



Guide 3 of 3

Driving Consultancy Culture

TIPS & INSIGHTS



Culture club: engaging your team for a more productive business

Please note: In this guide, we use the term ‘consultants’ to define any project-based business that offers a service to clients and needs to track time and project progress against estimates.

Culture is the bond which ties people together and creates a sense of common purpose – not just in wider society, but also within individual businesses.

In fact, in many ways, the culture of a consultancy is arguably the only thing that can truly be said to differentiate it. After all, the services you provide, the structures you develop, even the results you achieve, they can all be duplicated. Culture, on the other hand, is truly unique – the DNA of your company.

And the importance of corporate culture to business success is growing all the time. In an age in which businesses are growing ever more transparent to their stakeholders, the culture of a firm can become a key competitive advantage, or a millstone holding it back.

Deloitte’s annual [Global Human Capital Trends](#) report has identified employee engagement and culture as the number one challenge facing businesses worldwide.

Unsurprisingly, 66% of HR respondents to the report stated

that they are currently in the process of updating their engagement and retention strategies. So, is it time you followed suit?

After all, a positive and encompassing corporate culture can help you improve the outputs of your team, attract the top talent, and encourage more fruitful client relationships.

While perceptions of how businesses should ‘behave’ and interact with employees are evolving all the time, a winning business culture largely comes down to a focus on:



Developing an engaged and satisfied team

While it's long been presumed that happier workers are more productive workers, it's only recently that a study has put a tangible metric on the impact of employee happiness on productivity levels (a not insignificant 12% uplift).

Of course, if you need any more compelling reason to believe in the power of 'happiness' at work, you need only look at the meteoric success of one the pioneers of the concept – Google. The culture of extravagant employee perks and allowing 20% of work hours on non-work side projects has helped create one of the most engaged and innovative workforces the world has ever seen.

As Clive Schlee, the CEO of sandwich chain Pret-a-Manger, a company committed to employee happiness, has previously said: "The first thing I look at is whether staff are touching each other – are they smiling, reacting to each other, happy, engaged? I can almost predict sales on body language alone."

So, how can you ensure your team is a happy one?



Maximise purpose and buzz

Contrary to popular belief, people are not intrinsically motivated by profit or market share – rather by a sense of purpose. It is the shared values and mission that brings us to work everyday, after all.

So it's important to make sure that shared purpose is central to everything your company does. A sense of the big picture and understanding of where all the members of the team fit within it helps provide a fresh dose of motivation on a daily basis.

How do you achieve this? A couple of core options to consider include:

A focus on assessing the end goal, not how someone got there: Often consultants are assessed on the exact processes they used to get to an end result, rather than their success in meeting the goal. There needs to be a careful balance. While we need processes to ensure consistency of delivery and protect against unnecessary mistakes, innovators who use their initiative to deliver great results in a new way shouldn't be discouraged from thinking about novel new approaches.

Incentivise great results: When people share in the spoils of great results they help achieve, they go the extra mile. Of course, it doesn't always have to be a financial incentive – rewards can come in many forms and sometimes simple forms of recognition count for more than a monetary reward. Anything that builds loyalty and puts a sense of reward at the centre of your culture.

Offer a sense of autonomy

With studies showing that people work harder and are more effective when they have a sense of choice and ownership, providing more autonomy is a sure fire way to increase motivation and workplace satisfaction.

In fact, something as minor as giving employees the freedom to move their desk has been demonstrated to increase their sense of control within the business. An increasingly popular extension of this idea is to set up individual desks or sub-departments within a consultancy – mini-units which have flexibility and freedom to set up their own processes and run their own projects, sometimes even with their own revenue streams. Think of it as creating 'little companies' within your business, and giving each the freedom to rise to the challenge of their own entrepreneurial potential.

It all helps to provide a greater sense of 'we did it' to every member of the team.

