An Alternative Path to ‘Always-On’ Company Culture

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How can company culture positively impact employee well-being?

According to British business magnate Richard Branson, it all comes down to treating people like the capable adults they are. “Flexible working encourages our staff to find a better balance between their work and private lives,” he notes. “Through this balance, they become happier and more productive.”

> *“There’s no magic formula for great company culture. The key is just to treat your staff how you would like to be treated.” — Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Group*

In a time when people are trying to navigate their workdays w[]hile simultaneously looking after small children and other personal responsibilities, these words couldn’t ring more true.

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During the worldwide health crisis, the need for boundaries between work and home has become even more critical. Many entrepreneurs might erroneously believe that sending emails at all hours of the day isn’t problematic since their employees are now working from home. But what they’re actually doing is promoting an unhealthy, “always-on” company culture that keeps people chained to their devices.

Writing for Harvard Business Review, John Hackston explains that, “Technology can empower people, but it can also make them feel enslaved. By thinking carefully about how and when to use it, you can find your own sweet spot. Amid the current crisis, that’s more important than ever.”

“Always-on” has become the default

Let me pose this question: How often do you take your smartphone with you to lunch or dinner? How about to bed? If you take a moment to tally up the number of times you’ve received work notifications outside of work hours, you’d likely lose count.

When I tell you that, as entrepreneurs, we are “always-on,” I am referring to this habit of not distinguishing between work and personal time. Many of us may have inadvertently set our company culture to reflect our own lax boundaries around technology.

I know that when I first founded my startup, I had this misplaced belief that answering emails till midnight or during weekends made me more productive. I had yet to establish the firm work policies I now have in place.

Research shows that as supervisors, we need to be careful in creating harmful expectations when it comes to smartphone use.

As Hackston points out: “And now that so many of us are working from home, communicating with our colleagues exclusively via electronic media, the boundaries between home and work can become increasingly blurred, making it even more difficult to switch off.”

Many of us might figure that since we’re working from home, we’ll get all our emails done later in the night or on Sunday morning. But what we often don’t take into consideration, is

that we’re significantly contributing to employee distress, and, ultimately, an unhealthy environment.

The change starts at the level of leadership

As leaders, it’s up to us to set a calm and productive culture that wards off burnout.

The problem with blurring the border between work and downtime is that it leaks into other areas of your life like your health, family, and personal time.

One 2012 study found the more information overload we experience, our productivity and performance decreases. And not only that, our decision-making and ability to innovate also become compromised. Other research shows that heavy multitaskers are less capable of doing several things at once compared to light multitaskers.

In other words, constant interruptions and not giving your team the head-space to be fully present in their personal lives will eventually lead to poor work results.

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So, what’s to be done?

To paraphrase Branson’s insight, the key is to treat your team how you would like to be treated. Below I offer an alternative path for cultivating more balance.

Ways to dismantle workaholic culture

1. Set the pace. It’s important that we note how our everyday habits perpetuate larger work behaviors. Meaning, we are

setting the precedent for how employees feel they should act. For example, if I answer phone calls while I'm having dinner with family, I'm creating an expectation that it's fine to blur these lines between our work and home life. If we don't create boundaries around our own work hours, others won't think they have the right to not immediately answer calls.

2. Allow your team to switch off. During the first five years of JotForm, we had just four employees. It was relatively easier to keep track of communication. But as we grew, I decided that promoting a healthy company culture meant adjusting our policies to reflect our values. Instead of simply paying lip-service to these ideals, I make it a point to walk my talk, and I do this in several ways:

- By encouraging my team to delete their Slack app on weekends, the amount of work related correspondence during our employee's downtime is limited.
- By defining the parameters of "on" and "off" hours, team members who are eager to please will assume they should always "be on" unless you tell them otherwise. Communicating clear expectations helps them guard their time better.
- By not stressing them out with excessive emails, I respect their personal time. I've written before why we should refrain from sending 2 a.m. emails. Keep in mind, receiving that ping in the dead of night is disrupting their sleep and causing unneeded stress during a time that's already stressful enough. In making sure I schedule my send time for business hours, I'm letting them know I respect their health and wellbeing.

3. Create a culture of honesty. Finally, breaking a work addiction mindset involves transparency on what we all can and can't do. Creating a sense of community and collaboration comes from allowing team members to examine their capacity to

give.

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Ask the hard questions like: Are they working through personal things at home? This is especially relevant now when people are dealing with mental health and safety concerns.

Having an open conversation about availability is what forms a healthy work culture. Instead of slowly watching employees burnout, talk with them and really listen to their needs. In doing so, you're improving your company's overall health, creativity, and performance. As Branson wisely emphasizes, you'll establish an environment in which everyone can flourish.

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