Great Teams = Great Times

Jeana Babcock

What do you do for fun during the long winter months? Have you ever been snow tubing? We recently had the perfect day snow tubing with our shop crew and families on the awesome hills of Ironwood Springs Christian Ranch. It was a great time of fellowship and fun away from the strains of work!

Previously I thought, these guys are with us for so many hours during the work week -- so why would they want to spend any free time with us? One word. Culture.

Have you ever pondered this word and considered all that it entails? Do you understand how important a good culture is? What is the culture of your workplace? Your home? Your heart?

Culture is a very complex concept which influences almost every aspect of our lives. Culture encompasses the religions we practice, music we listen to, food we eat, and traditions we celebrate. On a deeper level, culture includes our beliefs and values. It's also in the little things - in how we greet others, how we behave with loved ones, and even in how we make decisions.

If you Google culture, you will find that there are many takes on it and definitions of it. It's a big word filled with deep meaning. And it's more than just words, practices, beliefs and attitudes. It's a feeling. Good cultures create "feel good" feelings and bad cultures deliver the opposite.

When it comes to the beliefs and values part of culture, we typically gravitate toward others that share our culture. Don't get me wrong, I love getting to know other people with diverse backgrounds and different cultures, and I have many friends whose cultures differ from mine. But some of the deepest relationships I have are ones whose culture or at least many aspects of their culture align with mine. Is it the same for you? Are those the people you long to do life with?

What about culture in the workplace? Now, that's where things tend to be out of our control, right? If you don't own your own business, you don't necessarily get to choose the types of people you do work life with. But might you have the power to improve the culture in your workplace? We'll come back to this later.

If you do own your own business, how do you hire? Do you hire for the skills you are looking for? Or do you hire based on whether or not the candidates fit your culture?

As the work pool has changed over the years, it has become more and more difficult to find great employees -- ones who have skill, common sense and who care. In our time in business ownership, we have made many, many mistakes in who we have asked to join our team. Sometimes the person who comes in for the interview is not the same person who shows up for work on day one. Sometimes there is hidden drama that doesn't come to the surface until the work "honeymoon" is over. Sometimes, we hired out of desperation and it backfired ten-fold. There are many more "sometimes" in our hiring mistakes, but just as it is with all difficulties or bad decisions, we have learned and grown from them.

The biggest way we've grown is in learning to hire based on skill and our culture. But we could not do that until our culture was clearly defined. In an effort to do so, a few years ago, we read books, went to seminars, and watched podcasts. We then hired a business consultant gifted in the art of teaching best business practices, including culture. He joined our management team in a meeting where he asked each of us to come to the table with a list of positive traits or attributes that described the three key people within our business. As a team, we combined similar words and narrowed everything down to fit into six categories - one that comes from "auto lingo" and five others that are great for any person to have - Positive, Respect, Quality, Integrity, Efficiency. From there we developed our company's purpose that they all fell within.

You may have seen our billboard around town with our purpose clearly stated for all to see: "We care for people and fix cars." This purpose encompasses our entire culture. As a team, we care -- we care for one another, we care for our customers, we care for our community. We fix cars -- well, that's one thing we do. As passionate as I am about maintenance, I would have loved to add that part in, but it's a big word and not that catchy -- so we hoped it would be implied by the "care" we put in.

Since we have defined our culture, we now have a basis in which to run our business, including hiring, managing, performing reviews, problem solving and more. We also, as a team, have memorized our purpose and values (well, mostly) and call people out (in a good way!) in monthly meetings by sharing how they displayed our purpose or one of our values.

Hiring people with culture in mind is a game-changer. Of course, we won't always know with words and non-verbals if a candidate will display our values and fit into our culture. But I believe that within the first half hour of an interview we can tell if someone cares by the things they say or don't say in answer to the questions we ask. From my experience, I believe you can teach a lot of things, but you can't teach people to care. If you can tell that the candidate cares, you can start to go deeper and glean other things from their attitude, words and demeanor to learn if they will fit with the culture.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that we are still not 100% successful in who we hire. Sometimes drama and issues sometimes sneak their way in. But mostly, hiring with culture works well -- even if they have other aspects of their own culture that aren't necessarily ours. We understand that people may have different beliefs and values in their hearts and personal lives. However, as long as they care and fit within our culture, while they are with us, we have found that it weighs out well.