CULTURE DEVELOPMENT TIPS

1

Seeing the big picture is very hard when information is scattered all over the company. It makes it hard for senior management, and even harder for the team, to assess progress towards each project's end goal. As an illustration, the Financial / Commercial Manager of one consultancy told us after installing Synergist that the new system is "all-encompassing. You have to see the big picture at a glance. We have 40 people here now. They all use Synergist and access the same data." This was a world away from their previous culture where data fragmentation prevented a rounded perspective for the team developing.

CULTURE DEVELOPMENT TIPS

2

Many companies today realise that developing an entrepreneurial culture pays big dividends, and this involves encouraging mini teams, and even individuals, to think as if they are running a small enterprise. Ironically this helps pull each team together because they don't compete – they all share a common goal, which is to thrive. The founder of one consultancy told us that implementing Synergist helps people to be "empowered to run their own departments like proper little companies now."

Expand commercial awareness to all

Creating a strong sense of ownership in a business is also about giving team members more insights and access to the financial implications of their activities on the wider business.

Indeed, the strong commercial awareness this engenders among personnel can substantially increase engagement, enhance loyalty and, most importantly, help employees improve their own performance. After all, if you don't understand the direction the business you work for is going, it's hard to follow.

Unfortunately, commercial awareness is a skill that is often flagged as being in short demand right across the economy. While Targetjobs has identified it as the top skill a graduate recruiter looks for in a potential employee, the Association of Graduate Recruiters has found that commercial awareness is the number one skill shortage in the UK.

Part of the issue is that commercial awareness is often seen as something that new employees need to learn themselves – an attitude that is developed through osmosis over time. Far fewer business leaders look at how they can actively support the fast-tracking and continuous development of the commercial awareness of the employees within their business. But that's exactly what any leader committed to empowering their team should do.

Four key areas to focus on are:

Ensuring all employees have a strong understanding of your organisation: Does everyone know how your company works, how it makes money, and what it cares about most? Even new starters? If you aren't confident they do, now could be an ideal time to look at your processes for educating new employees on your business' mission and vision, its core values, key result areas, and expressed goals.

Educating your team on resourcing and supplier best practice: Every business relies on resources and suppliers to operate effectively – and it's important for every member of the team to use these resources effectively and ensure they get the best price for the goods and services they procure.

Ensure that resource planners are shared across team members so they can jointly prioritise scheduling in the best interest of the overall agency (rather than seeing it as competitive free-for-all). And if you haven't already, create a centralised database of approved suppliers, alongside an archive of previous purchases and procedures regarding gaining competitive quotes. This will ensure that your teams are well versed in how to achieve best value with any purchases they have to make.

Being more transparent with the financials: By sharing business critical financial information, you empower individuals within your company to see how their role fits into the bigger perspective – and how they have contributed to overall business success. And by giving them an awareness of how their activities have contributed to the bottom line, team members are more likely to take greater pride in projects well done.

CULTURE DEVELOPMENT TIPS

3 Having the team suddenly become commercially aware is one of those step changes that can happen in a consultancy. The Commercial Manager of a client told us that *"It's been an education for the team. It's increased the financial knowledge to non-finance staff tenfold. It's given them more of a sense of responsibility, more discipline. The team have become much more commercially minded now."*

CULTURE DEVELOPMENT TIPS

4 Don't underestimate the power of having centralised project communications on projects. One MD told us of the satisfaction he had when he made an update to a job affecting several team members in different ways. He watched as they all quickly saw the change and started acting on it. He said it was like watching information magically trickle across the office. It's another of those benefits that you probably don't think of when considering a new system.

IN PRACTICE

As Synergist is a system which provides access to everything in one place for all of the team (subject to the access restrictions you set), it lifts commercial awareness for all. The access to cross-team, end-to-end information – which in many consultancies is siloed and not easily accessible or frequently shared – helps make the 'impenetrable understandable', as one of our current clients has previously phrased it.

