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# Creating Culture

THE CULTURE OF YOUR BUSINESS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MUSEUMS OR WORLD TRAVEL. IT'S ALL ABOUT HOW YOU TREAT YOUR EMPLOYEES AND HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT WORKING FOR YOU.

BY KATIE NAVARRA

**H**ave you ever thought about how former or current employees talk about what it's like to work at your barn? When they're being candid with family or friends (in a space where you can't hear them), do they say they're fulfilled or is each day a grueling grin-and-bear-it existence until another opportunity comes along?

Whether it's positive or negative, how your employees feel at work impacts their ability to perform. Nurturing a positive workplace culture improves morale and productivity and ultimately helps your barn achieve the next level of success.

Just because stalls rather than cubicles fill the "office space" and saddles substitute for chairs doesn't mean a training facility is immune to the "toxic workplace culture" you hear about in corporate America. Despite the excitement that accompanies the opportunity of working for a skilled professional, assistants and staff can only thrive when they're satisfied at work.

Nearly 60% of employees have left a job or are thinking about leaving because of a bad boss, according to a survey by Randstad US. While inadequate pay and benefits were among top-ranked reasons for leaving a job, many workers reported leaving because of negative experiences and a poor workplace culture—factors you can improve with better leadership.

Turnover is costly. Every time you hire a new employee, you're investing time and resources into teaching them the ropes. Depending on your program, you may also cover the costs of additional education. When they leave, they take that knowledge with them, which impacts your stable financially. Being short-staffed can make it difficult to accomplish the daily chores until someone new can be hired and trained.

It's only natural for employees to come and go as their careers evolve, but that's often planned with plenty of notice given. The unexpected loss because of a poor working environment is something that can be avoided. And if word gets on the street that the status of working at your barn isn't worth the discomfort, it'll become harder and harder to find good staff. Workplace culture is one of the most talked about topics in businesses large and small. Here's a look at why it should matter to you. →





*Everyone in a workplace has to perform tasks that aren't their favorite. But when the boss appreciates that work and recognizes other talents, employees can find fulfillment in both the exciting parts of their job and the mundane.*

### What Is Culture?

When you think of culture, chances are you think of the traditions or customs associated with a nation or group of people—for example, the Caribbean culture or the European culture. Dictionary.com offers a broader explanation. Culture is “The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.”

At work that translates into a shared set of assumptions that are shaped by you, the boss. Culture is everything; it's not something you add, according to Chuck Blakeman, CEO of Crankset Group. Blakeman has consulted with Google, Apple, Microsoft, and other widely recognized companies teaching leaders the importance of culture.

Businesses spend thousands, sometimes millions, trying to “make” a better culture. There's a lot of buzz about tech companies that offer on-site gyms, coffee bars, on-site medical staff, and more. But beware, even in multi-million-dollar companies, these incentives cannot overcome a bad culture.

“One of the biggest mistakes businesses make is equating perks with culture,” he said. “Things like ping-pong tables and free lunches are just perks.”

Blakeman also cautions bosses about confusing great compensation with a good culture. Just because your barn may pay better than another or offer a stronger benefits package doesn't mean your barn is a better place to work.

“Our society has a skewed understanding of what incentives are,” Blakeman said. “When the pay is on par with the industry, the money falls at the bottom of the list.”

### Live What You Believe

So, when the pay is equal, what is it that will attract the top talent to your barn? An overwhelming majority of workers (85%) responded to the Ranstad US survey that they wouldn't apply for or continue to work for a company that has a bad reputation with former employees or the general public. It's about what you believe in and more importantly what you do that keeps employees happy and engaged. Remember Enron? The energy, commodities, and services company has become one of the most well-known examples of willful corporate fraud. Blakeman said that not long before the company's collapse in 2001, executives spent thousands creating a 64-page booklet highlighting the company culture.

“The No. 1 item highlighted in the booklet was integrity,” he said. “The company's actions clearly showed that their integrity was not a part of their culture.”

Spend time thinking about what values are most important to you and the success of your barn. Write them down and share them with staff. When making decisions, do so based on that mission statement rather than other motivating factors.

### Communicate What's Happening

No one likes a secret. Secrecy fosters distrust and skepticism. When employees are in the dark about what's going on with the business—good or bad—it creates an uncomfortable working environment.

