

# Company Culture is the Story We Tell Ourselves... About Ourselves

**CULTURE**

**W**hen we were kids, "culture" was some dark green goo we put into a petri dish to grow bacteria. Company culture is the same – maybe not as gooey, but essentially an environment in which to grow people, process, and profit.

Every company has a "culture." Some companies define it and improve it. Others simply wallow in it, for better or worse, while going about their business. Mainly because that's their story about the importance of designing their "culture!"

Before I can help any leader define and improve their culture, I try to understand what they mean by "culture." Get five leaders in a room, and you'll get five different stories as an answer. Even when they work at the same company!

What follows are stories I consider helpful when identifying and designing company culture. These stories will interrelate with each other to create the overall culture.

Know this: *the fastest way to transform your culture is to consciously design your stories.*

## The Leader's Story

It could be the CEO, not-for-profit director, or President. Whoever is running the show. The Leader. The Big Cheese. The face of the place! The story that person tells themselves about the company is where company culture begins. Many times, new leaders are brought in to share *their new story* of what the company could be.

One of my favorite questions for clients is, **“What is your story about the company?”** What is the past, current, and future story? We don't rush it. We take our time. Let it unfurl. Make it detailed and visual. Sometimes the exercise reveals they don't have the fully articulated story for the company they thought they did.

Once we clarify what the story is, we can then determine if their story is producing the results they are after.

## Commitment to the Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals.

For example, Nordstrom's built its brand on a commitment to extraordinary customer service. That was, and is, their cultural story. That commitment begins in the hiring process and is reinforced through continuous training, policies, and procedures.

It is also reinforced by sharing stories of how customers have been treated gracefully, even in what might be considered a difficult situation. Like letting someone return tires to the store even though they never sold them. (It's a true story. The interesting thing is there was a tire store at the location previously.)

I can generally tell how well articulated a company's vision, mission, values, and goals are simply by walking around the place.

Remember this: your environment always tells a story and reflects your culture.

## Relationships

Between management and employees, the company and its customers or clients, vendors, and other stakeholders. I consider Southwest Airlines to have a high-relationship culture. Their story is to *love* their customers and employees. They give service with a smile and look to serve rather than throw off the vibe they are being annoyed by those bothersome people who want to use our planes. One reason why they are my first choice when flying domestically.

## Quality

The Lexus story, adapted from the work of Dr. Edwards Deming, has been defined by “The relentless pursuit of perfection,” which is why they produce the highest-rated sedan, year after year. They don't build a car allowing for tolerance; they strive to make the perfect car. That's the story they tell themselves, and they've executed on it. Interestingly, now they are shifting their story to become “the progressive luxury car of the 21st century.” I am sure they will execute on that as well.



## Compensation

An implicit story that runs throughout the workplace relationship is employers will pay employees as little as necessary to hire and retain them. The flip side of that story is that employees

will work only as hard as they have to, so they don't get fired. In my experience, that story leads to mediocrity at best.

What would happen if you turned this compensation story on its head?

One of my young coaching clients, already financially successful by the time he was 25, bought a small manufacturing company and decided to pay each one of his employees at least \$100,000 per year, no matter their position. At that time, everyone thought he was a little bit off his rocker for doing so. However, ***the impact of that story on the workforce was transformative.***

They became the most dedicated, creative, and caring employees. He told me their productivity, customer satisfaction, and sales generated more than made up for the extra pay. Five years later, he sold his company handsomely and created an agreement with the acquiring company where existing employees would have job security, and at least a \$100,000 paycheck, for five years, unless let go for cause.

Now that is how you tell yourself an amazing compensation story!

## Professionalism

I would expect a law firm, CPA firm, bank, or insurance company to have a risk-averse story. I would expect the just opposite working for an Elon Musk or Richard Branson company. In my experience, the "new generation" of employees and clients are tired of the "old guard" story about professional relationships. Nobody wants a clown act, but enough of the stick in the mud approach already!

Having a professional culture doesn't mean you need to take the humanity out of your relationships. Perhaps the focus should be on being real, not just "professional."



## Fun, Creativity, and Celebration

This is not just about having a ping pong table or dartboard in the hallway. And it's not about an other award ceremony. That story gets old soon enough.

Question: are your people allowed to have *fun while doing their work*? Pike's Place Fish Market in Seattle decided to have fun selling cold, smelly, and slimy objects. They even wrote the **Fish Philosophy** book about it. Is there any reason not to have a fun work story? What story would you love to embrace, but hold back from doing so?

Fact is, you can have fun, invite creativity, be celebratory, and be profitable, all at the same time!

## When Something Feels Unfair

We usually think of culture as a "sunny day" story. But the culture of an organization, team, or individual is on full display when something feels unfair. It's a cultural "tipping point."

How we collectively deal with our stuff is one of the true benchmarks of culture- at work or home. How often is the story about how we will deal with conflict ***purposely designed as part of our culture?***

## The Work Environment

Let me share an example of how a single "story" got in the way of financial opportunity and

employee engagement. I was referred to the CFO of a printing company on the verge of bankruptcy. I consulted with them for one week. That work helped produce a \$1.5 million turnaround over the next six months.

On my first visit to the plant, I noticed how dirty and messy it was. The CFO also told me there were shift wars amongst the three shifts (they ran those expensive presses 24/7) about who left the area dirtier for the next shift, etc. When I asked the CFO why the place looked the way it did, he told me, "That's how all print shops look." Then I said, "**Well, that's one story**, what if your story was that a commercial print shop is a clean, organized, and inviting place?"

I encouraged the owners to hire a paint contractor and cleanup crew over the weekend and pay overtime to employees who wanted to help paint and clean. On Monday morning, their "new look" had an immediate impact. The fights stopped. The three shifts took pride in leaving their workplaces neat and clean. The overall mood of the workforce elevated. The sales associates felt pride in bringing clients and prospects into the "back area" to watch how their work was being done.

I further encouraged the owners to use their printing prowess to line the walls with motivational quotes, client testimonials, and blown up pictures of their best work.

**Every workplace tells stories.** Few workplaces are designed with the thought process "*what stories do I want my employees to be enveloped in every day?*" If I came into your workplace for the first

time, knowing nothing about the work you do, what stories would it tell me? Those are the stories it's telling your employees... every day, day after day. **Show your stories!**

## It's All About their Story

Then there are those companies where it's all about their culture. Zappos being the poster child. People move to Las Vegas to work for Zappos so they can be part of *an amazing story*. After their initial training, Zappos offers to *pay people thousands of dollars to quit* who are not fully invested in the company culture, ramping up the commitment even further.

Zappos **chose** to create a powerful company culture about putting shoes in boxes, and it has produced amazing bottom-line results.



## Conclusion

***What powerful stories are you telling yourself to design your culture?***

What story about culture do you want to design for your company, your team, or your career?

Here's to designing a story that builds great culture!



## About Don Phin, Esq.

Don Phin is a keynote presenter and strategic advisor. He helps executives and their companies create transformative stories by design.

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