

Is now the right time to work on culture?

By **Debbie Craig**

I used to believe that culture could only be cultivated through many face-to-face sessions and courageous conversations, and choosing the best time to engage. I have had to reframe this for myself and my clients in the last few months.

Our Middle East client operating in 5 different countries has a new growth and transformation strategy and an intent to build synergies across countries for a comprehensive and seamless client experience that leverages economies of scale. To achieve this, their culture needed a shift toward one that was more courageous, agile, collaborative and innovative with a greater commitment to employee growth and engagement. For a company with a history of over 75 years and many long tenure leaders, this was a significant challenge.

We had a plan ... and then Covid arrived. Some of the questions we grappled with in the initial phases were:

- Do we wait until we can meet F2F or start virtually?
- Do we wait until a new operating model and resulting structural changes was finalized or start now?
- What happens if we only start the culture conversations in 6-8 months?
- Who do we involve in defining the desired culture? Execs, leaders, HR, staff?
- Do we focus on countries (to enable customisation and accountability) or cross country groups (to encourage collaboration and one company focus)?
- How do talk about trust or respect as a value, and then possibly retrench or move people?

After a number of executive sessions considering these questions, it was decided that the business could not wait. There was a recognition that it takes time to understand, embrace and then practice new behaviours. It was also acknowledged that leaders would need additional skills and tools to navigate the current and upcoming changes in a way that would build the new culture rather than reinforce the past or set people up for a breakdown of trust. We didn't just ask the execs but checked in with the General Managers of all countries too to ensure there was buy-in for the way forward.

And so we tentatively proceeded with embarking on a culture transformation journey virtually with people in sessions often from more than 7 countries. We utilised culture survey data, December senior leadership session data and HR personal stories and insights to draft an aspirational culture charter. We included some core values, and behaviour with both Dos and Don'ts. We also included leadership behaviours required to drive and develop the behaviours.

We then had on-line sessions as follows:

- the VP and Execs first (who also represented the Board),
- the HR project team (to gain their input and buy-in),
- the General Managers and Execs combined (to agree a way forward as a collective)
- the GMs with their leadership teams in each country.

The objective was to listen to their strategies and challenges, share the importance and the story of transformation and gain input to the draft culture charter. The VP opened each session to share the strategic context and reinforce the importance of culture to the business success. We worked closely with the project manager and culture stream

lead to co-facilitate the sessions to ensure relevance, cultural sensitivities and language barriers were taken care of. Apart from a few tech, language and real business challenges, the VP and General Managers were fantastic in making the session their own and tackling the issues courageously and committing to the roadmap.

Next are the virtual leadership readiness learning journeys over 3 months on leading self, leading others and leading the business through the culture transformation journey. These include pre-work, virtual facilitated sessions and action learning as part of implementing the culture roadmap. We are hoping to get all the top leaders together as soon as is viable, to work on the collaborative, one country focus. Once the leaders are on-board and ready, and some of the immediate barriers to the culture are addressed (such as prioritization and decision making principles), only then will we engage with the staff and launch the culture as part of the employee experience journey with a strong focus on the roles of self, the team and the company to cultivate the culture needed for a successful, sustainable future, where we can all grow. None of this will work without the following:

1. culture being seen as a strategic priority (it is one of 7 strategic drivers),
2. without senior executive support (we have people who really believe in this),
3. without a committed group of change agents making it happen on the ground (we have an amazing project team of HR managers and specialists across the countries)
4. without general managers who are willing to make it a priority in their businesses (and are measured on it)
5. without consultation, listening and co-creating the solution with all key stakeholders (see above)
6. without identifying and addressing all the people, process and system issues that are barriers or enablers of culture and trust (a culture audit is a tool can assist with this)
7. without an accountability mechanism to ensure culture and the leaders role in driving it is measured and they are held accountable (this is set up through culture as a KPI, values measured in performance reviews and surveys to measure progress and identify issues)
8. without building leader and HR readiness to lead by example and drive the culture through their areas (sessions to inform, engage and enable with tools and then apply with action learning).

The overall feeling by the various stakeholder groups has been one of YES, lets do this now, interest in the foundations of cultivating a culture and of maintaining momentum, and building now for the future!

A common theme in our conversations with the leadership teams was their surprise in the many aspects of the existing culture coming to the fore over the Covid period such as commitment, loyalty and going the extra mile for the customer. There was a natural creativity, courage and innovation unleashed in this time as more trust was necessitated for people working without tight supervision. This has become a gift and has turned a constraint and possible postponement of a culture journey, into a great platform to build the new culture upon.

Look out for updates, as we navigate this journey, in partnership with our client.

Debbie