



CULTURE CASTING

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INTRODUCTION

Let's talk about culture. You've likely heard this intrinsic aspect of human civilization—generally defined as the shared beliefs, attitudes, values, social norms, and goals of a group of people—emphasized dramatically in the business world in recent days. Whether positioned as the source of all a company's ills or a golden ticket for profit and popularity, culture seems to be a more significant talking point than ever before. Indeed, "culture" was Merriam-Webster's overall most popular word of the year in 2014, and in the corporate world the conversation has only strengthened since.

Where is this emphasis coming from? The impact of a strong, well-defined corporate culture has been shown to be widespread and clear: it contributes to your image both as an employer and public brand,¹ helps with talent acquisition, and boosts retention.² It fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose for employees from the top to the bottom of an organization. From here, many secondary and tertiary benefits can follow. Fast food franchise Taco Bell sought to hone its cultural focus to emphasize loyalty after finding that the locations with the lowest turnover had 55% higher profits than those with high turnover.³ Google's culture of risk-taking and championing new ideas includes a program for employees to spend 20% of their time on their own projects, an initiative that led to the creation of Gmail—a platform that now boasts over one billion monthly active users.⁴ At the other end of the spectrum, weak or nonexistent culture is tied to much higher turnover and can stifle innovation.⁵ As in society as a whole, culture is the basis for many important ideas and recurring behaviors, and when people are not aligned with the culture they inhabit, discord is the result.

The truth is that corporate culture has always been important, and it's only the acknowledgement of this importance in the headlines that is recent. If we refocus the general definition of culture above onto the business world, we find that corporate culture is the framework of experience for the work life of employees at any organization. If you are speaking to a friend or family member about a new job and they ask you not about your specific role but rather, "What's it like to work there?"—your company's culture will form the answer. An optimal corporate culture will reflect an organization's unique strengths, but in all cases reflect a workforce whose employees and leaders have individual goals that are synchronized with the strategic goals of the business as a whole. According to Dr. Jarik Conrad, emotional intelligence expert and author of *The Fragile Mind*, "Businesses are uniquely positioned to create microcosms of what culturally aligned societies could be."

Obviously, this is no simple task to pull off. It requires intensive collaboration and cooperation between the C-suite, HR, and managers throughout an organization. One of the issues that businesses encounter on a regular basis is that so much of what is discussed regarding corporate culture is assumed rather than concrete. Whether it's a mission statement crafted by executives that does not reflect current realities, or employees that are hesitant to voice their true sentiments for fear of repercussions from their managers, cultural discourse in the corporate world often carries a lot of cognitive dissonance. Additionally, many businesses fear locking themselves into any kind of measurable milestones, opening the possibility of failing to meet expectations.

The good news is that with culture taking center stage, new techniques and technologies are gaining ground that make the process of crafting and aligning company culture more straightforward and attainable.

1. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/larryalton/2017/02/17/why-corporate-culture-is-becoming-even-more-important/#3c8aa4bc69da>
2. <https://hiring.monster.com/hr/hr-best-practices/recruiting-hiring-advice/strategic-workforce-planning/hire-for-the-organization.asp>
3. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/putting-the-service-profit-chain-to-work/>
4. <https://techcrunch.com/2016/02/01/gmail-now-has-more-than-1b-monthly-active-users/>
5. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/238640>

WHAT IS “CULTURE CASTING”?

Culture casting is a new approach to evaluating the current reality of your business, and leveraging that information as a blueprint to build the ideal culture for your specific organization. Simply put, if your culture consists of who you want to be and what you want to do, culture casting means taking advantage of every available avenue to make it happen.

There are three major components to this approach, each reflecting a form of “casting” your company can perform from the top down:



Let’s take a look at each of these facets of culture casting one by one, examine how to apply them to your business, and highlight some of the tools and technology that can help get it done.



I. CASTING A LIGHT ON YOUR CURRENT CULTURE

The first aspect of culture casting is taking an honest look at where you are, casting a spotlight on your existing culture and emphasizing transparency. Understanding your culture is not just a source of interest to executives, but something that affects everything from day-to-day engagement to making your next new hire. One Bersin study showed that for 95% of candidates, culture is actually more important than compensation.⁶ Employees, and especially top performers, seek a sense of belonging—the confidence that they’ll find a personal sense of purpose in their job that aligns with corporate goals. Creating and providing this sense of belonging is nearly impossible without first recognizing the status quo.

For some companies, this is already a speed bump. If your theoretical or idealized culture as espoused by your vision statement doesn’t quite mesh with the daily reality experienced by employees, the disconnect will be palpable. A lack of cultural alignment leads inevitably to cultural unrest. Employees who feel they aren’t being heard—or worse, actively believe they don’t belong—are much less likely to be engaged. This leads to the higher turnover you might expect, in addition to more subtle problems that can go unchecked. Minor distractions become major challenges. Productivity can slow down behind the scenes.

Begin the process of casting a light on your culture by asking these questions:

- How transparent is your business? Do your executives/directors/managers communicate honestly with their reports?
- Do you provide an open forum where direct constructive feedback is valued?
- Are employees, managers, or both out of sync with the goals and/or values of leadership?

A recent study showed that 80% of managers believe they are transparent with their direct reports, while **less than half of employees agree**.⁷ This staggering disconnect signifies a clear mandate for businesses to take the time needed to determine where they really are before moving on to forging and communicating a cultural vision. This may mean having frank and difficult internal conversations, but the process will pay off with a stronger foundation for cultural alignment in the future.

