

Put Values in the Spotlight



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The September 2014 issue of *Fast Company* features a wonderful profile of Tory Burch, the designer and entrepreneur whose empire began with the opening of a single retail store in NYC in 2004. Ten years later, the “affordable luxury” brand has 2,000 employees and 85+ stores worldwide. Revenue has grown from \$100,000 on opening day to \$800 million in 2013. What advice can public entity leaders glean from a CEO known for her signature ballet flats and double-T medallion?

In the *Fast Company* profile, writer Jeff Chu explains how despite her reputation for being relatable, the most “daunting task” facing CEO Tory Burch is “maintaining a welcome, familial culture within her organization as it grows.” I’ve heard this challenge expressed by Burch’s public entity counterparts, countless times: how to maintain or evolve a connected culture when an organization moves to larger quarters, when it has more new hires than veterans, and when vestiges of the start-up phase are in the archives, instead of the lobby. This challenge was expressed in risk terms during a recent [Risk Assessment](#) conducted by our team: the rapid growth of a social services agency created concern on the part of the founders that the culture of putting clients first could dissipate in the new, but necessary bureaucracy.

In the [Fast Company article](#), Tory Burch company insiders reveal that less than runway ready internal communication tops the list of gripes and concerns on the annual employee survey. We’ve seen a similar result in the organizations we work with. As an organization grows, the informal, all-in culture of a small office finally gives way as the signs of structure and formality appear: staff meetings scheduled days and weeks in advance, memos explaining new organization policies, and the arrival of new “team members” no one has met before or knew was coming.

I was intrigued to learn that the visionary behind one of the fastest growing fashion brands sees three core values as the heart of her company: kindness, humility, and humor. Admitting that the company culture is evolving and that “We still have a lot of work to do,” Burch says that the company’s fundamental values—inspired by her father—are in essence about “good manners.”

Nourish Your Culture to Keep it Alive and Help it Grow

- **Define your values** – entities that haven’t defined their core values should borrow a sketch from the Burch fall fashion line by clearly defining the organization’s core values. Beyond saying that values such

as kindness and compassion are important, ask whether staff members throughout the organization are guided by these values each and every day. Invite staff to suggest ways to bring those values to life in relationships with internal and external stakeholders. And instead of picking a long list of positive attributes, select a short list of values that define who you are and want to be.

- **Ask, listen and challenge** – When anonymous surveys reveal that not everyone thinks leadership is doing their best, the negative feedback hurts. Passionate leaders not only want their visions to come to life, they want to be liked and respected. They want every member of the team to see and believe that the leader is doing her best. I've yet to see the results of an employee survey or focus group indicating a fully-contented workforce. The truth is that perpetually unhappy and disgruntled people find their ways into even the most successful entities. And the good intentions of leaders are subject to different interpretations. Listen intently to the feedback you receive, and look for clues and insights that will help you evolve your culture as you grow. Acknowledge that culture is a work in progress, not an end state. And instead of ending an employee survey or focus group with "what needs fixing?" invite each participant to share what steps they will take to improve internal communication, and grow the connections between people working on a common mission.

Although a public entity's new line of services is unlikely to be featured in a popular fashion magazine, its service is a bit like a NYC runway show: anything can happen, the bright spotlight of scrutiny and potentially harsh criticism is ever present, and the entire operation is a team effort. Inspiring a team to do its best work, together, is no easy task. By letting our values take center stage, we reduce the risk that a vital culture of teamwork and caring will disappear or dissipate with our success.

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