

Creating an Intentional Culture

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Was it in geography, world history, or civics that you first became aware of the word “culture”? Or maybe you first heard the term “culture” in preparing Petri dishes when studying bacteria.

How you learned that word doesn't matter; you now have or are building a culture in your organization! What? Has nobody ever told you that? I'm telling you that one of your biggest jobs as a leader is being intentional about building (and improving) your culture!

Open your mind to how an outside observer might describe your organization's culture. What if your leadership team became more focused on the culture you and your colleagues want to create?

“Culture” is merely shared habits and expectations within an organization. Let me share two examples of intentional cultures that you can study as models to stimulate your imagination!

Think back to that class in U.S. history. Remember those guys named Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin? Remember the Continental Congress and debates about how the big states and small states would be represented? Some of you memorized, “We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...” (Um, for most of us, it gets a little fuzzy after that!)

All that debate in the 1770s was a large-scale effort to establish an intentional culture. Nothing like democracy had ever existed before in the history of the world! People who were committed to creating a better way offered many renegade ideas. “What if we worked it like this?”

We take all that for granted today, but those activities were radical! They sure took King George III by surprise! Over two centuries later, the concepts are still being copied elsewhere in the world!

How about a current culture that's being intentionally built? Visit a Chick-Fil-A restaurant and listen to the employees. When you hear “My pleasure!” in response to your “Thank you,” take a moment and ask that person “Do you say, ‘My pleasure!’ when you're not at work?” Listen closely for the energy in the answer. Then ask how working at Chick-Fil-A has influenced this person's life in other ways.

In his 1989 book entitled *It's Easier to Succeed Than to Fail*, Truett Cathy reveals that in 1946, at the end of his first week operating his new restaurant, he and his brother Ben decided to close on Sunday. “Never have I intended to make a big issue out of being closed on Sunday,” Cathy writes. But he also notes, “People who take a day of rest to worship the Lord and to refresh themselves spiritually and physically are the kind of associates we seek.”

The company is unexpectedly open about how it conducts its business. Researching this article on the internet (web address is www.chick-fil-a.com), I found many “frequently asked questions” with surprisingly frank answers! (Update: the frequently asked questions page was recently removed.)

The stated purpose of Chick-Fil-A is, “To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-Fil-A.” Their systems and structures are all intentionally set up to serve. Your culture could be that intentional, too.

Ah, the cynics out there are thinking, “Sure, but what about the results?” In 2001, fifty-five years into its history, Chick-Fil-A reached the \$1 billion mark in annual sales. Five years later, they doubled to \$2 billion. They doubled again, to \$4 billion in 2012, then \$8 billion in 2016. Sales were \$10 billion in 2018, and stores exist in 47 states and the District of Columbia. Now those are some good results!

David Grossnickle, owner/operator of the store on Sam Nunn Boulevard in Perry, GA, was generous with his time as I sought perspective for this column. Are you interested in learning more about building intentional cultures? David says he's willing to talk with you about how Chick-Fil-A is doing it!