10 Must Do's for Creating and Sustaining a Strong Culture

A new year is a great time to set goals (both big picture future goals and SMART goals for the current year). Here are our top 10 must do's for creating and sustaining a strong culture in 2018.

As you navigate these first few weeks of 2018 we recommend that you sit down with your team and consider what on this list you do really well and what you need to work as a team this year. If you need help getting starting let us know. We have facilitators who can not only help lead this discussion, but they can work with your team throughout the year to help you all achieve your goals.

Here are Drive's top ten "Must Do's" for creating and sustaining a strong culture for your organization:

1. **Focus on the Positive.** We've seen it time and time again what the power of positivity can do! In fact our positivity pact workshop is one of our favorites and can be especially helpful to those who need a little boost in employee morale. The positivity pact provides a constant reminder that negative talk (gossip, complaining and criticizing) can bring down even the best organization. It's toxic to your culture, and your bottom line, so don't let those Negative Nellies drag you down! Next time you catch yourself saying something negative, don't be the Grinch, instead create Seuss's Land of Fott-fa-Zee.

2. **Ensure Shared Values.** Skills and competencies are important, but behaviors are often rooted in one's personal values. When we facilitate leadership retreats for clients, we help bring a team's values to life. Attendees constantly share that it was eye opening to discover how their values impact them as a person, and what is important to their teammates. If you aren't already hiring for shared values we wrote a blog earlier this year that can help you get on the road to employing team members who model behaviors that fit your values.

3. **Give *and* Receive Feedback.** Some of you may or may not know, but before joining Drive I worked for Tiffany & Co. for nearly a decade and one of the most valuable things I ever learned from their leadership program was "**S**pecific **B**ehavior **I**mpact" or as they called it, SBI. Since joining Drive we've taken this concept (When giving feedback be **S**pecific, focus on the observed **B**ehavior, and describe the **I**mpact it had) to the next level in our coaching conversations workshop where we discuss why it pays to address conflict and how to have comfortable conversations. Most people love giving positive feedback but dread the tough stuff. If you're used to structuring your feedback and developing a strong level of trust amongst your team, the tough stuff won't feel so difficult anymore. Want to role play a difficult conversation? Our coaching calls are a great way to practice giving feedback and keeping your own emotional response in check should it not go the way you want.

4. **Follow-Through.** Following-through builds trust and shows your commitment to getting the job done. Consider when your residents have a special request or a complaint, don't you want your employees to resolve the issue and follow up afterwards? If you find yourself nodding your head in agreement then you need to model this behavior to your employees too. After all, they will mirror what they see. Whenever we visit an organization to conduct focus groups we always advise leaders to share the feedback from our visit. Sadly, I can't tell you how many times front-line team members have said to me, "they won't do anything with this."

When we visit homes and communities we recommend very specific "quick successes" that are unique to the feedback we heard, something like, we always run out of paper towels on the night shift, or ensure everyone has a name tag badge, to show team members that they were heard and that management is following-through on the feedback they received.

5. **Care About Your Team Members.** I sat down with my boss recently to discuss my performance (Denise doesn't like it when I call her my boss but she is after all my boss!) I told her the number one reason I like coming to work is she cares about me as a person. If you want your people to care about your residents, not just checkoff tasks on a list, then you must care about your people! Otherwise you're just creating a drama ridden high school. Think about some of your own former bosses. What about them made them a "good boss" vs a "bad boss"? If you're interested in facilitating this exercise with your team, let us know and we are happy to send you the worksheet!
   1. Did they care about your career development?
   2. Could you bring up concerns to them?
   3. How were issues handled?
   4. Did you trust one another?

6. **Play to Strengths and Look for the Bright Spots.** At first glance this sounds like focusing on the positive, and it is, but it's more than that. Let's use recruitment as an example, when you are focused on strengths and what's going well, you'll want to look towards your superstar employees to find out: How did we find them? What about them makes them special? How do we keep them? How can we replicate what's most important? If it was referral, consider ramping up your referral process. If they came from a local school, consider increasing your presence at this school. If it was someone who randomly applied online, how did they find you? What search terms were used? Ask them what it was that attracted them to you? We've recently had two clients who were working with us on their culture eliminate agency for nursing assistants!

7. **Set Expectations.** All employees should know what is expected of them and in a field where we are struggling to retain employees past the honeymoon phase, setting expectations right from the start is critically important. At Drive, we say build an "up-front contract" when hiring people. During the interview process, explain what is required of the job along with any current challenges or major changes to the organization. Explain the importance of the organizational culture and the mindset that comes with being person-centered and focused on continuous performance improvement. You can even do this during the application phase. What you want to avoid is hiring someone only for them to leave because you weren't upfront with them. Zappos, the behemoth online shoe and clothing retailer, is so fanatic about hiring and keeping only the best people that they offer new employees $2,000 to leave if it's not the right fit! The complete opposite of a sign-on bonus!

8. **Evaluate Processes and Procedures.** If you're committing to continuously improving, and not falling behind the times, you'll need to have systems in place to constantly evaluate and look for opportunities. You'll also want to make sure that your current processes or procedures aren't causing a bottleneck or hindering employees from doing the right thing. For example, we hear from a lot of organizations that they can't find the right people to hire, but how often are you putting time on the calendar to review the recruitment process? Putting time on the calendar to review critical processes is non-negotiable if you don't want to "get stuck"!

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9. As an executive director retreat once told us at a Leadership Retreat, "I didn't realize how complacent I had become with everything. We were doing well and I thought that was good enough; I now know how much more there is to be working on!" (Bonus: As a result of his uncovered excitement for his work he increased his census consistently by 6%).

10. **Create Opportunities for Collaboration.** We hear time and time again that teams are working in silos and that they aren't working together to meet the resident's needs. A great way to create opportunities for team members to collaborate (besides hiring us to challenge and grow your team at a workshop or retreat – shameless plug!) is to form a committee to promote cross-functional collaboration. Perhaps you're interested in improving your employee orientation program so that instead of it being a 3-hour one-time session, it is actually a six-month long onboarding program designed to integrate the new team member into your culture rooted in strong meaningful relationships. To accomplish this, you could invite one or two members from your leadership team, two or three team members, and one or two residents that could help you decide what the new program should look like.

11. **Be Consistent**. Starting and stopping new things all the times will never lead to movement and it can actually cause employees to distrust management. Flavor of the month clubs aren't effective, and no one likes a boss who says one thing and does another. It is better to pick one thing and follow through on it then to try all ten, only to get overwhelmed and give up.   We challenge you to pick just one "Must Do" from this list and commit to doing it for one full month. Better yet, start with number 1 (we can help you with our positivity pact) and work your way down the list.

It was so hard to narrow this list down to just 10 and one thing we just couldn't leave off the list is telling stories. Bonus: You now have our top 11 Must Do's!

Telling stories and using examples (Like we've done through-out this blog) demonstrates concepts.   Stories paint a picture; they evoke emotion. Stories help people relate; they make an idea come to life. Next time you are working on updating your careers section of your website, your employee orientation, or even a simple newsletter, try including real life stories that provide insight into your culture. Trust us, stories are a powerful marketing tool! This month we were working with a client in California on their hiring process and one thing that really stood out during the mock interviews was when the interviewer described a scenario to the interviewee and asked how would we respond in that situation.

Good luck creating and sustaining a strong culture in 2018!

This article was written by team member, Allison Duda.