We must stop viewing culture, brand and strategy as separate things!

Every year much time and effort is spent defining brands and refining strategies, but what is actually done to create an organizational culture that can support and promote the desired brand or help to make the new strategy successful?

By Per Nordahl, Senior Leadership Consultant, Ennova

There are many questions that need to be answered! Here I hope to be able to provide some input and inspiration to get you started on developing the culture that will help you to achieve the desired brand and a good strategy for the path forward.

In my meetings with organizations, I find that most of the people I meet are buried in team meetings and follow-up work, with few opportunities to take a step back. The vast majority express a desire and a need to do this occasionally but end up smiling with an air of resignation and saying that it is something they hope to have time for "eventually." Everyone agrees that this is important, but there are other things that are more pressing "read: in the calendar…" This raises the question of who actually manages your calendar, but we'll leave that for another time.

Therefore, I would like to beat the drum for the importance of developing the organization's ability to see the entire elephant!

Normally, some people see the trunk, a few see the thighs, some the legs, and some the bodies – but very few see how these parts connect to form a unique and wonderful organism with a "personality" that can lift and change the most incredible things.

Getting back to work life and organizations, I meet some who look at operations and delivery, some who look at recruitment and brand, some who look at management and strategy, and some who look at HR.

What I meet less of are those who look at the interaction and the overall culture or "personality" of the organization, which consists of, but is also bigger than, all the individual parts.

Everything is interconnected, but most people are content doing their own thing – and, yes, it takes considerable effort to change this, but the payoff is big if you show the will to carry it out. This is where the best stand out from the crowd.

Holistic culture in practice

Let me give an example. Recently, many organizations have set a goal to create a customer-centric culture, i.e., put the customer at the center. As it turns out, what they primarily want is customer-centric behavior, followed by customer-centric attitudes, but they have not thought it through any further than that.

So what is the difference between a culture and an attitude? For me, it is the difference between, on the one hand, "the water we swim in," i.e., something that surrounds us all the time and that we quickly take for granted and forget, but that will miss as soon as it disappears. And on the other, splashing a little water on your face to wake up and look revitalized before the next meeting, but the effect fades fast. It is something we do consciously, which has a limited effect and does not create the same opportunities for interaction. Don't get me wrong, a good attitude is extremely important, but it has much greater effect and credibility as part of a whole than as a stand-alone solution.

To truly succeed and go from being a separate tool and a single method to being part of our identity, we must be willing to integrate it in the entire organization from top to bottom and from the outer edge to the core and out again.

It must be demonstrated in how our leaders are there to support their teams. In how your first customer is always your colleague, and the sense that you succeed when she succeeds. Internal service and support teach us how we can make a difference for our customers, too, and what kind of experience we want to create for them.

To use the (home) office as a training arena, where we are conscious of helping others to shine and meet their own needs, and then use this to support customers and others in the best possible way. This is the first step in becoming truly customer-centric – empathy and solution-focused.

Another area where this is in focus is recruitment. Do we have a customer-centric approach in our recruitment process, or do we unconsciously accept the imbalance of power that naturally exists in an interview situation? Here, there is important information to collect in who attracts us and how good we are at getting them to join and stay in our organization.

I know an organization that has worked in recent years to introduce a holistic approach, and it's absolutely fantastic to visit them and witness the energy, community and drive they have. They have also gone from struggling to find new people, to becoming a coveted employer with a reputation that precedes them, thanks to satisfied employees.

Where do we start?

Mats Alvesson discusses two ways of approaching organizational culture:

The first is from a negative perspective, where culture is something we must be conscious of and deal with by "circumventing" or avoiding direct confrontation with it, and so we spend a lot of time finding our way around it.

The second way is to view organizational culture as a tool for achieving the desired strategy and goals. This is considered to be the positive perspective on culture, where we take a constructive approach and can use culture to support whatever it is we want to achieve. This

approach can sometimes be seen as a bit naive, and might create new unforeseen challenges because we undervalue the power of the existing culture.

For my part, I believe in taking a positive approach and find that it creates more room for action, while a negative approach can create a more fatalistic experience of culture and give the existing culture too much power. Nevertheless, it is important to be able to balance the two, and sometimes we need to establish good new parallel structures or behavior before confronting or simply driving out the existing culture when the desired culture reaches a tipping point.

Often there is a basis for creating the culture we want, but it has not been tapped, or we haven't been aware of how crucial it is for a successful strategy or branding.

Most organizations have either a vision (articulated or not), and/or a strategic plan (even though it may come in many forms), and/or a desire to be perceived as unique by customers, potential employees and other stakeholders (brand), but the question that often remains unanswered is how do you lift this to make it a culture? Here are some things that might be worth thinking about.

- **Mission**: There has to be agreement between motivation (= a sense of meaning, mastery and autonomy) and purpose for all employees, and the organization's vision, strategy and desired brand. It is important that each employee and manager has a clear line of sight between the work they do each day and the organization's mission and vision, so they know how they actually contribute and make a difference.
- **Values**: There must be alignment between employees 'personal values and the organization's stated values. It is important that all employees feel at home in the organization and feel that there is room for their personal values to be expressed and valued.
- **Personal Match**: There must be alignment between individual values, attitudes, words and behavior. This is particularly important for the leadership team. Leaders are undoubtedly the biggest cultural role models, accounting for 50 to 70 percent of experienced culture. It is also important to think about all the informal leaders. What are they signaling and legitimizing, what is accepted in our organization?
- **Structural adjustment**: There has to be agreement between the stated values and structures, systems, processes, policies, incentives and procedures. It is important that your organization's values are reflected in all structures, systems, processes, policies, incentives, and procedures for your organization to institutionalize culture.

Get started!

A lot of good literature and tools exist for carrying out the process, so the question is whether the will is there… and the answer to that question varies greatly to say the least.

This is something that will come back to bite many in the coming period, because with an increasingly fragmented work life, both in terms of tasks and locations, seeing and understanding an organization's unique culture will be an increasingly important selling point for both customers and employees, and when we start to feel safer in the future, many will be on the move, and with a clear identity and culture, they will be the winners.

What makes you unique and how do you show that throughout the organization? Your answer will tell you what needs to be done and how urgent it is...