



SUCCESSFUL *Culture*

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Eight Secrets to a Growth-Driven Culture

Every organization is shaped and defined by its own culture—a culture that flows down from the company's founder, permeates through the leadership team, and seeps into the rest of the organization—whether good or bad. Organizational cultures are like fingerprints: no two are the same. Experience has taught me that if the leadership holds true to these two components: culture and values, the employee base, customer base, and top and bottom line results will remain strong and healthy. Only after leadership shifts its focus or intention from the values and culture does the decline appear in other areas.

I've identified eight cultural strategies that safeguard a company through even the most challenging market conditions. These include:

1: Commitment to a Non-Toxic Environment.

Work is stressful enough without adding unnecessary toxic behaviors. Throughout my 15+ years of leadership at Information Experts, we terminated customers for being abusive to employees, we turned down business opportunities from potentially abusive partners, and we purged employees for being abusive to other employees (although our experience has taught us that this behavior is often masking a larger issue). Respect for one another was a non-negotiable requirement. In addition, an attitude of gratitude was reinforced by much public appreciation, with heavy doses of "Please" and "Thank-You" all around, including a quarterly program called "Completions-and-Wins" in which we acknowledged collective team efforts.

2: Commitment to Fun.

Life is too short to not infuse fun along the way—even in your work day. Nothing builds teamwork like a competitive scavenger hunt that takes teams through their community and culminates at a local restaurant. Budgeting for fun—literally inserting a line item for fun in your company's yearly budget—tells your employees you are committed to not taking life too seriously, even in the midst of high pressure deadlines. High-volume fun doesn't necessarily equate to high costs. One of the most anticipated traditions at Information Experts before the company became geographically disbursed was the annual Thanksgiving potluck luncheon. Other events have included BBQs, baby showers (I've used to read Goodnight Moon to



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my employees), mid-day movie field trips, customer field trips (we toured Wegmans!), paintball, flag football, and laser tag. We had a Good Times Committee (GTC) that spearheaded these events.

3: Safety Outside of the Comfort Zone.

At Information Experts, we encouraged our employees to say, “Wouldn’t it be cool if...” One of the most rewarding aspects of business ownership is watching employees stretch to a place of discomfort, explore new tasks, and then grab the opportunity to follow a new interest. This resulted in the development of several technology platforms that improved productivity inside the organization, and became competitive differentiators for our customers.

4: Employee Input for Ideas, Improvements, and Direction.

When I was leading Information Experts, I heavily depended on my employees for ideas on how to build the best business possible. Visionaries need realists and pragmatists to keep us grounded. CEOs should create an environment that encourages employee input, and should frequently run ideas by their employees for honest feedback—how viable the idea is, how it aligns with the brand, and how it impacts existing work or strategy. Employees always bring unique organizational perspectives to the table. Leaders must approach all ideas with an open mind. There is no place for arrogance, filters, and blinders in effective leadership.

5: Join for One Position; Stay for Another.

It was incredibly rewarding to watch so many employees join Information Experts in one position and then evolve and migrate to another position, the by-product of the freedom we gave our employees to explore and follow their passions. This aligns with the practice of ensuring that companies must have the right people on the bus and further, that they have the right people in the right seats on the bus.

6: Continuous Learning.

There are so many learning opportunities for every discipline these days. Under my leadership, Information Experts employees attended conferences, luncheons, and webinars on just about every topic relevant to our business. They also had ample non-billable time to explore and try new ways of doing and making things. Innovation and creativity often can’t be scheduled—but the lessons gleaned from those breakthroughs can be scheduled through brown-bag lunches and all-hands meetings. For organizations that run at a rapid pace, they must schedule learning and sharing, or they risk missing out on opportunities to grow personally and organizationally.



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7: Responsible Flexibility and Work-Life Integration.

From the moment I launched Information Experts in 1995, work-life integration and responsible flexibility was a core value of our firm, and one of our biggest cultural differentiators. We recognized that while work life is an important component—it is only part of a larger picture of life responsibilities, obligations, goals, and interests. Our employees have always been empowered to build a responsible work-life model that reflects the needs of their unique individual situations, and still enables them to achieve maximum productivity. This is a natural win-win-win for a company, its employees, and its customers.

8: Empowerment & Accountability.

Experience has taught me that empowerment and accountability are actually two different sides of the same coin. I've never believed in a culture of hand holding or micromanagement. CEOs only know a fraction of what is needed to run, build, and grow a business. Delegating to others and elevating them to their highest potential is essential for a business to continue its growth. The flip side of this "freedom" is accountability. Employees must be empowered to act and make decisions, but are responsible for delivering. One of Information Experts' top performers once said to me, "One of my favorite things about Information Experts is that you can't hide here."

Culture and people fuel growth. Growth does not create culture. What cultural footprint is your organization leaving?

If you would like help understanding, evolving, or repairing your culture, please reach out to me at marissa@successfulculture.com.

Good luck!

~Marissa