

How to Increase Business Growth and Retention of Top Talent

By Jennifer Selby Long

An innovative culture keeps the best people around. There are 12 factors which are highly correlated with the cultures of successful innovative companies – and that’s what you want to be, right?

The interplay of the values, leadership behaviors and processes listed here create a culture which has the right mix of creativity, selectivity, and excellence in execution to bring good ideas from the whiteboard to the market.

Each of the 12 items compounds the influence of the others, in the same way that a healthy diet compounds the influence of exercise, which compounds the influence of stress management, which compounds the influence of adequate sleep, and so forth.

They are:

1. Support and encouragement of taking risk rather than maintaining the status quo. In the words of technology writer and early Apple leader Guy Kawasaki, “Don’t worry, be crappy.”
2. A corporate leadership team that plans for most of the company’s growth through the development of *new* products and services, and is diligent in ensuring that the best ideas are exploited and less promising ideas killed early on.
3. Inspirational leadership with an inspirational vision.
4. High trust relationships, relatively free of interpersonal conflict.
5. Investment in and encouragement of skill development at all levels.
6. Substantial, sustained information sharing, which creates well informed employees. These employees can apply their extensive knowledge of customer desires, the company’s goals and strategies, and competitive threats to improve their own work, as well as offer innovative solutions beyond their own immediate area of responsibility.
7. Family friendly or “life friendly” work practices. Some examples are flexible office hours, child care, part-time arrangements, or telecommuting.
8. Demonstrable valuing of differences. This includes the traditional dimensions such as gender, race, physical disability, etc. as well as the less visible dimensions, such as different ways of thinking or approaching the work to be done, different personal values, religious or spiritual beliefs, different lifestyles, etc.
9. Semi- or fully autonomous teams, who are free to solve most problems and make decisions on their own or by working directly with other teams -- without escalating to management for approval. This can and should include decisions about which of their creative ideas to further explore and which to kill off.

10. Direct employee involvement in innovation via routine team briefings with feedback, and involvement in the decisions on how work is organized and outcomes improved.
11. Goals relevant to innovation such as increase in number of new services launched, success rate of innovative products and services, decrease in non-value-added work due to process innovation, better speed to market, etc., and a means of measuring progress toward them.
12. Adequate resources to exploit ideas. Some examples include hiring temporary staff to cover some routine day-to-day functions while key team members dedicate themselves to bringing up a new business, funding market research for new ideas, and hiring process engineers to teach employees how to map and improve their work processes so they can free up more time to pursue new ideas.

Few organizations are currently strong on all twelve fronts. A rigorous assessment and focus on improving key areas can help. Assessment should begin with a survey of employees, who are often well qualified to assess the real level of innovation nurtured by the current corporate culture.

To view Selby Group's Survey of Innovation, click here:

http://www.selbygroup.com/docs/Selby_Whitepaper_on_Building_Innovative_Cultures_2_.pdf.

Getting Started

Start your journey by exploring these questions as a leadership team:

1. How well do we stack up on each of these 12 factors?
2. How important is innovation to driving growth, revenue, market share, and customer satisfaction?
3. What's the worst that would happen if we did nothing to create and sustain a more innovative culture?
4. How realistic is it for us to develop each of the 12 factors?
5. How much autonomy do we have in developing the culture?
6. What metrics would we use to measure progress?
7. Can we support an innovative subculture in one division, even if the rest of the company isn't ready?
8. Do we have the basic foundation to develop a more innovative company? Do we have the attitudes, experience, and skills? Do we have what it takes to get there?

Clearly, building an innovative culture is a substantial, important, and long-term change, but the history of past recessions indicates that it separates the Googles from the Wangs.

News

No one ever said entrepreneurs are sane. In Q4, I will:

- Begin writing not one, not two, but three books
- Integrate a new partner into my business
- Conduct at least one webinar, probably more
- Continue my research on how your personality and gender influence your personal financial choices and risks
- Be a guest speaker at San Francisco State's business school
- Prepare to teach a college class on counseling skills for financial advisors
- Roll out a new customized Selby Group product backed by a well-respected publisher
- Co-lead my global professional association
- Serve as a guest expert blogger at careerapple.com
- Teach a two-day course for clients of Lee Hecht Harrison
- Complete three training courses for my own development
- Oh, yeah, and do my job as an executive coach and management consultant!

I've never had such fun in my life. Some of us are just built for this. Others are fully convinced we've lost our minds. Probably both are true.