

How to Ensure Your Nonprofit's Culture Lives Up to Its Promise

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Organizational Culture

You probably love to talk about the strength of your organization's culture with job candidates, donors, and your board. But do employees and clients experience your organization's culture the way you intend them to? If not, they may question whether they want to work for or with your organization. Culture might seem like a squishy concept, but there are ways to ensure your organization lives up to its professed values more often than not.

Pretend you're starting from scratch. How do you want things to get done in your organization? How often should you hold meetings? How do you want managers and their teams to interact? How do you want meetings and the office environment to feel—lots of rapid-fire conversation, or a quieter environment where people work more independently? How should individuals and the team respond when someone makes a mistake? Identifying your organizational goalposts will help you measure whether you've hit them or missed the mark.

Gauge employee engagement. Conduct an anonymous employee survey. Ask questions about how well team members believe your organization lives up to its values in different areas. Pay attention to the areas where employees express the most negative sentiments, and focus your energy on those areas.

Be honest and invite employee input. Talk about the areas where your nonprofit has challenges living up to the culture you profess. A workplace where leaders can admit things aren't perfect will be more effective at retaining top performers than one where employees feel leaders are dishonest. Ask team members for their thoughts and opinions on how your nonprofit can live out its values. Every individual in an organization can help shape culture, and yours will evolve as your nonprofit and its team changes.

Show why your values matter. Many organizational value statements offer no clue as to how the values help their organization succeed. Spell out how your organization's values shape how you serve the community and deal with challenges. People will be more likely to make choices that uphold organizational culture if they have a sense of why it matters.

Define the behaviors that demonstrate your values. Say one of your nonprofit's values is integrity. Different people might interpret that in very different ways. Define how you want team members to demonstrate integrity. Should they always prioritize finding the best solution to a problem above the quickest solution? Should they always get a second opinion from a team member when an ethical dilemma arises?

Reinforce your values. Make sure to praise and reward employees when they act in accordance with your values, and share these stories with the rest of your team. And hold people accountable if they consistently don't act in accordance with your values. Regular reinforcement of your cultural values is one of the most effective ways to make sure they're put into practice.

Train managers. Managers set the expectations for how work gets done and set the tone for how employees interact with one another. Make sure managers have a full understanding of the organization's culture, the behaviors that culture encourages and discourages, and how to give constructive feedback and initiate disciplinary action when needed.

Resources

- [Harness the Power of Your Organizational Culture in 3 Steps](#) - Gallup
- [How to Change Your Company Culture in 5 Steps \(with Examples\)](#) - Built In
- [When It Comes to Culture, Does Your Company Walk the Talk?](#) - MIT Sloan Management Review