The 5 Pillars of Building a Culture of Success in a Startup



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Any article you read, podcast you listen to, or founder you talk to will tell you that “startups are hard.”

I couldn’t agree more, but what does “hard” mean? Hard because you work long hours? Hard because you have little money? Hard because you have so many competing priorities? Hard because it is lonely trying to look successful to customers, partners and staff while struggling to keep it all together?

The answer is a resounding YES to all of the above. Startups are hard. But they are also just the right thing for people who want to learn and grow continuously. And they are the right thing for people passionate about establishing a unique

company culture that reflects their values. Being intentional about company culture can be a make-or-break factor for any startup.

I spent over 20 years with a successful career at a Fortune 100 technology company. I worked in small subsidiary offices in remote parts of the world and at corporate headquarters. I had stable, sometimes very large, budgets and teams in both settings. I knew the corporate values, understood and lived the company culture, and knew precisely how to manage the systems, processes and policies to support my area of business and career. I moved fluidly between headquarters and field roles. No matter where the office was located on a map, there was a consistent corporate feel and "type" of employee. This was true for fewer than 20 employees and offices of thousands. No matter where I was, there was structure and the security of a well-known logo on the door and systems and processes to connect with the larger corporate, sales, marketing, financial and HR systems.

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When I stepped into my first role leading a startup, I was certain that all my time working remotely in field offices had prepared me to lead a small organization. I understood how to motivate and manage a team, talk to customers, create a killer PowerPoint presentation and back it up with a slick Excel financial forecast. I didn't count on a company culture's role in a successful business. I took that for granted because my career had been steeped in an already-established business culture.

Like most startup founders, my priorities were laser-focused on how to make money, how to achieve the holy grail of product market fit, where the first tranche of funding was coming from and how much runway we had. I put my head down and drove hard to succeed. I failed. I spent all the money in ways that

didn’t make sense in hindsight. I never found the right market fit and failed to dig deep enough into the customer’s pain point. And I never really thought about the type of company culture I wanted to build. I stepped into a position with a team in place and never really questioned what type of company that group of people added up to and how significantly this would impact the product we offered to the market.

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Not being one to give up easily, I took the lessons I learned about spending and saving money, understanding a need before developing a product and even how to pitch and raise more money, and started another business. This time, I decided to put the company mission and culture first. My co-founder and I come from very different business backgrounds but share the feeling that culture is one of, if not the most important, element to success. This approach has paid off, and we have attracted and formed a team deeply committed to our business mission: creating economic gender equality.

Here are the top 5 steps to building a culture of success:

1. Communicate!

Prioritize communication. Do it regularly and reinforce the company’s core mission, values and direction. Share the status of business deals, your financial position and short-term goals and long-term aspirations. Seek input and feedback on business status and how the team feels about the direction, product and place in the market.

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2. Make hard choices

A small startup team can become like a family. You depend on one another and often have a close, beyond-professional relationship. This makes it difficult when things go sideways with one of the family. But as a leader, you must keep your eye on the mission and remember why you are in business. Making a hard decision to let someone go, while painful in the short term, is better for the team and will reinforce the culture of building for the long term. It could also lead to amazing, unexpected opportunities.

3. Reward the work

I am not a big believer in compensating teams with free drinks or a foosball table at the office. The best way to reward your team is to pay them a salary or with equity or both. Continuing to invest in building the business to enhance their stake in the company speaks louder and is more beneficial than superficial, short-term entertainment perks. And don’t forget to celebrate the wins, even the small ones.

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4. Tell the real story

When things go wrong, and they often do in a startup, own it. Talk about it and learn how to improve and not repeat mistakes with your team. Optimism is a hallmark of startup founders and teams, but not acknowledging when things go wrong likely will harm your business, or at the very least infuse a superficial element to your company culture – and create distrust.

5. Enjoy the work you are doing

You and your team are working hard to grow a business. You can never forget the drive and passion that attracted you and the

team to get started in the first place. No matter how successful or large the organization becomes, if you don’t have a culture where your team feels invested and enjoys their contribution to the mission, you won’t have a sustainable business.

So yes, startups are hard. But when you are intentional about creating a healthy business culture that reflects your company’s mission and values, startups can be just a bit easier – and a lot more fun.

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