

# Don't Leave it to Chance



## The importance of building an effective workplace culture

By Andrew Klebanow and Arte Nathan

Every company talks about the importance of its workplace culture, but few approach it as a strategic initiative. Because of the impact culture has on a company's performance, it should not be left to chance. It can and should be crafted and nurtured in ways that reflect a company's needs, hopes, aspirations and goals.

An organization's culture refers to the values, beliefs and behaviors that determine how a company's employees and management interact, perform and conduct their business. Companies spend a lot of time and effort creating a culture, and yet it is often not as good or robust as it could be, which is a shame because it affects employee hiring and retention, employee and customer satisfaction, performance and productivity, business results and public perceptions.

Workplace culture is important because it gives employees something to believe in, to feel good about and to base their loyalty on. When an organization's culture is good, employees want to be employed there and remain there. When it is not, it diminishes that attraction and employees' interest in doing their best.

At its most basic level, a sound workplace culture is manifested in the service that employees provide to a casino's guests. A good culture

can be manifested in ways that are simple, as in employees offering guests a sincere welcome, wishing them good luck and thanking them for their patronage. A good culture makes guests feel appreciated. In addition to guest service, it can have a profound effect on many other aspects of the business.

### Recruitment

Whether one likes it or not, applicants are attuned to the buzz that exists about companies. If that buzz is good, they are apt to apply for a job or wait for the right opportunity to leave their current employer. If it is bad, they stay away.

Much of the information that creates this buzz comes from current employees. If they are happy, it shows in their faces and actions when working and, since many applicants may also be guests of the casino, they notice this on the gaming floor, in the restaurants, and at the hotel. They also can see if the property is understaffed. That too is a sign of a casino's culture, and the impact it has on current employees and job applicants can be significant.

# When your people feel valued, they value what they do.

## Retention

Everybody today is talking about the Great Resignation, or Quiet Quitting, or any of the other employment issues that have arisen since the end of Covid shutdowns.

While it is understandable that many companies had to lay off employees at the start of the pandemic, how they did that, what communications they put out before, during, and after those layoffs and how (or if) they called employees back to work had a great deal to do with how employees perceived management's commitment to psychological security, trust and other issues reflective of their culture.

## Employee Satisfaction and Performance

A casino may conduct employee attitude surveys, but their guests and competitors can assess those attitudes directly by how employees talk and react to them. Good or bad, these reflect the impact of culture on employee satisfaction, behavior and performance.

## Public Perceptions

Workplace culture is on full display not just to guests and job applicants, but also to vendors and even investors. It is all tied to the company's beliefs and practices, which again, are all over the faces and actions of their staff. But all of this is obvious if an organization is attuned to its employees.

Two practices can better align your actions with the needs of your employees and have a direct impact on your company's culture:

### • Servant leadership

Servant leadership is a personal leadership philosophy built on the belief that the most effective leaders strive to serve others, rather than accrue power or take control. Servant leaders put their employees' interests and needs ahead of their own. With a traditional leadership approach, the leader encourages people to do their jobs by providing them with guidance, direction and motivation. A servant leader focuses on the people that work for them, rather than the company as a whole. The emphasis is on effectiveness, doing the right things and not just being right. When your people feel valued, they value what they do.

### • Emotional intelligence

Many companies say that "employees are our most important asset." In the post-Covid era, employees are looking for the substance behind that boast, and it can be found in management's practices and the company's culture. Emotionally intelligent leaders are aware of the things that affect them and their employees, and empathetic to the issues that impact their employees. This creates trust and respect, the kinds of things that influence

**Servant leadership is a personal leadership philosophy built on the belief that the most effective leaders strive to serve others, rather than accrue power or take control. Servant leaders put their employees' interests and needs ahead of their own.**

whether employees like their work, their supervisors and the work they do. Servant leaders tend to be emotionally intelligent.

The casino industry is replete with examples of great organizational culture. Many can be found in Las Vegas as well as in Native American casinos. Their organizational cultures were created by their founders and passed on to future generations of leaders.

Sam Boyd, Bill Harrah and Wilbur Clark (Desert Inn) were iconic figures whose personalities and beliefs served as the foundation for their respective corporate cultures. They were soon followed by other charismatic leaders such as Jackie Gaughan (El Cortez and Union Plaza), Claudine Williams (Harrah's), Henry Lewin (Las Vegas Hilton and Sands), Benny Binion (Horseshoe) and Steve Wynn, founder of Mirage Resorts and Wynn Resorts.

