

Business heritage

I was in a different part of town the other day, and decided to pick up breakfast from a fast food place. I chose one that I frequented some 20 years ago -- and haven't been there since.

I chose it because 20 years ago, it was the fastest service I'd ever seen; because I was once again in a hurry, I trusted that the service was still up to par, some 2 decades later -- and it was.

As I've traveled over the Western United States, I've stopped at a number of these fast food restaurants; invariably, I find that if the restaurant was blazingly fast years ago, it's more likely to give fast service today; if the restaurant is invariably slow, it usually continues to be slow.

It's what I call a "business heritage." Businesses invariably pick up a personality when it comes to service. Some businesses are slow to change, methodical in their movements, glacial in their speed to adapt. Other businesses are always moving, always on top, always customer-centric.

This heritage -- perhaps we'd be better off referring to it as a culture -- is so definite that even outsiders to a company can see it, right off the bat.

It's this company culture that can energize, define, and accelerate a company -- or have just the opposite effect.

In fact, this company culture -- the business heritage that a company has -- can make the difference in the success or failure of a company, even if all other things remain equal.

Two companies can be in the same business, follow the same business model, hire similar employees, and make similar business decisions, but if one has a positive culture, and the other has a negative one, one will rise, while the other one falls.

You can see this effect more easily in families. Take two similar families. One family will follow a victim culture; the other one will follow a culture of success. Following the children and grandchildren of those families, you'll invariably find that the culture the families choose has an effect for multiple generations.

It's the same in businesses. Employees absorb the prevailing culture of a company, and bend to fit it. People who don't adhere to the culture are weeded out over time, or leave because they just don't fit. Loser companies can turn a

good employee into a loser, and winner companies can turn a losing employee around.

So, the question becomes: how do we turn around a culture that's gone astray?

Again, we turn to a family for inspiration. My wife's father's family were farmers. They'd been farmers all their lives, for multiple generations. My wife's father, who I've never met (he died before I met Judy) left the farm, joined the service, and started selling insurance and buying and selling real estate on the side. He had never gone to college, but insisted that his children (and later his wife) get their degrees. My wife's mother also was raised in a farming community, and also moved away from a rural lifestyle. Her choices formed a new culture, and after her marriage to Judy's dad, their family formed a newer culture, still.

As an in-law to the family, I can look at the effects that the family culture has had over three generations. I can see how it's affected the children and grandchildren (and great-grandchildren). It's interesting to look at -- and I'm certain you've know people you can look at as well.

Businesses are similar -- it takes a great leader, or leaders, to change the culture of a company for the better. FedEx, for example, would not be the company it is today without the dynamic leadership of Fred Smith, who infected the company with his vision, just as assuredly as if he had infected it with a virus that made the company better.

Other companies are similar. Apple Computer grew under Steve Jobs, but when leadership was turned over to a manager who came from Pepsi, the company floundered -- the new manager changed the culture, and damaged the company. When Jobs came back to the company, he brought back the Apple culture -- he infected the company with his vision.

Other leaders have done it as well. Jack Welch changed the culture of General Electric. James Despain changed the culture of Caterpillar. Richard Kovacevich changed the culture of Wells Fargo.

There's a Costco culture, a Google culture, an Amazon.com culture, a Marriott culture, and an American Express culture, all fostered by leaders who know the importance of creating a business heritage for a company.

How is the culture of your company? Take a look at your company, as if through the eyes of a visitor. Does your company have a positive culture? Does it look to the future, and greet each new challenge as an exciting possibility for growth? Does it provide a nurturing environment where individual contributions are welcomed? Does it create an opportunity for employees to grow? Does it welcome employee involvement? Does it appear that employees actually **like** to come to work?

If you can answer in the positive to these questions, you're working for a company with a positive business heritage. If you find yourself answering in the negative, then maybe your business culture can stand a bit of a tune up.

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