

ACHIEVERS ROUNDTABLE

Hosted By
Achievers



HRD
HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR

CULTURE AND THE WORKPLACE



What exactly do HR professionals mean when they talk about workplace culture? And perhaps more importantly, how does “culture” translate into tangible business results? Last December, a Sydney roundtable of some of Australia’s foremost Australian HR professionals sought to unearth answers.

WORKPLACE CULTURE is one of the key conversation points in the HR sphere at the moment. More and more businesses are assessing how they can develop a better internal culture that breeds staff retention and better business outcomes. Yet there is still often a lack of clarity around what workplace culture is, with tangible definitions lacking. Is culture something that’s enshrined in a document at head office? Or is it a set of lived values that are carried out in the workplace every day? How does a culture survive or thrive in the world beyond the sealed environment of the workplace itself?

With these questions and more in mind,

some of the leading luminaries in Australian HR gathered for a sunny – and smoky – afternoon roundtable in Woolloomooloo on Wednesday, December 4. Hosted by Achievers, the roundtable was geared at sparking conversation around how businesses can both develop an effective workplace culture – and how that culture can be better defined in the first place.

DEFINING COMPANY CULTURE

Colleen Harris, Group Chief People Officer at Ramsay Health Care was the emcee for the afternoon, sparking conversation around the challenges facing each of the attendees in their own workplaces. Harris described her own

workplace culture as “How we achieve our results”, which she was quick to distinguish from a specific mission statement.

A mission statement, Harris noted, was a specific directive or directives which directly lead into the company’s wider business goals for itself. It should be the product of a company’s culture, rather than dictating the culture itself.

But what is culture in the workplace context? After a short discussion about how culture was defined among each of the attendees’ businesses, it quickly became apparent that there was no universal definition, though there were a number of common threads.

ABOUT ACHIEVERS

Achievers' mission is to change the way the world works. Our Employee Success Platform is specifically designed to drive higher levels of employee engagement. It's built to align everyone with business objectives and company values, driven by recognising shared victories every day. It's designed to make success a way of life.

We know that one size does not fit all. Our customers' success stems from making each employee recognition program match each organisation, down to the details. We work to understand the uniqueness of your organisation and vision, so we can set up and support your success, every day.



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Communication was cited as being key – after all, there’s no point in having a workplace culture if it can’t be effectively communicated. It’s also necessary for this to be an ongoing process, as staff at every level require periodic refocusing on what behaviours are best aligned with company culture.

Diversity and inclusion were also noted to be crucial components. Given the increasingly diverse nature of Australian culture, it’s

essential to create a company culture that accommodates all employees – and therefore in turn, can cater to a diverse customer base. Company culture should not unfairly advantage or disadvantage another employee.

Protecting the culture once it was in place was also discussed. Harris noted that once a positive workplace culture has been implemented, it’s crucial to put steps in place to ensure it remains positive. Employees who

see other staff diverging from the company culture must have the ability to pull others up or make reports as necessary.

Yet perhaps most important consensus to emerge was that the culture needs to translate to tangible results for the company. One attendee noted that a focus on “positive company culture” without clear parameters had actually had a deleterious effect on the company’s performance – an aspect of conversation around work culture which is seldom discussed. In line with these needs, attendees also noted that it was crucial to have a culture that could evolve in the face of a changing company and marketplace.

CULTURE AND THE WORKPLACE



THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING CULTURE

It quickly became evident that irrespective of industry, there were striking similarities in the challenges facing businesses when they seek to implement either a new culture or add new facets to it. Numerous attendees noted that culture is often perceived as something that's generated by leadership and theoretically filtered down through the various layers of management. For example, the CEO's behaviours and attitudes may influence wider business behaviours, either by observation or direct orders.

There's no doubt that senior figures exercise an influence – and must be sure to use that influence wisely – but this doesn't necessarily translate into an effective means of introducing a new workplace culture. Taking a “cascading” approach to

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culture management within the workplace can be problematic as it's prone to misinterpretation, distortion or is simply out of touch with the reality of the workers at ground level.

Scalability is a common issue of note too; the culture that suited an office of five in a company's early days was not necessarily a culture that would sit well with an international organisation of several hundred. Accordingly, there's more pressure among new companies to establish a culture earlier on that can sustain itself as the company grows. This extends across a whole

range of behaviours, making it a challenging task and inherently tied to wider changes in the business. As one attendee noted: “When you implement systems and processes, you always have unintended consequences.”

REFORMING THE WORKPLACE CULTURE

Perhaps even more challenging was the prospect of changing and reforming the workplace culture. A hot topic of conversation during the afternoon was the Hayne Royal Commission Report, which earlier this year exposed a whole variety

ACHIEVERS ON WORKPLACE CULTURE

For Mark Barling, Senior Sales Director at Achievers APAC, culture is one of the foundational principles of any company. In his words, it's something to "live and breathe every day".

"Culture is the backbone of every organisation and when it is well-articulated and executed, employee engagement soars," says Barling.

Barling points to the Haynes Royal Commission report as an example of workplace culture being in the spotlight. It's a clear example of issues being present in the workplace, and looking ahead will likely cause a number of other industries to reassess their own culture.

"While we acknowledge there is no silver bullet, the discussion raised some very significant points which we will continue to explore in depth through our series of roundtable dialogues throughout 2020," said Barling.



of ingrained, negative workplace cultures, concentrated within the finance sector. One attendee noted that people had been called out as a result, but many of the underlying processes still remain the same. The consensus seemed to be that the culpability of individuals in such toxic situations was debatable – recognising the cause-and-effect of such cultures was not always possible for ground-level staff members.

"People think they're doing the right thing – they don't go in to do something terrible," said one attendee.

Yet there were positives too – another attendee pointed to their own company as an example of positive cultural change being made. New elements had been deliberately introduced into the company over the past year and a half in order to combat a number of previously problematic elements.

“Given the increasingly diverse nature of Australian culture, it's essential to create a company culture that accommodates all employees”

Resistance sometimes arises to change, because many of the factors that contribute to a “positive” work culture can be difficult to quantify, verging on nebulous. This filters through to new people joining a team, too. As Harris herself noted, “You can tell from a resume whether someone can do a job.” But, as she was quick to note, this did not necessarily mean that a prospective hire was an ideal fit for a company's culture.

It's clear that there is still much

discussion to be had around workplace culture. Its current focus in the wider HR sphere is providing businesses with opportunities to not only look at where they need to improve, but also highlight what they have done right. While a definite answer around just what “workplace culture” is still remains elusive, conversations around the topic can yield key insights which can then be carried back into the office. If leveraged correctly, there is an opportunity for real-time impact and growth. **HRD**