

With the Best Intentions

The importance of intentionally creating a business culture

MY NIECE IS AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

teacher. Several years ago, she was miserable in her job. She loved the students and teaching, but she always felt like she had to watch her back. She was ready to look for another school, even though she didn't want to leave. Then, over the summer, the principal of her school was replaced. The next year everyone started off a bit wary, but before the Christmas break the school was humming with new, positive energy. "I never knew a principal could have such an impact on the culture of a school," she said. "I always got along with the old principal. He was just very private and kept to himself. What a difference!"

You may not be aware how much impact organizational culture has on pro-

ductivity. There are two kinds of business culture: intentional and unintentional. Let's take a look at both.

UNINTENTIONAL CULTURE

Unintentional business culture is the norm. Most business owners just start working, and hiring, and doing the day-to-day. To the extent that there is a business culture, it is typically an outgrowth of the business owner's personality. That may be good, and it may be bad, but it's usually somewhere in between.

The problem with personality-driven culture is that it lacks definition, it can be inconsistent, and it isn't well-suited to motivating others and providing the basis for a brand.

INTENTIONAL CULTURE

I'll start by stating that intentional culture isn't necessarily positive. During my advertising agency years, I worked for a man who believed the only way to get the most out of people was to terrify them. He was constantly threatening that we were on the verge of losing all our accounts, and that we would all be out on the street. Of course, he never seemed particularly stressed out. One evening after a long dinner with clients (and a lot of wine) I asked him how he remained so calm when we were on the brink of failure. He admitted that we were actually doing quite well, but he believed that people did their best work under duress. I found a new job shortly thereafter, and the once-thriving independent agency was out of business two years after that. People don't do their best work under duress. Bob had created a very intentional culture, but it was based on a false premise.

An intentional business culture is one that has been developed to achieve specific business goals, provide motivation and inspiration to its employees, serve as the basis for a compelling brand identity, and keep all the players—from suppliers to customers—aligned with one another.

Let's use a few examples:

A gymnastics team is a team in the loosest sense. Each individual gymnast must compete alone, working to be the best gymnast at every single event. Yes, the



team may win awards, but those awards are largely based on individual achievement. So a gymnastics team must have a culture of intense competitiveness, deep commitment to individual training and achievement, and a never-give-up work ethic. They may practice all at the same time, but each person is practicing alone.

In contrast, a basketball team is only as strong as its weakest link. The team only wins when talented individuals work well together to maximize one another's strengths and minimize one another's weaknesses. Internal competitiveness is destructive to a basketball team, so the culture must be centered around shared achievement, deep commitment to team training, and a genuine desire to help one another be the best they can be. They practice together.

You can probably picture two very different cultures in those examples. Now let's do a few closer to home.

Imagine two jewelry manufacturing environments. When you walk into Business A, you walk into a dark hallway with a flickering light. Once you get through security, you see a cluster of rooms around a central lunch area. Each room houses a different function: administration, sales, design, casting, bench jewelers, stone setters, a polishing room, and a QC group. The place needs a good scrubbing; when you look at benches it's hard to see which work is today's work; it's not quite bright enough for fine work; and inoperable pieces of equipment are scattered about.

Now walk into Business B. The entry is bright and welcoming, decorated with posters and staffed by a cheery attendant. People are chattering warmly with one

another as they pass through the security checkpoint. The manufacturing area itself is brightly lit, and you can immediately see that there's a flow to the work and a logic to the layout. The environment is immaculate, the energy is palpable, and people are working purposefully.

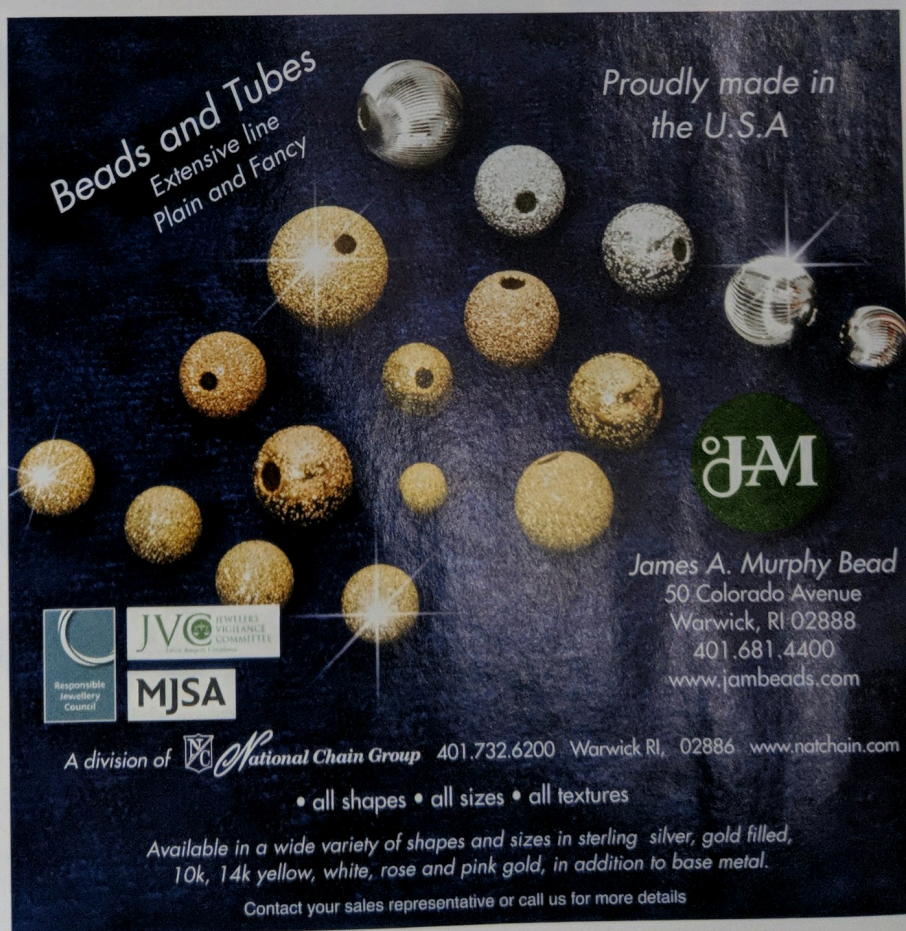
You haven't even met the leaders of these two businesses, but you can already tell that Business A has no discernible culture, and Business B has an intentional culture. What is Business B's culture telling you?

Business B's culture embraces quality. It is a culture of caring about the employees, from making sure they work in an inviting and clean workplace to cultivat-

ing relationships and cooperation among them. Business B's culture values productivity and accomplishment.

In contrast, Business A's culture really doesn't say much of anything. It's not inherently bad, but it's not positive either. A culture of *meh* will typically lead to less than stellar results.

If you don't know that intentionally setting the culture of your business is important, it may not occur to you to craft a culture that will help you achieve the results you want. And now that you do, what are you waiting for? Creating a positive business culture is one of the most productive things you can do. Let's all get intentional. ♦



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