

Culture is the key differentiator



Many leaders like to craft a culture that resonates with employees. For Brian Fielkow, culture is what enables top organizations to stand apart.

Fielkow, 49, is president and CEO of Jetco Delivery, a trucking firm based in Houston with about 145 employees. He's also author of Driving to Perfection.

EL: How do you define organizational culture?

Fielkow: I define it as people and process working together in harmony. It's managing behavior, a set of non-negotiable core values to live by.

EL: Many leaders identify core values. But employees may not always live the values. Why?

Fielkow: You can have these great signs on the wall and then they're promptly abandoned if there's a lack of alignment. Leaders need to live the values. The real work comes in not just articulating the values, but also weaving them into the operation of the company.

EL: Can you give an example?

Fielkow: If teamwork is a value but you only reward individual effort, that's a problem. If integrity is a value but you tell a little lie, then integrity isn't a value.

EL: As CEO, how do you align the values at your firm?

Fielkow: Teamwork is a value, so our bonuses have to be based on team performance, not individual performance. I also talk about what I call "the three Ts": treatment, transparency and trust. If any of those three are broken, that's when you run into a problem.

EL: How can you gauge your success in living your values?

Fielkow: We're in an industry with 115% annual turnover. Our raw number is about one-third of that.

EL: What other steps do you take to bring employees together?

Fielkow: In our company, an easy step we took was letting our drivers elect a drivers' committee to help us make decisions. Now we have a whole team of drivers aligned with us as opposed to the we/they approach. Our drivers have guided more of our capital spending decisions. They also wrote our bonus program. So nobody can say, "That's a dumb program." It's their program.

EL: Any other suggestions that leaders can take to cultivate a team spirit?

Fielkow: At organizations where there's a disconnect between management and the front line, you can have an unscripted series of lunches to really listen to your team.

EL: What about inviting—and acting upon—good ideas from the workforce?

Fielkow: When we get ideas from our team, we skip the low-value ideas and we take the high-values ideas and put them into two buckets: easy-to-implement and hard-to-implement. Then we focus on the easy ones. That can quickly give you some small wins.

EL: But do small wins resonate with employees?

Fielkow: They do if you celebrate them. If you go 30 days without an injury, celebrate it now. Don't wait to see if you go longer.

EL: What are some other high-value, easy-to-implement ideas?

Fielkow: Eliminating employees who are incurably out of line with your values is easy to do and high-value. It's not fun. You know who's bringing down your organization. Coach them and bring them along. And if they aren't coachable, you may need to let them go.

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