Today, Frank Fertitta III and Derek Stevens are making their mark on their businesses that reflect their personal beliefs. They, and the great casino operators that preceded them, are all larger-than-life figures whose business and personal identities are so intertwined that employees often refer to working for them rather than the businesses they owned. These leaders were always on the floor, talking to employees and guests, and they never hesitated to share their personal thoughts about their success and the success of their businesses.

There is no confusion about what was important to these great leaders—they were the first ones to pick something up off the floor or extend a smile and handshake to guests and employees alike. Their organizational cultures were based on the way they lived their lives, and people enjoyed being part of that.

Great workplace cultures can also be found in many of the restaurant brands that are now found in casinos. Sirio Maccioni, founder of Le Cirque, who opened an outpost at the Bellagio in Las Vegas, embodied the idea of culinary culture and style. Employees in his restaurants were more than servers, bartenders, and cooks—they were professionals inspired to be better by the style and beliefs of the Maccioni family.

There are so many other celebrity restaurateurs and chefs (too many to name for fear of inadvertently leaving one out) who added their ideals and beliefs to Las Vegas—they spawned a whole new era in culinary excellence that added to the city's uniqueness. Their success in turn spread to other gaming markets and their celebrity restaurant brands can now be found in casinos across the world.

Native American casinos often bring their tribal culture to their gaming enterprises. Reflective of their rich history, the Nez Perce tribe in Idaho is a great example of leveraging a tribal culture of hospitality to inspire the culture of all of their enterprises. Others include the San



Culture is way too important to leave to chance.

Manuel Tribe, operators of Yaamava' Resort and Casino at San Manuel in Southern California and the Palms in Las Vegas, and the Mohegan Tribe, operators of multiple casinos in the United States including its flagship Mohegan Sun Casino Resort in Connecticut, to name but a few. Their tribal cultures are instilled in their casino businesses and employees.

### Building an Organization's Culture

The challenge for any casino operator is to integrate their business strategies and core beliefs into the company's workplace culture.

Whether developed organically or not, workplace culture should be crafted and internally marketed carefully and effectively, much like marketing plans and public relations strategies.

There are basic steps that any casino operator can implement:

First, have your leadership team develop mission and vision statements that reflect what the company does (its mission) and where it aspires to be in the future (its vision). Add to these the values leadership collectively believes in and lives by.

This is not an easy task, so one should consider taking the leadership team away from the property for a few days to work on them. Make sure everyone participates and takes ownership of the final statements, and that they are aligned when releasing and supporting them. Perhaps what is most important is that leadership must truly believe in the company's mission, its vision and its core values. If not, developing a sound workplace culture will fail.

After that much effort, leadership needs to develop a plan to put them to use rather than have them relegated (as often happens) to a shelf in the office, there to remain out of sight and out of mind. Worse still, painting the organization's mission, vision and values on the walls of the employee dining room without leadership believing and living them every day will only harbor resentment and cynicism from employees.

Next, have your human resource and marketing departments collaborate to define and graphically display the company's mission, vision and value, and include them throughout the employment life cycle in the same style and manner that a casino designs the marketing pieces it sends to its guests. Include the statements and values appropriately in job postings, job offer letters, new-hire orientation materials and every other announcement or correspondence that is shared with employees. This way,

the company's mission, vision and values come to life in everything you do throughout someone's connection with your company, and they are never out of sight nor out of mind.

And finally, teach your managers and supervisors the roles they play and the responsibilities they have for keeping the mission, vision and values alive in the company's culture. It should become more than just a poster on the wall.

Culture is way too important to leave to chance. It should be honest and simple—no contrived. And it should be the basis for the relationships your employees have with your

company, their colleagues, and your guests. Done right, it is a powerful recruitment and retention tool, and powers your employee relations and guest services. Left on its own, it too often becomes unfocused and ineffective. If your employees are indeed your most important asset, treat them and organize them in ways to maximize their impact on your company's overall performance and success.

*Arte Nathan is president of Strategic Development Worldwide (sdwnet.com). Previously, he was chief human resources officer at Wynn Resorts and opened all the company's properties in North America and Asia.*

*Andrew Klebanow is co-founder and a partner at Casino Consultants Consortium (C3 Gaming). He has worked in the casino industry since 1977 and as a gaming consultant since 2000. He can be reached at [andrew@C3GamingGroup.com](mailto:andrew@C3GamingGroup.com).*

**First, have your leadership team develop mission and vision statements that reflect what the company does (its mission) and where it aspires to be in the future (its vision). Add to these the values leadership collectively believes in and lives by.**