

Spreading Joy versus Growth – What Would You Prefer? The Power of a Purpose Culture

By Ruma Biswas, Progress-U Partner and Managing Director of Progress-U South Asia



Donna, the newly appointed CEO of a fast growing and uniquely positioned retail organization sighed as she scanned through the books and company reports. She was ready for a roller coaster ride but this surprised her. The organization was yet to break even and had been burning cash steadily, particularly over the past 3 quarters. While the investors kept pumping in capital given the future that the retail chain promised, it seemed like a distant dream for Donna. The question facing Donna was “How do we fast track and keep the investors happy?”

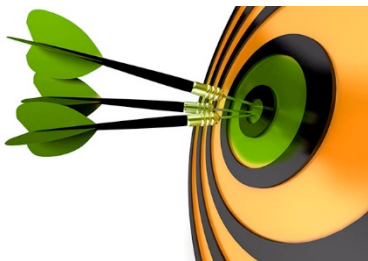
In comes Mark, with a strategy company in tow. Mark, the strategist, worked tirelessly to look at every little detail over the past 5 years, pored over the trends in similarly positioned companies worldwide, scratched his head vis-à-vis the Indian market and at last was triumphant in emerging with a strategy that demonstrated a shift to not only break-even but show profits over the next 3-4 years.

The strategy met with widespread approval in the board room but Donna knew it was going to be an uphill path. The strategy was transformational, which meant all employees had to gear up and get ready for the roller-coaster ride.

Now comes the crux. How does Donna get all her employees to willingly jump onto the roller-coaster? Of course, she could always force them onto the ride but that would mean employees shouting and screaming (not with joy but) with fear. Overall, she did not envision a “fun” environment unless she could get all of them to willingly step onto the ride and buckle up.

Would motivational talks help? She eschewed the option and decided that was temporary and not a permanent solution.

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. Donna had heard of this and now she mulled over this powerful statement. Culture change seemed like a “big” thing to do while she was looking at low hanging fruits – somehow get the company to break-even in the near term. Was there something more nimble?



While Donna grappled with this dilemma, she decided to first get her executive team completely on-board. And so Donna and her executive team of 8 members head to the mountains to explore the way forward with the strategy. What emerged from the strategy offsite was something that would change their way of thinking....

Donna had invited a leadership facilitator to facilitate the strategy event where the expected outcome was for the executive team to buy-in to the strategy. To use the analogy, the executive team had to willingly jump onto the roller coaster with joy.

The 2 days started with a strategy overview where the entire team engaged their logical “left” brain and analyzed the way forward. It was where they discussed analytically and logically how it would feel to be on top of the roller-coaster and what machinations they need to deploy in order to survive the ride.

The mood around the room was not what you may call “jumping with joy”.

While at the board room, Donna could leverage and eschew the strategy and growth figures to keep the investors hooked, would that hook the employees? The answer was a resounding NO. What was needed? Let’s look at what was needed to hook the employees in that room – the executive team members!

Time to engage the “right” brain and make the process experiential. What emerged was that Donna and team were building a house and they needed a solid base/framework (the compelling PURPOSE), movable walls to adjust and design as per requirements (the VALUES & associated BEHAVIOR aka culture) and the roof of the house (the STRATEGY and/or VISION).

So, the importance of having a solid framework and a solid base for their dream house drove the team to first solidify their purpose. The purpose that emerged through the exercises was “To spread joy through _____”.



What is the objective of this purpose statement?

Imagine an employee waking up everyday and telling himself “today I am going to help my company grow by x% in 2 years”. Is that exciting or inspiring to the employee?

Imagine an employee waking up everyday and telling himself “today I am going to spread joy through my work”. Is that inspiring?

Whether you are a store manager or a supplier or a customer service agent or a procurement manager in Donna’s company, ask yourself the question “What can I do today to help spread joy?”

The team then identified the values of the organization based on their own values that they held dear and the associated behaviors based on the values. The executive team was happy to role model these behaviors since they were rooted in their own values. And bingo, before Donna knew it, the culture had grown roots!



If you are a leader grappling with similar issues, don't be daunted by the phrase 'culture transformation' in order to bring in the culture you want. Instead jump into action and work and weave your way through. Otherwise, you may end up waiting forever for the "right" time.

Of course, strategy is important but strategy alone will not give the impetus that a business needs. "Culture eats strategy for breakfast" has never been truer.

And as you can see, Donna doesn't really have to choose between spreading joy and growth - they go hand in hand.

What are you doing in your organization to marry culture with strategy? What are your success stories and what are your challenges?

Let's keep progressing with purpose!

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About the author: Ruma Biswas is a CXO and Culture coach, who works with leaders worldwide to transform their perspective and their organization culture focusing upon a key ingredient – purpose!