

Volume 25, Special Issue**Print ISSN: 1099 -9264**
Online ISSN: 1939-4675

THE UNIQUE ART OF CULTURE-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

I don't know about you, but we hit the ground running this year. After ten months of turmoil and trying to find a firm footing in a world of remote workforces, social distancing, strict health protocols and many employees facing financial crises, South African companies are eager to get back to business. Of course, the pandemic hasn't disappeared. Most businesses are dealing with the devastating effects of Covid-19 and many employees are battling with the personal loss of family, friends and colleagues. The rollout of the first batch of vaccines offers some hope, but experts are warning that it will be many months before we feel the impact of herd immunity, and even then, new variations could take us back to the drawing board. I am not one for doom and gloom, however. I never have been, and right now, after a really difficult 2020, the overwhelming impression we're getting is that business leaders are stepping up, supporting their employees and looking for methods to build stronger and supportive corporate cultures that are sharply focused on customer service.

Culture should be Proactive, not Reactive

The challenge is maintaining momentum. We're all familiar with the process. In January we lay out our strategy, complete with how we're going to execute it. By March, everyone is too busy reacting to market pressures and the best-laid plans slip away. Right now, we're being asked two main questions: how do we build a strong company culture that unifies our employees with a common purpose; and how can company cultures be nurtured and maintained in the face of so much disruption, personal loss and turmoil?

The answer to both questions is the Culture-Driven Leader

Culture-driven Leadership is a type of leadership based on a true motivation to grow others through a deep and entrenched business culture that puts people first. When I launched Sorbet in 2005, I already had an idea of what I wanted the business's culture to be and this became the foundation of the entire group. Over time, we perfected the framework, gave it a name (Cultureneering) and put in place exactly what a Culture-driven leader needed to be.

No-one could foresee a pandemic, or that leadership teams around the world would be faced with the critical role of supporting employees through a health and financial crisis. However, we have always believed that business leaders, who work from the bottom up to build a nurturing community culture that has a solid foundation of service and upliftment, and provides support, encouragement, equal treatment, effective communication, and mentorship

to employees, will reap the benefits. People who feel trusted and respected and whose contributions are valued, will develop a sense of belonging, will, in turn, give exceptional service to customers. This is how to build the foundation of a sustainable business with a strong bottom line.

How to become a Culture-Driven Leader

The Culture-driven leader believes in the philosophy of Cultureneering, which is described as the creation of a strong culture in a diverse workforce that lays the platform for obsessive customer service. Many leaders struggle to see the connection between culture and the bottom line. The truth is that culture is the bottom line.

Cultureneering has one goal: to single-mindedly build a sense of belonging and a common purpose across the full spectrum of employees, which puts the customer at the centre of everything. Culture-driven leaders develop the skills of their people and build their self-esteem, thus enhancing their ability to continuously improve their service to others.

There are five primary steps to this:

1. Culture is built around a set of moral values that puts people first and is entirely focused on customer service.
2. Understanding and navigating the socio-political environment in which we both live and work is critical to the success of building a strong culture.
3. Trust, respect, and community building become the foundation of a culture that everyone can believe in.
4. Employees have a sense of belonging regardless of their group or background.
5. Serving others becomes the common focus of the business and is deeply fulfilling for every member of the organisation.

And the result? A sustainable, growing, profitable business that delivers on the moral obligations of South African businesses to lead the charge for change and gives employees the stability, support and respect they so desperately need right now.

Maintaining Momentum

Once the process of Cultureneering becomes embedded in a business and the leadership team embrace their roles as Culture-driven leaders, the company won't slip back into old habits because a service-orientated culture is woven into the business's DNA. If this is your goal, be prepared to be consistent. People need to know what to expect of their leaders, each other and the business as whole. Consistency achieves two key things: First, your employees will feel safe. If you work in a predictable environment, particularly when everything around you is uncertain and even chaotic, you feel comfortable and secure making decisions.

Second, if you are consistent as a leader, you are essentially leading by example, giving your employees a clear road map of your culture in action. Great leaders serve the people who are serving the people. Nothing speaks louder than actions.