For new graduates, this can help fast-track their career – giving them access to detailed project data from day one and helping them to be more strategic and independent in their decision-making. Even more experienced personnel can gain new skills through exposure to the full financial details of the projects they plan and deliver. In turn, this can help make them more disciplined and financially-minded.

Create a winning mentality

The mentality of a team is a crucial element of corporate culture. A high- functioning team is one that is confident about commercial objectives, clear on how decisions are made and all members feel that they have a defined place within the company.

These confident and driven employees are not only more informed and purposeful, they are also empowered to perform to the upper limits of their abilities.

But, how can this mentality be engrained into everything a company does?



Turbocharge collaboration

According to a Salesforce.com study, 86% of executives blame workplace failures on a lack of collaboration and poor communication.

It's a shocking finding, but low levels of collaboration is both a cause and effect of an ineffective corporate culture. If team members don't collaborate, the sense of common purpose diminishes. And when a team doesn't have a sense of common purpose, it is more likely to work in isolated silos...

While workplace collaboration isn't an easy concept to summarise, in essence it's all about the ability and willingness of employees to communicate openly among each other, to ensure information is efficiently shared and resources effectively assigned.

Some quick-fire ways to develop a meaningful culture of collaboration include:

Make teamwork a performance management measure: By measuring an individual's contribution to the wider team when assessing their performance, and making it clear that it is a key part of their role, you encourage employees to value and take seriously its importance.

Celebrate great collaboration: If you've already explained to your team the benefits and importance of working together but have not seen a noticeable change in behaviour, you may need to introduce some type of reward or recognition programme to help instil the culture of working together. Better to reward good practice than punish ignorance of new initiatives.

Look for opportunities for reciprocity: Sometimes the easiest way to introduce a new way of working is to look for obvious examples where it will be beneficial. It may be necessary to engineer a flagship project (perhaps an internal one) built around a high degree of collaboration and requirement for team members to allocate resources between themselves, to help integrate a new approach to working more closely together.

Increase team confidence

Confidence is a key element of great corporate culture. And confident employees are more open to questioning and challenging their own decisions and presumptions.

Without the ability to be self-reflective, consultants can fall into the trap of introducing biases in the approaches they take and recommendations they make.

As Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains: "A team that has fallen in love with its recommendation may subconsciously dismiss evidence that contradicts its theories, give far too much weight to one piece of data, or make faulty comparisons to another business case."

Even experienced consultants can be fallible – we're all prone to erroneous thinking at times. And this is where a culture which values and recognises the ability to evaluate our own decisions and admit when we make mistakes can help set a consultancy apart.

The first step is to empower employees with the ability to take a wider, unbiased view of a project. Working with integrated resource planning systems can help consultants immensely, enabling them to use sophisticated calculation and scoping tools to back up their gut feel on project planning and allowing them to tap into centralised datasets to help them learn from the wider experiences of the whole consultancy.

It's also important to educate the team on how to recognise the warning signs that biases could be clouding their judgement, and provide clear guidelines on how to ensure decision-making always remains objective and evidence-based.

CULTURE DEVELOPMENT TIPS

5 Decisions are not so hard if you have all the relevant facts at your fingertips. A Director of one project-based company told us *"Synergist makes it easier to make those tough decisions about jobs, because the information is there to back up your hunch."* And the MD of a London-based consultancy said: *"It helps us in our decision-making as reporting is easily available. This helps us make on-the-spot decisions on many varied issues as well as more strategic ones regarding focusing more on the most profitable areas of work."*

CULTURE DEVELOPMENT TIPS

6 Increased confidence is not only something that relates to team members. It also affects senior management. Driving a project-based business is a complex business, so giving the senior decision-makers instant access to key information that was previously hard to get at, or even invisible, can have dramatic effects on management confidence. One Director told us *"Synergist tracks past, present and forecasts future for us, and gives us stability, reference points and confidence in the performance of the business."*

Maintain the culture you build

Culture is not something that you simply build up and then move on to the next challenge confident that the job is done. It needs to be constantly and consistently improved on and re-evaluated.

