

How to Evolve Your Organization's Culture Without Losing Its Essence

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For a founder, few things are more challenging than ceding control of a company built tirelessly, often over a lifetime. However, nothing is more necessary if the founder plans to scale their business. And while entrepreneurs usually understand on a fundamental level that the culture that got them “here” won’t take them “there,” they worry about how to grow while maintaining the essence of their organizations.

As a human capital advisor who specializes in workplace cultures, I can say with absolute confidence that it is both possible and often essential to keep a company’s “secret sauce” as it grows. But that doesn’t mean cultural nuances, like decision-making paradigms, can’t and shouldn’t change. Founders who allow and participate in the act of purposefully growing their cultures will inevitably see their businesses scale faster and become more sustainable over time. Crucially, they can accomplish this while retaining their mission and values, carving out the vital elements of their organizations that need to stay.

Better understanding the nuances of culture

For many, defining an organizational culture mistakenly comes down to whether it is simply positive or negative – a great place to work or one that drives good people away. The reality

is culture is far more complex. It is defined by a series of behaviors surrounding such areas as power, perspective and creativity along with time, interdependence, communications and inclusion. Every organization is comprised of these normalized behaviors that, in fact, exist along a spectrum. Meaning, for example, an organization doesn't allow or disallow creativity but, rather, does so by degrees.

With this in mind, founders should understand that the act of evolving their culture in order to grow can involve both subtle and dramatic changes. What's more, it can shift the norms of their companies in ways that are far more nuanced than most initially understand.

To illustrate, a leader achieving rapid growth might decide that they want to keep most aspects of their company's culture but needs to ensure siloed team members operate more collaboratively. Additionally, expansion into new geographies might require the organization to become more inclusive to better support team members who bring increasingly diverse perspectives, local knowledge and life experiences.

Bringing data and analysis to culture-building initiatives

Similar to human capital-oriented work, culture-building is often considered a right-brain, soft-skill area, leading to inaccurate perceptions about the process of evolving organizational cultures. In truth, there are savvy, data-driven ways to approach this work, always laddering up to big-picture strategy.

For example, close examinations of institutional materials – from mission statements to engagement data to exit interview records – all inform the beginning of rigorous, intentional culture-building initiatives. This analysis – coupled with deep interviews with founders, as well as in-depth

conversations with board members and employees, surveys and walkabouts – reveals a trove of contextual information, providing organizations with the data they need to map out their current versus ideal culture and design work streams that facilitate the desired cultural transition.

This rigorous, context-driven approach helps remove the guesswork from culture-building initiatives. In addition, it ensures founders feel heard, respected and assured the companies they've built retain their most critical cultural elements, even with potentially different looks and feels in phase 2.0 of their evolutions.

Embracing the act of letting go

There is no escaping the fact that significant organizational expansions usually require founders to step back from many of the responsibilities they previously championed and often enjoyed. Understanding this, they would be wise to prepare themselves for moments in which ceding control creates a complex mix of feelings, including concerns that their organizations and respective cultures are changing too radically as well.

Within my own firm, our founder Dr. Foster Mobley has lived this change. Reflecting on his experience, he advises other founders to maintain healthy distances from organizational divisions or areas identified for transition. He also believes outside experts can help differentiate between situations in which a founder's involvement is warranted and those that are merely churning up their emotions. According to Foster, who himself navigated the transition from CEO to Chairman Emeritus, nothing brought more peace of mind concerning the culture and legacy of his company than knowing he shared the vision and values of the leaders he brought into the organization to shepherd its growth.

Given the blood, sweat and tears founders pour into their

organizations, it is more than understandable that they feel protective over the direction of their companies, even as they seek to take a step back from their previously defined roles. Fortunately, it is possible to honor these heroic efforts and build them into well-established origin stories and corporate narratives, even while culture-building to help usher in new eras of growth.

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