Share the goals you have for each horse, for yourself, and the business as a whole. Provide regular updates on the progress toward those benchmarks. You may not

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want to share your full financial goals, but quantify what you're comfortable sharing to get more buy-in from your employees. For example, if you want to increase your number of non pro clients from 10 to 15, communicate how you'll do it and your progress.

Don't be afraid to ask staff, and ask them often, how they feel about the work environment. Offer an anonymous method for providing feedback so they feel they can be honest without fear of losing their job. This is challenging for barns with a staff of one person, for example. In those situations, schedule weekly, monthly, or quarterly meetings with time for open dialogue. And as the boss, be authentic in hearing what your staff has to say. It's not always easy to acknowledge a weakness, and not everything can be changed or "fixed," but committing to listening and communicating goes a long way.

"Having respect for one another and having a diversity in personality can be an asset," said Sheryl Jordan, an equine-facilitated coaching and leadership development consultant who uses horses to illustrate cultural breakdowns at work through her business EquiSpective.

### **Empower Employees to Make Decisions**

Employees are willing to walk to the ends of the earth for a trainer, a horse, and a client when they feel invested in the process. That means empowering your employees to make decisions of many different kinds—be they in the horse's training, showing schedule, or even medical treatment—is key to their investment in your business.

It may be frightening to allow an employee to make significant decisions for a client-owned horse with a high-dollar value. It's scary because the horse owner holds you and your business accountable. It doesn't have to happen in a vacuum—you should remain an integral part of the process—but fight the urge to micromanage. Allowing employees to make decisions leads to creative thinking and an unwavering commitment to doing what's best for the horse, the client, and your business.

"When you tell people what they have to do it makes them unhappy," he said. "What makes us adults is that adults get to make decisions—children don't. When you take decision-making away from someone, it dehumanizes them and they can't recover from that."

But there's more to it than that. You can't simply allow employees to make decisions. You have to require them to do so. Through his consulting work, Blakeman has found that about 60% of people have gotten used to leaving their brains at home. About another 20% to 30% of people jump at the opportunity to have more responsibility at work. "Being an adult at work is not an option, and most of them will adapt over time and come to find they're much happier at work," he said.

### **Tools for Change**

The horses in your barn can do more for your business than bring in income. They can serve as an unbiased source for reporting the type of culture in your barn. You've spent years honing your ability to catch the slightest cues for willingness and quickly identify soreness. You know that the smallest wrinkling around the eyes or nostrils and the slightest flick of an ear can indicate the horse may be in pain or unhappy.

Can you recognize those same signals in your staff? A human worker may wrinkle their nose, but they won't wring their tail and you may not observe discontent in their eyes. But they have clearly visible body language that gives away an employee's state of happiness at work, Jordan explained.

"Look for rounded shoulders and a slouched position with a collapsed-in rib cage. These are signs the person isn't engaged and has shut down," she said. "They may be participating in the work process, but they aren't fully invested in it."

Horses only care about your authenticity and intention. They can intuitively read whether a person is confident, secure, and capable. That all changes at liberty in the round pen and their reactions can tell a lot about your own and your employee's state of being. Spending time in the round pen helps cast a light on how your nonverbal cues and intentions come across to others, including your staff. That can be the first step to understanding how your staff perceives you.

"Horses commit to what you create," Blakeman added. "If you watch how whales, dolphins, and seals are trained, they aren't forced or told what to do. They're invited into the discussion without punishment, it's all done with positive reinforcement. Employees are the same way."

### **A Win-Win for All**

Your staff may be suffering in silence, working solely for the experience that accompanies the opportunity to work for an elite training barn. Spending the day surrounded by horses, traveling to high-level competitions, and learning the secrets of the trade beat a desk job just about every day. The satisfaction of a big win or breakthrough with a horse often outweighs the grueling hours, the unpredictability of horse training, and missed family holidays.

Above all else, what keeps people satisfied as long-term employees is knowing they work in an environment where their viewpoints are valued (and sought out) and their well-being is important to the boss.

"Companies are discovering when they invite everyone to participate in the building of a great company and share in the rewards, both the company and the people profit more," Blakeman said. ■