While you may succeed in creating an inspiring and inclusive corporate culture in the short term, it's crucial to put processes in place to maintain those initial surges in engagement, goodwill and excitement over the long-run – especially if you want to keep your top talent and maintain strong client relationships.



Keep things challenging

Top performing staff need to be constantly challenged to remain engaged and motivated.

In fact, [research has found](#) a strong correlation between current level of challenge in an employee's role and their level of job satisfaction.

The same research found that employees tend to require around just 12 months before they begin to feel ready for a new role. Of course, an obvious benefit of consultancy life in this regard is that most consultants will find satisfaction in working on a range of new projects that change on a regular basis. However, risk of apathy can still occur if a consultant repeatedly carries out the same types of task.

The issues that can ensue if this does happen are manifest. At best, indifference to work may begin to set in, with a resulting lowering of performance and morale. At worst, the employee may simply begin to look elsewhere for a new, more exciting role.

Fortunately, there are some clear signs to look out for in identifying when someone needs to be re-energized with a fresh challenge:

- Smooth management of everything they run for a significant period of time.
- They are quick to jump to a solution when faced with problems.
- They spend time trying to fix other colleagues' / departments' problems.
- A sense that they have grown increasingly but inexplicably negative.

If it's clear that an employee is displaying these tell-tale signs of job stagnation, then it could be time to make things a little bit more difficult for that person – in a positive way!

Think about kicking this off by having a meeting with them to find out what new tasks or functions they'd be interested in gaining more experience in and provide them with a clear action plan on how to move their role forward and provide them with new challenges.

Avoid needless complication

Engaged employees should be regularly challenged to keep them motivated – but not by needless complications and processes. A core aspect of maintaining a high performing culture is to de-clutter the unnecessary procedures and bureaucracy that frustrate employees.

An always-on attitude to working life has created a situation in which the sheer scale of information consultants face daily can begin to create resentment and make it difficult for them to demarcate what is business critical from activities which add little real value to the consultancy.

It's certainly not a phenomenon limited to the sector – 60% of companies across numerous industries surveyed by Deloitte said employees feel "overwhelmed" by the volume of activity and messages at work. So, when going through a programme to enhance your consultancy's culture a key aim should be maintaining a focus on the truly important things.

IN PRACTICE

Synergist helps maintain focus on what matters by pulling all key information together in one place. In the noisy consultancy environment, this at-a-glance access to the big picture helps consultancy leaders and their team give increased emphasis on the areas of their business that have represent the greatest opportunities and challenges.

By providing a more holistic picture of client relationships and projects, Synergist also helps consultancies to focus their priorities and performance indicators on the key externally-facing factors and objectives, rather than getting tied down in needless internal bureaucracy or arbitrary target hitting.

TIPS & INSIGHTS

7

A consultancy management system can make it much easier to focus on the important things. One Financial Manager told us *"Before Synergist, we used several different systems. None of their elements talked to each other. We needed far greater capture of everything that is going on. We needed to focus on key performance indicators, which relies on everything being connected, everything in one place."*



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Synergist – the trusted job costing and project management system that helps consultancies take control of their business and improve profitability and performance.

We've spent the last 15 years creating systems for consultancy and agency managers to help them drive their time-and-project led businesses more effectively. This has led to a wealth of narratives by business managers explaining how Synergist has saved them time, improved efficiencies, increased team awareness of big-picture issues, informed decision-making and improved client service.

We're based in the UK in a delightful converted cotton mill next to a canal in the hilly part of Cheshire, close to Manchester.

Fancy a chat? Give us a call or drop us an email.

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Our colleagues at **Magnifeye / The Agency Works**, our implementation & training partners from our first days, will be happy to give you a personalised demonstration of the system either online or in your office. See **www.magnifeye.co.uk**

