



# How to Create a Winning Company Culture

## Strategies to engage employees in a shifting workplace dynamic.



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Engagement during a pandemic is probably not a thought that ever crossed your mind until around Q2 of 2020. If you weren't already navigating through it, you were probably asking yourself if you could actually expect people to show up for work and continue to contribute at a high level amid the vast unknown the entire world was clouded in. How could you possibly ask the troops to be engaged in their jobs when no one really knew what was happening and everything felt unsafe?

I was thankful to be a part of the email chains from PRINTING United Alliance's 2019 SPIRE event when we finally started to grasp what was happening at the onset of this pandemic. Instantly, there was collaboration and strategy among many different companies spanning several states, even countries — it was fun to watch. The collective message I saw was, "It is time to pivot." When the big malls, local shops, and the entire retail world comes to a halt, what do we do next? We had to innovate and adapt to a scary and unstable environment that had no known endpoint.

Many of us were thinking about how to restructure our companies. Some of us were changing over our equipment to accommodate products different

from what we were used to producing. At our organization, we switched swiftly and began producing mass quantities of fabric masks, PETG face shields, counter and lunchroom table dividers, floor graphics, and many other client requests — most of which were not previously in our area of expertise. The only way we pulled it off was with an engaged workforce of employees who understood their purpose and the importance of what they were doing. Even then, it was a tough thing to do.

### Answering the Phone Despite the Unknown

Executing at a high level in an unknown environment on products you aren't used to is daunting. That challenge was exacerbated by the fear of not understanding how serious the climate was and what tomorrow held: More store closings? Tighter curfews? Supply chain shortages?

People were afraid to leave their houses, let alone head into work. How do you get them to come into the shop and do their job as safely and effectively as possible? Looking operators or employees in the eyes amid all of this and telling them that you needed

them to keep showing up was difficult. But, it could be difficult for different reasons: It could be because you don't think that your team

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Courtesy of The Bernard Group.

is going to pull through for you, or because you genuinely care about your troops and you're knowingly asking them to not only trust you, but to come out of the safety of their homes and pull on the oars for the team. Either way, you shouldn't have to worry about the team showing up; you should be concerned for their safety and well-being. It is our jobs as leaders to put our people first and to keep them safe. But you should also know that they will rise to the occasion, and whether they will show up should not even be a concern, because engaged employees are going to answer the bell every time. Disengaged, or worse, actively disengaged, employees, won't even answer the phone.

Engagement is how you promote and maintain culture when everything you've known is upside down. New challenges will not burden an engaged team. Instead, they will lean in on their coaching and fortify themselves even more. Showing up isn't an inconvenience; it's a duty, a commitment, and a lifestyle. But it is because employees want to contribute, not because they are being told to.

In an environment where you have a high percentage of engaged employees, there is symbiosis between the employee and the organization. The organization promotes a safe and healthy workplace. It cultivates and develops its employees. It pays them well to retain their talent, and it balances results and relationships. In turn, happy employees produce brilliant work. They actively participate in continuous improvement projects and move the company forward. They look out for one another, the client, and the company, and they execute at a high level all the time. This is only achievable with balance and effective leadership.

### **A Full-Time Commitment**

When discussing employee engagement and leadership, it's important



to understand that leadership is a lifelong journey. There is no graduation ceremony, award for reaching a certain milestone, or a certificate that says you made it. You are a lifelong student to the craft, and the only way you can measure your progress is by measuring the progress of the people you influence. Nothing else matters. Lead because you love it — not because you get a title.

That said, engagement can't be a part-time thing. You can't just talk about it leading up to a survey in hopes of steering or influencing your results. What's the point of giving a survey if you're not going to take the purpose of the survey seriously? Engagement isn't a badge or a sword you swing around. It's not a banner to be flown and bragged about. Of course, you should be proud of high organizational engagement,

but at the end of it all, it's not meant to promote ego or status. Its purpose, again, is symbiosis.

It's been proven that engaged employees are more effective at their job, with some studies claiming numbers up to 200 to 300 times more! While this sounds good, it doesn't mean you can do twice the work with half the people. That's not what engagement is about. What is important here is that engaged employees are able to contribute at a high level for sustained periods of time; they are more effective, but none of this is a burden for them. They are resilient to adversity, and they get to come in and do what they do best because great leadership has identified their talents and put them in a position to succeed for themselves and for their teams.

So, how do you maintain culture in an unknown and potentially unsafe

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environment? You make sure that your troops know their purpose. You make sure they understand what their contributions mean to the client, their teams, the world, and to the company. If someone looks pained and bored spending 12 hours a day assembling plastic masks, you haven't done a good job defining their purpose. They should know that they are producing mission-critical equipment that is going to someone who desperately needs it, and there is high potential that their contribution is saving lives. That is purpose: they're not making plastic masks, they're making life-saving equipment. Think about the power in that small shift in vision and new understanding in purpose: "I want to get out of bed every day and save lives! I can't think of many more honorable occupations than that." None of this is perception management or manipulation, though. This has to come from a pure, honest place. If you leverage people's good will against your profits, you are not in balance with your team, and you certainly aren't putting your people first.

