



LOS ANGELES

Your culture is your brand; help it evolve

By: **Kim Shepherd** | 12:01am EST

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Many think that company culture is an aftereffect that evolves on its own. It will if you let it, but you shouldn't. If you don't decide what your culture is going to be, it will get decided for you, and not always for the better. Culture doesn't mean people have to drink the Kool-Aid, but it is just as important as your marketing strategy, R&D or your ERP system. Like those aspects of your business, it needs to be intentional.

There are a number of good reasons to be intentional about culture. Culture shapes your team's internal activities. Maybe even more importantly, it influences the public's perception of your brand. Here are two good examples:

- **Starbucks intentionally created a culture that's caring and respectful of employees.** The employees, in turn, are upbeat and friendly. That promotes the Starbucks brand: great coffee, yes, but you also can count on a warm, welcoming atmosphere.
- **Apple also intentionally created an effective culture, although it's the opposite of warm and fuzzy.** Apple's culture says, "You're the best or you work for someone else." When it comes to innovation and quality, it's do or die. This supports the Apple brand, which is about being on the defining edge of the market and offering products that may cost more, but are worth it.



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Effective culture also fosters commitment and passion, and helps retain top talent. A college grad may earn close to minimum wage as a Starbucks barista, but they'll stay for years because they love working there. Apple retains top talent by hiring people who are motivated to perform at a high level and then providing the kind of challenging culture they thrive in.

So if you're just starting a business, pay as much attention to culture as you do to any other facet of your model. If you've been in business for years, you can still re-think and re-engineer your culture, just as you can overhaul your sales strategy. And even if you have a well-designed culture in place, you need to nurture it constant constantly.

Trader Joe's, for example, has been quirky and offbeat since 1967. Even today, though, senior executives will go into the stores and ask employees, "What are we doing, in corporate, to screw you up?" And they respond to employee input. That kind of respect goes a long way toward keeping employees motivated.

If you've been to TJ's, you know the staff are all about the bringing the vision to life: a trip to Trader Joe's is like a mini-tropical vacation, with free samples in grass huts, upbeat and friendly staff in Hawaiian shirts, and unique food.

It's true that Trader Joe's also pays very generously, but money alone won't create employee engagement. Ask any HR professional. Trader Joe's culture goes deeper than bonuses and Hawaiian shirts. It helps their people feel they are part of something special that is bigger than themselves.

One way you can tell your culture is healthy is widespread use of "tribal speak." An example I love to share comes from my own company, from an actual email I sent to my leadership team:

Our CP just landed a chunky monkey. Please send the Green Flag, iceberg it and flag the cockroach committee. Dog has fleas.

Every organization has it, and those who can understand it are part of the tribe. It helps define us as a unique and special "Us" — insiders who share a common vision and a common language.

Speak it, live it, love it, but above all, *intend* it. Your culture is critical part of your business' success.

Kim Shepherd's ideas on leadership, virtual workplaces and company culture have been featured in Fast Company, Huffington Post, Forbes and SUCCESS. A three-time Inc. 5000 CEO, she has also authored "The Bite Me School of Management — Taking a Bite Out of Conventional Thinking." She joined [Decision Toolbox](#), a 100 percent virtual organization providing recruitment solutions, in 2000 as CEO. Today, she leads the company's growth strategy as an active member of the Los Angeles and Orange County human resources communities. She can be reached at kshepherd@dttoolbox.com.

This article is derived from Kim Shepherd's new book ["Get Scrappy: Business Insights to Make Your Company More Agile"](#), available in Kindle and print editions from booksellers everywhere.