There have been times that my colleagues who own other independent repair shops complain about things their employees are or are not doing. Before I learned about culture, I would empathize with them and try to come up with solutions to help. Now that my perception has changed in the light of how important culture is, of course I still empathize, but I also inquire about their culture. Having a defined culture has changed my outlook, and it's given our management team a concrete set of standards in which to have crucial conversations. It also allows us to ask questions and get to the root of the problem more quickly than tiptoeing around an issue and wondering why it continues to be an issue week after week.

Here's an example. There was an occasion when one of our mechanics washed the floor under his hoist more often than what was needed. Having a clean work environment is awesome. But we also saw that it was decreasing his efficiency in fixing cars. Knowing that we "work with efficiency," our shop foreman was able to address the issue in light of this value. Come to find out, one silly comment by another mechanic made our floor washer feel that he should keep his area pristine. It was not needed and he was released from having to feel this way. Easy peasy.

Performance reviews are another area where culture can be utilized. Perhaps the team member is doing everything great in their eyes and they are personally reaping rewards from their work. But if they have a negative attitude and are disrespecting others, these are things we bring to the attention of the employee in the moment -- and if there is no change, then at performance review time. A defined culture once again becomes the basis of drawing alongside team members and helping them understand (hopefully) the reason for a poor performance review. Sadly, there are times when a person does not improve and no amount of loving them through the process will ever work. In this case, "caring for people" may just be tough love and parting ways.

Now let's dive deeper into the "feeling" part of culture. Anyone can write pretty uplifting words and put them on a paper. Anyone can say "I care about you." But if actions don't follow the words, it's all pretty hollow, wouldn't you say?

So how does one create a "feel good" culture that doesn't just look good on paper? You live it. You plan for it. You understand that keeping great employees includes caring for them in priceless ways. It means having a cookout (when the weather is warm, of course), it's recognizing their birthdays/anniversaries, it's handing out chocolate just because (for who doesn't need an occasional chocolate?), it's asking them how they are and how their weekend was, it's buying lunch after a great week -- or a not-so-great week, it's being interested in them, it's sharing successes with gratitude and sometimes high-fives, it's having fun with them so work is more enjoyable, it's a million different things that make culture feel good.

But there is more. It's the more outside of work -- team building events with fellowship and fun. It's in these times that team members get to know each other on new levels -- it's time away from the everyday stresses where our guards are let down and more fun is let out. It's taken me many years to realize this, but I have learned (finally) that this is the sweet spot of a feel-good culture. Boy was that snow tubing with our people a blast and brought about all kinds of warm fuzzies!

Who knew that there was so much to business ownership? It isn't just picking a name, hiring people and providing service. It's a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get it off the ground. And then it's taking a step back to see how it can be done better. It's being teachable and caring. It's providing a culture, written and unwritten, that people can be proud of and part of.

My friends, business ownership is kind of like snow tubing. You take off down the hill at lightning speed, screaming all the way, making a wrong turn, tipping over, planting your face full in the snow. Then it's getting back up, brushing yourself off, ascending that hill with more knowledge so that you can do it better the next time. And in the end, it's so much better because you have a great team to snow tube with!

But aren't the ups and downs of snow tubing also like life in general? It's in the workplace, in our homes, in our friendships and groups. And don't we, whether we own businesses or not, whether we are parents or not, whether we are in management or not, have the power to allow the culture of our hearts to ooze out in unwritten ways to positively affect those in our sphere of influence? Life is often crazy as we fly down the snowy hills, tumble, collide with others, plant our face in the snow. But we have the ability to brush ourselves off, grow, learn, change and get back up to do it better next time. We have the power to improve our culture in our hearts, our homes, our workplace and any group we are a part of. And life becomes much better because of the great teams we get to do life with!

So as we march into March, how might you join me in caring for others with a positive attitude and a "feel good" culture?