

HR DIRECTORS BOARDROOM Leeds 2018

The Future of Culture



Delegates gathered at the Eversheds Sutherlands (International) LLP and participated in this thought provoking boardroom event. Introduced by [Karen Brown – Senior Business Manager](#) for Ashley Kate HR, [Paula Shaw - HR Business Manager](#) and chaired by [Simon Rice – Birchall, Partner](#), Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP.

[Amanda Cox – People and Service Director](#) from Dunelm led the event, and facilitated a very informative discussion on the future of culture involving all attendee's experiences, views, thoughts and challenges.

Amanda gave us a very interesting insight into the culture and values of the businesses in which she has worked, having held both operational and HR roles within Marks and Spencer, Asda and now with Dunelm. This has given Amanda a great insight into some of the country's best known businesses and has witnessed first-hand, very different cultures over the years.

By her own admission Amanda finds culture fascinating, and has a real interest on where the assembled group saw this developing.

Amanda believes that one common theme that resonated with all the organisations that she worked for, especially within the early days with them, was they were very true to their culture and values, and that this was strong and embedded. It is recognised that this was vital to engagement and empowerment – but will this be in the case in the future? And will this look the same? And a key question for the morning – how do you create a culture when everyone has different views, different motivators and in many organisations different locations and very different roles.

Amanda is clearly very proud of Dunelm, their culture, their evolution and their success. With a new CEO in place, driving in part a new agenda, how can you keep what has worked in the past?

In the main we followed two themes during the morning:

Can you have one culture?

Will culture be as important in the future as it is today?

This then opened up the discussion. Everyone felt that a strong culture was important and everyone had some great examples of where this has worked within companies that they had worked for – and also some great learnings. In the main most people had worked with one culture which was driven through their organisations, but many thought that this was getting harder to do and also had examples of where this had been detrimental.

With companies changing at a greater pace and also with so many businesses growing through acquisition and merger, some had seen the fall-out from trying to install one culture across a business made up of once separate entities, all with their own cultures.

Another point raised was that many businesses have very different work environments and roles which make having one culture very difficult and it can become quite irrelevant to whole sectors of the workforce.

Many felt that it was more important to have an overriding set of values, but then with a recognition that different parts of the business will have their own DNA. But how can this have achieved? There is a real danger that this will be too “vanilla” and not meaningful to employees. Some people talked about having a “mothership”, and aligning behaviours to a set of values but allowing different “spirits” within this.

You then have the age old issue about how you embed a culture, and the fact that cannot be forced upon people it needs to lived and demonstrated by leaders and managers and only then can you expect employees to buy in.

The discussion then moved onto some of the negative aspects of a strong culture, as people had experience of this being used against them, especially in strongly unionised environments. This is particularly true during difficult times, and whilst ensuring that people are treated in line with the culture – it is still often used as a “stick” to beat the business with. It is therefore of paramount important that communication on culture is consistent and not just “rolled out” when times are tough.

Another interesting point was that, especially in larger organisations, communication too often becomes a cascade and less about a valuable discussion. This is generally driven by the best intentions to communicate with a large number of employees efficiently – but the power is in the discussion not in a cascade.



A great way of remembering this was suggested that this common mistake is too much waterfall and not enough water wheel.

So were we all in agreement that culture was still important?

Unanimously the answer was yes – but that that we did need to resist the temptation to impose a culture. It was also a point that it is not important 100% of the time to 100% of employees. Again we revisited the issue of culture after acquisitions. So often a culture is imposed on the acquired business and this will not work from a people point of view. A recent example of where this has been disastrous is with the acquisition of Homebase – this highlights the difference in culture between countries and how care needs to be taken in deciding what to do culturally and not assuming that one size will fit all.

But is this just a case of HR naval gazing – are we convinced that culture matters as much to the majority of employees as it does to HR? There are many who come to work, to do a job and to get paid, preferably with a good manager. Also, there are issues with instilling culture and a buy in to it as a business grows, and then it becomes more forced, rather than evolving and employee led. We will have seen and continue to see that culture evolves and changes and we need to anticipate and embrace this.

So back to the question of how much will this matter in the future? In order to attract good people to the organisation, culture matters – but have expectations been raised with the likes of Goggle? Is it fair for people coming into the workforce to have such high expectations of business? At the end of the day the culture needs to resonate with the business and be led and exhibited in word and deed by the leadership team.

Also, the importance or not losing sight of the business relevance of your culture is vital. Your strategy, structure and culture need to be in alignment.

So in conclusion – it was felt that culture would be relevant tomorrow as it is today, but that the previous reliance on one size fit all would not work for many businesses moving forward.

Please follow the link for a summary of the event by [Amanda](#).



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Thursday 8th November - Birmingham
Thursday 15th November - Leeds
Wednesday 21st November - London