Surrounded by Workaholics? How to Retune Your Company Culture

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Running a business can feel like running a marathon. With rapidly evolving markets, an entrepreneur must continually anticipate how to offer their users a better product or service. But if you forget to pace yourself, you can slide down the slope to becoming a workaholic.

You might be thinking: “But the most successful companies are fueled by workaholics!” Just take Tesla. In 2018, Tesla CEO Elon Musk admitted to pulling 120-hour work weeks. Published company-wide emails sent by Musk reveal that he encourages employees to match his level of hustle. As one employee put it, the happiest Tesla employees are self-described workaholics who *want* to work 70-plus hours a week. Employees are even known to sleep at HQ on occasion.

While a cutthroat work culture might lead to some success — on rare occasions, it may even launch rockets into space — it can also result in high turnover and low employee morale.

Of course, it’s up to each entrepreneur to decide upon the culture they want to build. As CEO of my company, I try to focus on the long-game — for me, that means regularly checking in with myself and my team to see if we’re pushing too hard, and if so, why.

When overworking becomes counterproductive

For entrepreneurs, it’s inevitable to burn the candle at both ends sometimes. Maybe we’re launching a new project, or maybe we’re trying to make up for slowed progress during the pandemic. Within reason, extra work is not inherently a bad thing.

It becomes problematic when overworking becomes the standard and is fueled by a sense of insecurity. Laura Empson, professor at Cass Business School in London, who conducted extensive research on leadership, says that this insecurity is caused, in large part, by the inability for knowledge workers to quantify their value.

For example, a maker of widgets can show the potential customer how well their widgets perform. A lawyer, on the other hand, can’t clearly demonstrate to a future client or to their supervisor the extent of their skills and knowledge. As a result, the lawyer feels insecure and is constantly driven to prove their worth. Empson calls these professionals “insecure overachievers.”

Related: Is Your Workaholic Behavior Hurting Your Team? The Answer Is Yes.

What’s more, workaholic culture is reinforced from the top-down. Tesla is the rule, not the exception. Some organizations, according to Empson, deliberately recruit insecure overachievers and exploit them to their benefit.

As Empson writes for *Harvard Business Review*:

> *“By the time insecure overachievers become leaders of their organizations, they unconsciously replicate the systems of social control and overwork that helped to create them.”*

The good news is that there are ways that entrepreneurs can prevent their companies from slipping into toxic overwork cycles. If you're already there, it's never too late to make efforts to retune your work culture.

Breaking the workaholism cycle

Workaholism is one of the rare compulsive behaviors that today's society tends to value. According to sociologist Mary Blair-Loy, that's because work is considered a morally worthy fixation.

Blair-Loy explains:

> *"We live in a culture where work demands and deserves our undivided allegiance."*

But that doesn't come at no cost. Numerous studies have shown that long hours aren't just bad for people by causing stress, impaired sleep, impaired memory and even heart disease. But they're also bad for a company's bottom line, most directly in the form of absenteeism, turnover, and rising health insurance costs.

Related: Advice From a Recovering Workaholic: Make a Shift to 'Less Is More'

I've learned at JotForm that my attitude and behavior affect my team. Here are some strategies for cultivating a healthier work schedule and setting a more reasonable standard for your company.

1. Redefine success on your terms. With the global health crisis creating never before seen uncertainty, many entrepreneurs are feeling less secure than ever. It's tempting to look at easily quantifiable things, like hours clocked, to measure how well you're doing.

But simply working more does not guarantee sustainable success. Instead, take a moment for introspection and decide how to define success on your terms. For me, success means continuing to organically grow my company and still be able to spend time with my family, disconnect at the end of the day, and travel to Turkey to my family's farm every year.

What does success mean for you?

Once you answer that question, you can figure out how to achieve it in today's evolving business climate.

2. Manage your team's expectations. If the first step is adjusting your own expectations, the second is ensuring that colleagues and business partners are on the same page — sharing any changes you're making to your schedule and why. For starters, this will help you stick with it. When your coworker knows you won't be looking at emails at three a.m., chances are, they won't bother sending them at that hour either.

At my startup, I don't just set an example of sustainable work hours — I also enforce them. I've seen in 14-plus years of running a company that when we all rest and recharge without feeling guilty about it, we work better, smarter, and more efficiently when we return.

So if you adjust your schedule, don't forget to manage your team's expectations, too, and encourage them to follow suit.

3. Get your device addiction in check. We're addicted to our devices. As reported by Harvard University's science blog, U.S. adults spend an average of two to four hours per day tapping, typing, and swiping on their devices. The result is that we never leave work at work.

Silence your devices during your downtime

Though we can’t part with our devices entirely, we can create boundaries. That way, when we leave the office (or virtual office) we can truly rest and clear our minds, instead of worrying about email notifications or the latest TechCrunch updates.

Consider angel investor and pulsd CEO Mareza Larizadeh: At some point, Larizadeh realized he had become a workaholic. To reel back his overwork habits, Larizadeh instituted rules for using his devices. He limited email checking to once per day, turned off most notifications, and delegated non-critical issues on weekends. As a result, he felt more able to connect with people and live in the moment.

Not only that, as Larizadeh told HBR, his coworkers felt the impact:

> *“They see how much happier I am when I am well rested. Everyone at the company is doing better.”*

Letting go of your devices can benefit your entire team.

Related: 4 Tips for Workaholic Entrepreneurs to Avoid a Crumbling Marriage

When overworking is rooted in insecurity, it’s bad for your health and your company’s health. By taking control of your work habits and redefining what success means to you and your team, you can promote a more positive and sustainable culture.

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