Start asking your people how they really feel, and do everything possible to gather honest feedback.

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP

Workforce survey tools are the most readily available first step toward taking stock of your current culture. Now, remarkable advances in natural language processing to fuel sentiment analysis can offer an unprecedented level of insight. Look for solutions that combine quantitative survey data (multiple-choice or ranking questions) with qualitative analysis of open-ended responses. If employees have the power to use their own words in delivering feedback, artificial intelligence (AI) can parse these words for underlying themes and recurrent sentiments.

6. <http://peerthru.com/blog/2016/3/23/culture-is-the-new-black>

7. Center for Generational Kinetics Survey 2017



II. IDENTIFYING YOUR “CAST OF CHARACTERS”

The next aspect of culture casting is figuring out who you are. Imagine that your business is a film or stage play. The leadership of your organization serves as its casting director: for the project to work, they must understand how every role aligns with the production as a whole, while each individual needs a clear understanding of where they fit. If half of your cast is doing Shakespeare and the other half thinks it's part of a superhero movie, no one will be happy with the result. Furthermore, this kind of dysfunction means it's going to get tougher and tougher to add new cast members over time.

In a business setting, your executives, managers, and individual contributors are the most obvious members of the cast. Indeed, the dynamic between managers and employees is sometimes the purest expression of your culture. Yet while 71% of managers believe they know how to effectively motivate their teams, only 44% of employees agree. A full 78% of employees even believe they could do their jobs without their manager being present at all.⁷ This enormous gap in perception underscores the need to figure out exactly who your people are and what drives them in the workplace.

At the same time, it's easy to forget that your “cast of characters” extends beyond the above roles. Culture casting invites business leaders to look beyond the immediate scope of their internal workforce and remember that affiliates, partners, community representatives, and other stakeholders in the success of your business are all integral contributors to organizational culture. The relationships formed and maintained between these groups can have just as much of a cultural impact as those at the top of the company.

The most critical factor here is alignment. Consider these questions when identifying your cast:

- How are your people performing, and do you understand why?
- If asked to describe your culture, would individual employees, managers, executives, and partners give similar answers?
- Are your most engaged contributors recognized and/or rewarded?
- Do you know who your flight risks are?

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP

While identifying your cast of characters takes effort from every level of the workforce, AI is providing fascinating new opportunities to automate some of the legwork. Predictive analytics tools have come a long way in recent years, and may be able to help you categorize your employees as top performers, high potential performers, flight risks, and more. The best available tools can draw from many sources of data to determine how engaged employees are with your culture.



III. CASTING A VISION OF THE FUTURE

The final facet of culture casting is *forecasting*; in other words, projecting a vision of the ideal culture you want your organization to have in the future. Once you have an honest and transparent understanding of your existing culture, this is the time to define who you want to be and where you want to go. This needs to be a concrete prediction as to how your culture will be relevant to your business in the days, months, and years to come. Culture casting means forcing your organization to recognize any gaps between the theoretical culture desired by your executives and the authentic one experienced by your people. Be optimistic, be bold, and create a testable goal to close these gaps.

Casting this vision may mean stepping outside of your comfort zone or reconsidering the approach that got your company to where it is today. This could include adapting to outside market forces that have changed since your company was founded, or creating a new emphasis on social or environmental responsibility within your industry. Or, it may mean identifying areas in which your organization may have deviated from its original cultural vision and initiating a plan to course-correct. In any case, it requires your organization to align its corporate philosophy and business strategy, and communicate both to every level of the workforce, shareholders, partners, and customers. You'll need to promote accountability—making sure your organization is on track means everyone involved needs to know their part, and has a personal stake in executing the plan. It also means prioritizing the tools and technology that will enable managers to have greater transparency, and empower your workforce to meet its goals.

There are both experiential and bottom-line risks to ignoring culture casting and attempting to move forward with a dysfunctional culture. We've already spoken about engagement, turnover, and productivity. Companies whose workforces are not culturally aligned cannot count on their employees to be brand evangelists or feel a personal stake in the work they do, which lowers morale and the incentive to innovate. But one recent study showed that companies with high culture alignment also had 4 times higher sales and returns than companies with low cultural alignment.⁸ This is something that every business needs to tackle.

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP

Consider a performance management solution that enables employees to set, track, and continually revise their own personal goals at your organization, which fosters a sense of personal ownership in the evolving direction of your culture. Managers can improve transparency by providing ongoing feedback on these goals and how they align with overall business strategy. Additionally, prescriptive analytics tools can evaluate performance data to automatically provide recommended actions for managers to take for employees in need of guidance or assistance, which may be a crucial first step toward aligning any given contributor with your projected vision for the future.



If you want to start the process of culture casting, there's no better time than now.

The first step is acquiring any missing tools you need to perform an honest self-check of your current culture and the underlying feelings of your workforce. Depending on where any gaps you identify in cultural alignment may lie, you might benefit from new recruiting/onboarding processes, employee surveying and sentiment analysis, performance management, and/or reporting capabilities.

Don't forget that everyone needs to get involved to bring your desired company culture to life. Communication obviously starts from the top down, but your HR team will also play a hugely significant role in making sure every new hire is introduced to your culture from day one, and resolving conflict when it arises. Consider training programs for all managers that emphasizes the unique culture of your organization, and highlight how it can strengthen their relationships with their direct reports. Make sure managers also have tools and processes in place to properly recognize employees and reassure them that their individual contributions are valued.

Achieving a culturally aligned workforce is a long road, requiring continuous reflection and iteration. But it's one well worth the investment to walk.



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