

# Company Culture Key to Unlocking Potential

Shay Hughes

I've always loved great success stories about pursuing the American dream. A pizza delivery guy becomes head of the Zappos.com online shoe and clothing retailer. An appliance salesman creates Starbucks. Two college dropouts build the first Apple computer in a garage.

While all of these business leaders created staggering wealth as a result of pursuing their dreams, at the core, they each were about creating something much bigger than a paycheck or a product. Their businesses, creations and life's work, became a living entity with values and ideals that took on lives of their own. These leaders created a culture for their people that defined them.

While so many businesses focus on financial goals, the greatest companies focus on something much more elusive than a finite and measurable return on investment. They focus on their people, both those who comprise their team and those they serve. It's interesting to note how much press there is about today's great companies — whether it's Google, Facebook or Zappos — that focus on their employees, facilities and culture. Sometimes it seems more attention is

given to who they are as a company than what they actually do. To outsiders, it may seem like a marketing ploy, but there is a reason for it that is much deeper-rooted than just ego or publicity.

"We decided a long time ago that we didn't want our brand to be just about shoes, or clothing, or even online retailing," said Tony Hsieh, president of Zappos. "Our belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff — like great customer service, or building a great long-term brand, or passionate employees and customers — will happen naturally on its own. We believe that customer service shouldn't be just a department; it should be the entire company."

Zappos has defined their core values so clearly and proudly that they print them on every box shipped to their customers' doorsteps in big print. "Value #7. Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit."

What I love most about the Zappos' list of values is that it is titled Zappos Family Core Values. If you didn't know better, you'd think "Mr. Zappos" and his family own the business, but there are no



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such people. Zappos was founded by two friends at a pizza joint who knew nothing about selling shoes, but recognized an online niche that has since grown to more than \$1 billion in corporate value. At Zappos, the employees are regarded as family.

In a world where the customer is rightfully king, it seems counterintuitive



***Hughes Marino core value #3: Enjoy the Journey.***

and even downright risky to put one's employees first and place such strong emphasis on creating an internal family bond. But putting one's "family" first is one of the defining secrets to these great success stories.

Starbucks believes that's the case.

"We built the Starbucks brand first with our people, not with consumers," said Howard Schultz, the company's chairman and visionary. "Because we believed the best way to meet and exceed the expectations of our customers was to hire and train great people, we invested in employees."

At our company of just 27 team members, we've embraced the idea of being a family in more ways than one. Not only do we have many family members participating in the work of Hughes Marino, but we also strongly believe that happiness is achieved by finding a perfect balance between our

personal and professional life. We invest in our team and their families because having happy employees exudes into everything we do for our customers. Happiness is contagious.

Being something much bigger than a paycheck or a job description is the golden thread woven into the fabric of America's most inspiring and successful companies. One of the great visionaries of our time, the late Steve Jobs, said: "What we're about isn't making boxes for people to get their jobs done, although we do that well. But Apple is about something more than that. Apple's ... core value is that we believe that people with passion can change the world for the better."

You can't argue with success. After all, companies don't provide services. People do.

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