DEFINING THE UNWRITTEN RULES

by Jennifer Stewart-Burton, Purdue University

Changing company culture is no easy feat. In fact, it isn't even easy to define what company culture is — let alone changing it.

In the business world, culture is defined as the unwritten rules everyone knows to follow. While sometimes parts of the company culture can be found in the mission, more often it's intangible and is the answer to what makes people within the company unique, says **Scott Downey,** Associate Director of **Purdue's Center for Food and Agricultural Business**.

"Culture can be good or bad. It isn't top-down. It's not policy," he says. "Culture is a paradox because it's unwritten. Once it's written it becomes policy. Culture is really about how people behave toward peers, customers and leaders."

Also included in culture are people's attitudes toward everything — internal and external. It is a very democratic system — all have a voice and all of those voices are equal, from CEO to the newest hire.

But while culture isn't policy and it isn't top-down, management does have a role.

To develop a strategy for culture, just as with any area of business, there are three important questions that have to be answered: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? How will we use our resources to bridge the gap?

Managers need to start by writing down what they want the culture to be, then they can start to understand what the current culture is. Once they have defined the current culture, they can measure the gaps.

"Measuring culture is hard for leaders," Downey says. "People won't necessarily lie, but they will tell the leader what they think he or she wants to hear. You can and should ask employees about the company culture because it is useful, but you won't always get the whole story."

Downey likens it to asking about employee satisfaction. For example,

employees will often tell leadership that they are happy in their jobs, while at the same time pursuing other opportunities.

Instead of outright asking, Downey says there are some situational and judgement questions that, when asked carefully, can generate helpful responses. His top five:

1. Who is the best employee in our organization? Why?

2. Who do you think leadership views as the best employee in the organization?

3. What is the most important tradition we have in our organization?

4. What are the most important parts of our history? How did we get good at what we do?

5. If our company had a motto, what would it be?

Culture is closely tied to values. While most companies have a written set of values, those may or may not reflect the real values that people in the company operate by. It's always good to ask employees what values the company operates by. It's also good to ask customers what they perceive to be the organization's values. The answers to those questions will give a truer sense of culture than written values, which are sometimes aspirational more than lived.

"Lived values should be obvious to everyone," Downey says. "Culture represents the values that everyone knows. If you want to get a good sense for company culture, ask the newest employee what makes the organization different than his or her last."

The challenge then becomes closing the gaps between where culture is and where management wants it to be. Making that shift is tricky; however, and can't be done with policy.

SALES MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The critical, yet intangible nature of company culture, and the ways to affect change are part of what Downey will teach at the upcoming Sales Management and Leadership program, May 31-June 1 on Purdue's West Lafayette, IN, campus. The program helps sales professionals make the transition to management, and helps managers improve their leadership skills. Learn more at *http://agribusiness.purdue.edu/SML-17*. **AM**

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