

Let's Get Practical

Building an Incredibly Fun and Supportive Company Culture

Episode 33 - Interview with Drew Harden

As a leader, talk is cheap. Action is what counts and practice makes a difference. Below are practical steps to improve performance.

- **Be spontaneously grateful.** This episode's guest, Blue Compass President and Co-Founder Drew Harden, spoke throughout the episode of the benefits of both gratitude AND spontaneity. If you want to build a fun and supportive workplace, be generous with both. In Drew's own words:

"Show your appreciation for team members when they do something well. Bring them a random coffee in the morning without telling them. Write them a note. Write them a card that says 'Hey, I'm really thankful that you're on the team and I enjoy working with you.'"

You don't have to throw a life-sized banner over the side of a building to impress your employees (although that made great memories for the team at Blue Compass!). Little spontaneous appreciations plant seeds that grow into great company cultures and intensify the loyalty and appreciation employees feel for you and the company.

- **Employees remember the words you spoke to them far longer than you do.** Drew mentioned in Episode 33 how he routinely gives employees stickers with words of encouragement and how those team members proudly display them for others to see.

We hear this often from CEOs and employees, alike: recognition and encouragement from a senior leader stays with an employee long after the senior leader moves past the conversation. As CEO, you likely underestimate the impact your words – positive AND negative – have on your people. Therefore, choose those words carefully when criticizing, and be far more generous with your words of praise. Employees will remember them long after you've forgotten, because the words and actions of a senior leader often mean more than you think they do.

- **Be purposeful about having fun at work.** You're obviously in business to be profitable, and you can't help anyone – employees, customers, shareholders – if you're not. But there's enough evidence to suggest that happy employees are more productive. In fact, a 2015 workplace study published by HBR showed a 12% boost in productivity simply by making the workplace more fun. And we all know that happy employees are more creative and bring more energy, both of which are necessary inputs into innovation.

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This might mean not making it so much about the numbers and not working on your check-lists above all else. Pausing those to intentionally bring fun to your team often makes them want to focus on the numbers and check-lists in return out of appreciation.

For specific ideas about how to inject more fun into your workplace, download and listen to episode 33 in its entirety.

- **People derive more happiness from experiences than from things.** Drew spoke in episode 33 about some of the experiences he and his business partner, Cary Coppola, have tried to create for their employees. Things like a trivia game in the department, wine and cheese parties, or hiring a singing quartet to celebrate an office birthday. Experiences like these create memories employees remember for years to come, long after gift cards have been spent and office swag thrown away. That's not to say people don't appreciate things, but sometimes giving stuff away might be the easiest solution but not the most impactful. Adding heartfelt experiences to those things you give away is the better route.
- **Gossip and drama tax your people and your culture.** These are the characteristics of toxic cultures, not fun and supportive ones. They break down the trust in your organization and lead people to question the motives and intent of coworkers and leaders. More importantly, they make your best people question whether or not they want to work for you. And be on guard for "venting" in your organization, which is really just a politically correct word for gossip. Make no mistake: venting IS gossip, and it's just as destructive to your people and culture.
- **Your incredibly powerful personality isn't enough to create great culture.** Many CEOs are big personalities, persuasive leaders who generate buzz and make others want to follow them. But that big personality alone won't create great culture. You need to take seriously the job of setting the tone for your culture, recognizing that you are the single biggest impact on your organization's culture. Therefore, first lead by example, and then set clear expectations for your extended leaders to do the same. Big personality CEOs who lead companies with crappy cultures are increasingly seen as ineffective.
- **Great culture is more than a ping-pong table.** Culture isn't the toys you put around the office, casual Fridays, or the salary and benefits you offer your employees. As we said a few bullets ago, these fall into the category of 'things', and while things can enhance your culture, they can't on their own create a great culture. Instead, think of your culture as what you experience every minute of every day. When those experiences are fun and supportive, your employees will say you have a great culture.

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- **“No one has ever left your organization because they’ve been too appreciated”.** This quote comes directly from Drew and doesn’t really need much explanation, does it? If you’re worried that too much appreciation will have an adverse impact on the culture, we’re here to tell you that employees never leave a company because they’re over-appreciated, but they leave all the time when they feel under-appreciated.
- **You can teach skill, but you can’t teach personality.** Too often, the people we let in the front door are strong fits for the technical aspects of the job but cultural misfits who don’t exhibit the values and behaviors that contribute to the culture you want. Always remember you can teach someone how to do a job, but you can’t teach someone how to be a good teammate or a nicer person if they don’t already know that when they come to you. Let your competitors hire those people and the issues that surround them. Instead, be intentional to hire for values, likely meaning you’ll need to interview more people, engage more of your employees in the interview process, and be willing to leave the position open until you find someone who fits your culture. You’ll be glad you did.
- **Your physical environment can support your culture.** The layout and look of your physical workspaces adds to or detracts from a fun and supportive company culture. Drew shared in our interview that the offices at Blue Compass were built without doors on the offices, enhancing a supportive culture by removing barriers to communication. While that might not be the right thing for your office, what impression does the physical environment give to your employees? Does it support the culture you say you want or is it working against you?
- **A supportive company culture requires people to appreciate differences.** The more we know about and understand each other, the greater the opportunity for us to appreciate each team member’s unique gifts, nuances, and quirks. All of those differences need to be accepted and allowed for if anyone is to feel supported in the culture. One way the team at Blue Compass achieved this was by asking each employee to list 3 things everyone else should know about working with them, then sharing those with the broader team. Whatever you can do to facilitate your employees sharing and appreciating each other’s differences will go a long way toward creating a culture that pulls together in hard times.

PRO TIP: If you decide to do this, consider refreshing the exercise periodically as your people change and grow, as new teams form, or as new employees are hired. No one is ever a finished product, so what you should know about working with me will probably change along with me.

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- **Consider capturing your fun on video for the future.** Because memories are more powerful than things, utilize available technology to capture the fun moments so your teams can relive them again in the future. Not only that, but you can use those videos to let the world know how much fun it is to work at your company, which absolutely helps your recruiting efforts. Everyone wants to work in a fun culture!
- **Don't be afraid to be spontaneous.** We live in a business world where everyone preaches the importance of planning, and that's certainly important. But don't forget the value of spontaneity, unexpected levity, and silly fun. These were characteristics of joyful and happy childhoods, so what makes you think they wouldn't be as impactful today?
- **If you hire someone who doesn't fit your culture, you own the responsibility of trying to help that person fit.** This may seem controversial and not everyone will agree, but if your interview process somehow allowed in an employee who doesn't fit the culture, we believe you have a moral obligation to help that person become a fit. Before you cut bait and move on, you owe it to that employee to be clear with your expectations, to give them honest feedback about their performance, and to support them in any efforts they make to improve. You can't possibly have a supportive culture and not be willing to support every employee in their quest to be successful, even if you shouldn't have hired them in the first place.
- **If you ultimately need to fire someone, it should NEVER be a surprise and it should ALWAYS be expected.** Culture lives in the stories people tell about your organization, and stories of employees caught by surprise when they were fired are stories that last a very long time. These are not only culture killing stories, but they're also in direct conflict with the bullet immediately above: if you're actively supporting an employee's attempt to raise their performance to meet your expectations, they should never be surprised when their time runs out. Any surprise on their part is a failure on yours.
- **Putting your team first actually benefits your customers.** The natural by-product of putting your team first and building an incredibly fun and supportive company culture is happy employees focused on spreading the joy to your customers. Your clients will pick up how much fun your employees are having and will benefit from better interactions with your happy people. All that appreciation and energy will flow directly from your team to your customers.

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