### Elevating and Empowering

So, engaged employees are coming in. They are grinding for you in this weird,

new space the world is navigating. They are being effective, executing at a high level and enjoying their time while they are at it. That's it? It just happens magically? They take a survey, and bam? Not even close.

This takes effective, servant-minded leadership to pull off. Notice I didn't use the word management. Managers and the concept of managing something or someone is antiquated and ineffective. Employees don't want to be managed; they want to be coached and mentored. They want to be cultivated and developed. They want to know when they make a mistake that it's ok, and it's an opportunity to learn and grow. They want someone they can turn to when there's an issue, but don't have to worry about that individual hovering, instigating, criticizing, fixing, or any other diminishing action that so many managers are guilty of. They want to be challenged, elevated, and empowered. Great leaders do that without pause or thought. Great leaders are a major part of an organization's culture and engagement level. When your leadership team transitions to being coaches and mentors instead of hand-holding managers, you will see a positive culture change. The results will be evident in ▶

### A Look at Employee Development and Creative Recruitment

A workplace culture that encourages development and attracts prospective employees is imperative to your business. PRINTING United Alliance's monthly Ask the Experts Webinar Series is exclusive to members, and includes discussions on employee recruitment and retention topics.

If you missed the recent "The Future of Work is iLearning" webinar, you can still access it, and register for the August installment, "Creative Recruiting," at [sgia.org/education](http://sgia.org/education).

Members also have full access to the Alliance's Center for Human Resources Support at [sgia.org/programs](http://sgia.org/programs).



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Courtesy of The Bernard Group.

**Leaders need to define and create understanding of the employees' purpose. For example, during COVID, employees should know they haven't just been making plastic masks — they're producing mission-critical equipment that has potentially saved lives.**

Courtesy of The Bernard Group.



increased productivity, decreased safety issues and happier people.

Managers are afraid of spreading knowledge. They are afraid to coach and develop their team because someone might actually surpass the manager's talent level. As a leader, it is your job to develop talent. When employees become better than you, then you've succeeded. That creates an opportunity either for you to elevate to something new, or for the employee to. Managers want to squander talent and keep it tucked away so that all information and decisions are funneled through them. That way, managers get the credit when things go right, and they know who to blame when they don't. Command-and-control methodology doesn't work. It's poison for your organization, and you cannot afford to allow it to propagate.

Leaders multiply their team. They teach employees to be autonomous, so everyone makes good decisions and there isn't a single point of failure. They shut up, get out of the way, and create an intense environment where people vie to participate and achieve great things. Managers will yell and scream about numbers and quotas. I've never had to be accountable to a quota, but I

have put myself in that position. I imagined driving in every day worried about hitting the number, even more so about what will happen if I don't; worrying so much, that I spend more time worrying than doing my job. I have to imagine that's reality for a great many people who are employed. What kind of life is that? We only get one trip around in this life, and we spend a great deal of that time at our jobs. Our work environment should be healthy, safe, enjoyable, progressive, and inclusive.

In my experience, when you take care of your people and stop managing numbers, you get the desired results. Numbers, metrics, spreadsheets, and profit and loss statements should be used to guide you. They will tell you when you are veering off course. They should be celebrated when they are great, and received well when they aren't. They shouldn't be shoved down your employees' throats. They aren't to be used as a fear tactic. When has management by intimidation ever been successful? Some will argue that organizations that operate that way and are profitable are successful. Sure, they make money and pay bills, but everyone who comes to work every day is miserable. They

loathe their occupation and the leadership and the company that they are toiling away for. Is that really success? I don't think so.

Leaders should take great joy in building effective teams and watching them thrive while coaching and mentoring them on their journey. They shouldn't be excited about getting that last job done in record time. That's not their victory anyway — it's the employees'. They did it, not the leader. The leader's victory lies in the effectiveness of their team; in how they collaborate, strategize, and execute. This is not measured on a job-by-job basis, but as an aggregate (did they leverage one another's strengths to be successful?). The employees should celebrate the win and be applauded for it. Leaders should be applauded and deemed successful for providing the environments and necessary coaching that empowered their teams to be successful.

Maintaining culture in an adverse environment comes down to engaged employees who understand their purpose and are free to make decisions while being coached by effective leadership. Those factors, when multiplied together, create a formidable team that is resilient to outside influences. Pandemic or not, when you have an engaged workforce that is effectively led, you are set up for success that is sustainable and scalable. ■

*Kristopher Parks has spent over half his life in the graphics industry, with the last 17 years at The Bernard Group (TBG). He has studied in and managed all arenas of the production process and spent the last several years honing leadership skills and breathing that life into his teams. With a passion for cultivating and growing teams, he believes in an even blend of relationships and results to extract his employees' best talents and empower their autonomy. He encourages a culture of continuous improvement and embracing mistakes as opportunities to improve. Having taken over the entire production process, Parks has an understanding of what it takes to procure and retain top talent, and ensure employees remain challenged as they grow through their journey at TBG.*