)

|

January 24, 2012 CULTURE EATS STRATEGY



Get on a Southwest flight to anywhere, buy shoes from Zappos.com, pants from Nordstrom, groceries from Whole Foods, anything from Costco, a Starbucks espresso, or a Double-Double from In N' Out, and you'll get a taste of these brands' vibrant cultures.

Culture is a balanced blend of human psychology, attitudes, actions, and beliefs that combined create either pleasure or pain, serious momentum or miserable stagnation. A strong culture flourishes with a clear set of values and norms that actively guide the way a company operates. Employees are actively and passionately engaged in the business, operating from a sense of confidence and empowerment rather than navigating their days through miserably extensive procedures and mind-numbing bureaucracy. Performance-oriented cultures possess statistically better financial growth, with high employee involvement, strong internal communication, and an acceptance of a healthy level of risk-taking in order to achieve new levels of innovation.

## **Misunderstood and mismanaged**

Culture, like brand, is misunderstood and often discounted as a touchy-feely component of business that belongs to HR. It's not intangible or fluffy, it's not a vibe or the office décor. It's one of the most important drivers that has to be set or adjusted to push long-term, sustainable

success. It's not good enough just to have an amazing product and a healthy bank balance. Long-term success is dependent on a culture that is nurtured and alive. Culture is the environment in which your strategy and your brand thrives or dies a slow death.

Think about it like a nurturing habitat for success. Culture cannot be manufactured. It has to be genuinely nurtured by everyone from the CEO down. Ignoring the health of your culture is like letting aquarium water get dirty.

If there's any doubt about the value of investing time in culture, there are significant benefits that come from a vibrant and alive culture:

- **Focus:** Aligns the entire company towards achieving its vision, mission, and goals.
- **Motivation:** Builds higher employee motivation and loyalty.
- **Connection:** Builds team cohesiveness among the company's various departments and divisions.
- **Cohesion:** Builds consistency and encourages coordination and control within the company.
- **Spirit:** Shapes employee behavior at work, enabling the organization to be more efficient and alive.

## **Mission accomplished**

**Corporate culture is a hot topic among businesses who want to attract the best talent, translate their values to their products and services, and show customers what they're all about. And it doesn't cost a thing.**

Think about the Marines: the few, the proud. They have a connected community that is second to none, and it comes from the early indoctrination of every member of the Corps and the clear communication of their purpose and value system. It is completely clear that they are privileged to be joining an elite community that is committed to improvising, adapting, and overcoming in the face of any adversity. The culture is so strong that it glues the community together and engenders a sense of pride that makes them unparalleled. The culture is what each Marine relies on in battle and in preparation. It is an amazing example of a living culture that drives pride and performance. It is important to step back and ask whether the purpose of your organization is clear and whether you have a compelling value system that is easy to understand. Mobilizing and energizing a culture is predicated on the organization clearly understanding the vision, mission, values, and goals. It's leadership's responsibility to involve the entire organization, informing and inspiring them to live out the purpose the organization in the construct of the values.

## **Vibrant and healthy**

Do you run into your culture every day? Does it inspire you, or smack you in the face and get in your way, slowing and wearing you down? Is it overpowering or does it inspire you to overcome challenges? It's important to understand what is driving your culture. Is it power and ego that people react to, and try to gain power, or a culture of encouragement and empowerment? Is it driven from top-down directives, or cross-department collaboration? To get a taste of your

culture, all you have to do is sit in an executive meeting, the cafe or the lunch room, listen to the conversations, look at the way decisions are made and the way departments cooperate. Take time out and get a good read on the health of your culture.

## **Culture fuels brand**

A vibrant culture provides a cooperative and collaborative environment for a brand to thrive in. Your brand is the single most important asset to differentiate you consistently over time, and it needs to be nurtured, evolved, and invigorated by the people entrusted to keep it true and alive. Without a functional and relevant culture, the money invested in research and development, product differentiation, marketing, and human resources is never maximized and often wasted because it's not fueled by a sustaining and functional culture.

Look at Zappos, one of the fastest companies to reach \$1 billion in recent years, fueled by an electric and eclectic culture, one that's inclusionary, encouraging, and empowering. It's well-documented, celebrated, and shared willingly with anyone who wants to learn from it. Compare that to American Apparel, the controversial and prolific fashion retailer with a well-documented and highly dysfunctional culture. Zappos is thriving and on its way to \$2 billion, while American Apparel is mired in bankruptcy and controversy. Both companies are living out their missions-- one is to create happiness, and the other is based on self-centered perversity. Authenticity and values always win.

## **Uncommon sense for a courageous and vibrant culture**

It's easy to look at companies like Stonyfield Farms, Zappos, Google, Virgin, Whole Foods, or Southwest Airlines and admire them for their passionate, engaged, and active cultures that are on display for the world to see. Building a strong culture takes hard work and true commitment and, while not something you can tick off in boxes, here are some very basic building blocks to consider:

### **1. Dynamic and engaged leadership**

A vibrant culture is organic and evolving. It is fueled and inspired by leadership that is actively involved and informed about the realities of the business. They genuinely care about the company's role in the world and are passionately engaged. They are great communicators and motivators who set out a clearly communicated vision, mission, values, and goals and create an environment for them to come alive.

### **2. Living values**

It's one thing to have beliefs and values spelled out in a frame in the conference room. It's another thing to have genuine and memorable beliefs that are directional, alive and modeled throughout the organization daily. It's important that departments and individuals are motivated and measured against the way they model the values. And, if you want a values-driven culture, hire people using the values as a filter. If you want your company to embody the culture, empower people and ensure every department understands what's expected. Don't just list your company's values in PowerPoints; bring them to life in people, products, spaces, at events, and in communication.

3. **Responsibility and accountability**

Strong cultures empower their people, they recognize their talents, and give them a very clear role with responsibilities they're accountable for. It's amazing how basic this is, but how absent the principle is in many businesses.

4. **Celebrate success and failure**

Most companies that run at speed often forget to celebrate their victories both big and small, and they rarely have time or the humility to acknowledge and learn from their failures. Celebrate both your victories and failures in your own unique way, but share them and share them often.

*Shawn Parr is the The Guvner & CEO of [Bulldog Drummond](#), an innovation and design consultancy headquartered in San Diego whose clients and partners have included Starbucks, Diageo, Jack in the Box, Adidas, MTV, Nestle, Pinkberry, American Eagle Outfitters, IDEO, Virgin, Disney, Nike, Mattel, Heineken, Annie's Homegrown, The Michael J Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, CleanWell, The Honest Kitchen and World Vision. Follow the conversation at [@BULLDOGDRUMMOND](#).*