

Training to Build a Culture of Distinction

by Sheila L. Margolis, PhD

Are you building a culture of distinction for your organization? Training has a vital role in developing and sustaining a valued culture. But first, you must understand and articulate the culture of your organization before you can design training that supports it.

To understand culture, look inside your organization. Think of your organization as a system with the “core” of your culture at the center. Core culture consists of the central three Ps of the organization: 1) the vital **Purpose**, 2) the distinctive **Philosophy** and 3) the **Priorities** that employees value. Core culture is the heart and soul of your organization and the essence of your culture. Training must be aligned with this unique set of core principles and values that will enable you to achieve your goals. To understand core culture, let's start in the very center with the organization's Purpose.

The First P: Purpose

The Purpose defines why the organization exists. It is not the answer to the question “What do you do?” which typically focuses on products, services and customers, but rather the answer to the question “Why is the work you do important?” Employees should find the Purpose inspirational and motivational. It is the cause that defines your contribution to society through work. Businesses exist to make a profit, and they also exist to make a difference. Through work, individuals can make a difference and be part of a meaningful legacy.

A Purpose statement is brief in length yet broad in scope. For example, one bank's Purpose is to help people achieve their dreams. The Purpose should be brief so employees can remember it, connect emotionally to it and use it to guide their daily actions. The Purpose should also be broad in scope. Another example — a bread company's Purpose — is not to sell bread, but more broadly stated — to nourish life. A broadly stated Purpose allows the organization to adapt over time to a changing world while its central focus remains constant. Products and services may change, but the organization seeks to endure. Organizations are living entities; they are vehicles for improving life and the world we live in.

Think for a moment...What is your organization's Purpose? Why is the work you do important?

The Second P: Philosophy

The next element of core culture is the organization's Philosophy. The Philosophy is the prime, distinguishing value that guides how employees do their work. It is the personality or character of the organization, typically derived from its founder, or from the principles and ideals that drove the organization's creation. Philosophy is the single element that employees believe is fundamental to the organization and the attribute that makes it feel different from other organizations, even those with a similar Purpose. For example, one internet company's Philosophy is a strong customer focus. They obsess over customer service. Customer service is vital to who they are and everything they do.

Where Purpose was the “why” question, Philosophy is the “how” question. Think about your organization. What is the prime value that guides how you do your work? What special attribute does the founder or leader possess that has influenced the character of your organization?

The Third P: Priorities

Priorities are the third component of core culture. Priorities are the values that guide how the Purpose and the Philosophy are put into practice. Select only the few Priorities that are central to all areas of the organization that will enable you to achieve your strategy. One food company has quality as one of their Priorities while at a forest products company, one of their Priorities is safety.

Evaluate Priorities based on how well they will contribute to a successful, thriving organization. Priorities are relatively stable, but you can change them to enhance your organization's ability to compete. When making change, it is more desirable to alter Priorities rather than changing either the Purpose or the Philosophy.

Now think...What values are important throughout the entire organization? What key values, if followed, would help your organization compete and thrive?

The Remaining Ps: Practices and Projections

Your core culture is the basis for your differentiation. With a clear picture of the core, everyone in your organization can

share the goal of living those attributes in a collection of many different ways. The core positions your organization with a defined and unique combination of traits that serve as a filter to direct action.

To live the culture that you have defined, you must align all aspects of the organization to the core culture. When everyone understands the core and performs in ways that are consistent with it, the organization will be unified and geared for success.

To achieve alignment, the Purpose, Philosophy and Priorities must be embedded in all aspects of the organization. This is where the remaining Ps come in: your organization's Practices and Projections.

- Internal Practices — how employees work with each other — include the structure of the organization, how work is designed and systems for doing work; recruitment and selection; training and development; performance management; internal communications; and technology;
- External Practices — employee interactions with others outside the organization — include your customers, products, services, suppliers and vendors, as well as your partners; and
- Projections — the images that the organization projects to the public — include symbols like the organization's name and logo; marketing, public relations, advertising and community activities; and appearances, such as employee dress and the look of your offices or stores as well as the image of the leader and the corporate headquarters.

Training and development is one of the Internal Practices that plays a vital role in sustaining the core culture. Culture must be learned. Even when you hire people who are a fit for your organization, they must perform to the organization's standards. Employees must be oriented on the prime beliefs and values of the organization and trained in the skills needed to model the culture. Think about your training and development practices and how well they support your core culture. Answer these questions...

1. Do you orient new employees to the organization's Purpose, Philosophy and Priorities?

Examine the first days for a new employee. What currently happens to orient them to the culture? What could be done to make that more effective?

To retain talent, give new employees a quick start through a comprehensive orientation program that includes the core culture. This foundational knowledge jumpstarts employee success on the job by inculcating the values that drive the organization. An effective core culture orientation helps new employees assimilate faster which promotes commitment and dedication.

2. Do you train new employees in the skills needed to sustain the Purpose, Philosophy and Priorities?

In addition to understanding the core, new employees must be trained in how to practice the core principles. New employee training should impart the systems and procedures employees should follow to live the core culture to the standards expected for organizational success. Often organizations hire for attitude and train for skills. If you have, for example, responsiveness as a Priority at your core, your training must hone those valued skills. Training helps new employees perform to high standards in

the areas that are central to your organization.

3. Do you provide refresher courses and ongoing training to ensure that practices meet or exceed expected standards for living the Purpose, Philosophy and Priorities?

People want to develop and achieve through their work. When employees have opportunities for personal growth, they are more engaged in their work and more committed to the organization because it provides this development. Ongoing training is valuable for improving skills and enabling employees to live the core attributes at the expected high levels of performance.

Evaluate the training that you offer and ensure that it effectively reinforces the knowledge and skills needed to successfully live the core at a desired level. Employees may understand and value the core, but they must continuously be developed to more successfully understand and practice the core principles.

4. Does your training model the core attributes?

The way you conduct training must also be in sync with your core. If you have a teamwork culture, is your training conducted in teams? If your culture is about knowledge, do you sponsor

stimulating lectures? Be sure to evaluate how you do your training as well as the content of the training. Everything should reflect your core culture. Consistency promotes a stronger core.

Understand your culture. Be sure everyone shares the vital Purpose, the distinctive Philosophy and valued Priorities of your organization. And ensure that your core culture is a living core. Institute training and development activities to support it. Prosper being the best at who you are as an organization. Use training to build your culture of distinction.



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