

How to Build a Thriving Company Culture Today



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Perks don't build loyalty; people do. As the workplace continues to evolve, senior leaders need to shift from performative culture tactics to authentic, human-centered leadership. Building a strong culture starts with empathy, consistency, and recognition. Because when your people feel valued, your business does too.

Key Takeaways

- A strong company culture is rooted in shared values, mutual respect, and authentic connection, not surface perks or one-off initiatives.
- Handwritten notes and personal recognition can have a lasting impact on employee morale and loyalty.
- Balancing high performance with authentic human connection fosters long-term engagement and success.
- Consistent, empathetic leadership creates a culture where people feel seen, supported, and inspired to stay.

In the Apple TV+ series “Severance,” employees undergo a bizarre procedure to split their work and personal lives entirely. Inside the office, they’re met with waffle parties, dance breaks, and quirky trinkets meant to spark joy. But beneath the novelty lies a familiar issue: a carefully controlled illusion of culture, lacking real connection or trust.

That might be fiction, but the reality it mirrors is all too familiar. According to Gallup, just [31% of U.S. employees felt engaged](#) in their work in 2024, while 17% reported being actively disengaged — the lowest levels Gallup has seen in over a decade.

Those numbers tell a story. Employees are burned out and disconnected. Too many companies still try to solve it with perks instead of prioritizing leadership behaviors that shape lasting culture and get to the heart of the issue: the human side of work. If you want your team to thrive in the second half of 2025, it’s time to stop managing culture like a project and start building it like a relationship.

Culture Strategy Begins with People, Not Perks

Culture isn’t a quarterly initiative or a set of talking points — it’s embedded in how leadership makes decisions every day. Real culture runs deeper. It’s about how we treat each other, how we make decisions, and how we show up, especially when things get hard.

That’s why I’ve never been a fan of the word “employees.” Around here, we say “family.” Like any strong family, our foundation is built on trust, respect, and a shared purpose. For executive leaders, culture isn’t fluff; it’s a strategic asset that affects retention, brand reputation, and operational resilience.

Culture doesn’t click into place overnight. You build it moment by moment. Decision by decision. And yes, performance matters, but it should follow people-first leadership, not replace it.

Why Small Leadership Gestures Drive Big Business Loyalty

One of the most meaningful ways I connect with our global team is through handwritten notes. They might be simple birthday messages, condolences during tough times, or congratulations for a job well done, but they’re always personal.

Small acts of recognition scale across organizations, strengthening loyalty and creating a leadership presence that’s felt even at a distance.

Writing thousands of these notes over the years has been a privilege. It reminds me, and hopefully reminds each person who receives one, that they matter.

Leadership doesn't have to be loud. Sometimes it's just listening — really listening — to what someone's going through. Sometimes it's celebrating the team that's been away from home for weeks, helping a community recover. Or shining a spotlight on an office that just won a community service award.

These moments build trust and belonging — the building blocks of a high-performing team. It's a reminder that one person really can make a difference. And let's face it, no waffle party can do that.

What C-Suite Leaders Must Prioritize Now

Work is changing fast. Employees expect more from their workplaces, and rightfully so. They want flexibility, yes, but also meaning. They want to grow, and they want to be supported and cared for.

Mental health and well-being have become non-negotiables in today's workplace. Our teams often show up in the aftermath of disaster: trauma, loss, and devastation. If we don't lead with compassion, we can't expect anyone to last, let alone thrive.

Technology is moving quickly. AI, automation, and digital platforms are already transforming the way teams operate. The goal isn't to replace people, but to elevate them — freeing up time and energy for creativity, connection, and strategic thinking.

The best companies in this era will be the ones that meet these shifts head-on. That means investing in learning, creating open communication channels, and checking in with people, not just on their productivity but on their well-being.

Executives who lead through these transitions with clarity and empathy will set their organizations apart in an increasingly people-driven economy.

Balancing Performance Metrics with Cultural Integrity

We talk a lot about results. But too often, the effort behind those results goes unnoticed. And the truth is, connection is the quiet force that often drives a team's best work.

Celebrate the big wins, sure. But celebrate the grind, too: the late nights, the thoughtful ideas, and the quiet leadership that makes the rest possible.

Create a culture where feedback flows both ways. When people feel safe speaking up, they contribute more. Especially in high-stress industries like ours, where teams are often the first ones on the ground after disaster strikes and leadership has to balance goals with grace. Culture isn't what's written in the handbook; it's what leaders model when no one's watching.

Leadership That Lasts

When people ask me what makes a great leader, I don't point to charisma or titles. I talk about consistency. About showing up. About staying humble enough to listen and strong enough to lead with heart.

If you're a leader building culture, start here: Stop thinking about what looks impressive. Start thinking about what drives meaning and impact. Don't just build policies, build relationships that support performance and purpose. And remember: DTRT, do the right thing, even when nobody's watching. That's the kind of leadership people remember.

The companies that thrive long-term will be those whose leaders made culture their business, not just their responsibility.

In the end, it's not the perks that keep people around. It's the people. That's why I always tell my team to be the CEO of your own life: your own Cheerleader, Enthusiast, and Optimist. The strength of a culture is shaped by how people treat each other when no one's watching.