TOP 10
CULTURE
HACKS

by Robert Richman

TOP 10
CULTURE HACKS

by Robert Richman

Hi. This is Robert Richman, author of the upcoming "Culture Blueprint" and I'm going to share with you the top ten culture hacks. I call them culture hacks because they are insights, mind grenades, tools, that can very quickly cut through to what you need without having to have a big, huge change and implementation plan, a strategy. If you get any one of these core concepts, you can see a huge change very quickly. So let's get into it.

#1

CULTURE IS CO-CREATED

It's never simply created. It's always co-created. What this means is a lot of leaders and managers feel like it's their responsibility to shape the culture. But not only is it not their responsibility, they actually can't do it because culture is not in your control. It's something that's shaped by every person because it's all within the communication, within the language, and you can't control people in that sense. So everybody is actually creating it, and this is actually really, really good news because it means that you can essentially delegate this to a certain extent. You're directing it. You're saying what values are most important, but it's not up to you to carry the entire burden to do that.

An example of this is if you have some type of program, for example, within customer service, and you really want to wow your customers. Rather than creating an entire strategy yourself of how you're going to do that, you say what you want that outcome to be, what you want that expression to be on your customer's face, how you want that to be in terms of an NPS score or any other type of measurement and you leave it to your team to create that. Because what happens is what people create, they take ownership for, and if you create a culture like that where people are constantly creating things, whether it be inside the company or outside the company, there's really magic that happens because they not only take ownership of that program, they actually feel like they take ownership of the company itself. They start making decisions with pride and real critical thinking because they're thinking of it as it fits their own company. Culture is co-created.

A. THINK ABOUT THE CULTURE IN YOUR COMPANY. WHAT TYPE OF CULTURE DO YOU HAVE? HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN THIS TYPE OF CULTURE?

B. DOES YOUR COMPANY HAVE ANY STRATEGIES IN PLACE TO CREATE A SENSE OF CULTURE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE YOUR ORGANIZATION?

#2

SWEEP BEFORE YOU MOP

This is based on the principle that if you've got a lot of dirt on your floor, rather than going straight to mopping and polishing it, it makes no sense to do that before you sweep and get those big pieces of trash out of there. How the analogy applies to culture is that it really makes no sense to develop your people, to develop leaders, to keep on training and coaching people if they're really toxic to the culture to begin with. An example of this is I was once asked to come in and train leaders and I said, my assumption going in here is that you want everybody to be here on the team, that you want them to last with the company, and you're not trying to edge anybody out because they can be like weeds that really hurt this whole process. That really shut down that whole training process because they realized that, "Wait a minute. We are investing in people that we don't even really want to keep here."

This can be tough sometimes because it's not always so obvious, especially when they are a star performer, yet they're being really toxic to the culture and bringing a lot of other people down. What we've seen time and time out is that these people consistently bring down the entire company even though isolated by themselves they're great performers. So if you want to do culture work within your company, it really helps to sweep out those people, essentially, that are not needed. It's a tough move but it can be done quickly, and you'll see an elevation in the mood amongst the rest of the team players if you do this.

A. HOW DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION DETERMINE IF EMPLOYEES AND NEW HIRES ARE A GOOD FIT WITHIN YOUR COMPANY'S CULTURE?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. HAVE YOU MADE THE CORE VALUES OF YOUR ORGANIZATION TRANSPARENT TO ALL EMPLOYEES? DO THEY KNOW WHAT TYPE OF CULTURE YOU'RE AIMING TO HAVE?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

#3

CULTURE CHANGE IS NOT SELF-MEDICATION

Now the idea behind this is that sometimes when we want to have a culture change, it's not actually so much about the culture as much as it is what we want for our own lives. So an example of this is I was speaking to a woman who wanted to drive a culture change and I said, "OK, based on this concept, the culture is really a feeling. It's really a feeling when people walk into a room and they get it immediately." I said, "What is the feeling you want within your culture?" and she said, "I want to feel excited. I want this to be exciting every day I walk in, that we are excited to do our job." I said, "OK. That's great. That's fantastic. Now tell me this: how much excitement do you have in your own life right now?" She didn't like answering that. She said her life is very, very boring right now. I said, "You know what? Then we're going to have to focus on that for a moment," because any culture change that you do is going to come from whatever place you're feeling.

If you're not feeling a certain value in your life and you're trying to use the culture to get that value into your life, then that's ultimately going to feel forced and people are going to notice that whether they consciously know it or not. So that first step is getting whatever value that is into your life first so that you're actually coming from a place of sharing whatever that value is that you want for people.

So we actually went through her life and said, "How can we bring more excitement into it?" and she named some activities, went and took care of that and really got more excitement in her life. Then the culture changes that she wanted came with an ease. It came with a relaxation because she was simply sharing that feeling of where she's coming from, rather than working so hard and forcing a culture to change in order to have more of that feeling in her life. Really do that self-examination. Look at what you want for the culture and say, "Do I already have this in my own life? If I were to not show up in the office, would I have this value?" If you don't, think about how you can create that first because, otherwise, you're really going against yourself and people will know that. Culture change is not self-medication.

A. IS THE CULTURE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION SOMETHING THAT CAN BE MAINTAINED OVER TIME, OR IS IT SOMETHING THAT YOU'RE CREATING OUT OF SELF-NEED?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. ARE THERE ANY ASPECTS THAT ARE MISSING FROM YOUR CULTURE THAT YOU FEEL WOULD BENEFIT YOUR ORGANIZATION? (EX. EXCITEMENT, SUPPORT, ETC.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

#4

START BY DESTROYING SOMETHING

You could start a change by destroying something. Think about it this way: how long does it take to build a building, like a skyscraper? It could take years, right? How long does it take to destroy it - minutes, seconds, when those bombs go off? It's far, far easier to destroy something. So how can we use that to our advantage? Well, we can destroy something that's not working far more quickly, more easily, less expensive, than we can by creating something new that's going to take a long time. Now this is not to say that we shouldn't create new things. We absolutely should. But if you want to get culture shifts happening first, quickly, now and to feel that energy and then leverage that energy, the fastest way that you can do that is to destroy something. An example of this is a company that realized the dress code was just not working for them. It really wasn't helping that many people. People really wanted to wear jeans to work. Then in one day they said, "OK. We're done with this. We're done with this dress code. Go ahead. Wear jeans to work." There was an eruption of celebration, a huge celebration. All this new energy and excitement about the company in coming to work just by simply destroying something that wasn't really working for them.

So think about that whether you're doing surveys, a great question to ask people if you want to figure this out is, "What do you think is useless? What do you think is a waste of your time? What do you think is pointless?" Hear them. If you're hearing a trend, think, "Is that something that we really absolutely need? How much benefit is it giving to us?" Then if you can, destroy it and then you'll have plenty of energy to funnel into those new initiatives that you want a lot of energy for.

A. HAVE YOU EVER HAD A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FROM DESTROYING SOMETHING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION? WHAT CHANGED?

B. NAME SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN DESTROY IN YOUR ORGANIZATION TO CREATE A BETTER CULTURE.

#5

CANCEL THE OFF SITE

Now I know that this has the best of intentions for everybody to go offsite and come together and think and brainstorm and have the new strategy solution for the year and then we're going to go off and do it. I'm sorry, no matter how good the intention, I consistently see this not working and it's really not anybody's fault. I am blaming the concept itself, not you as a leader, if you've done this before or if you're planning this or you're excited for it. If you want to go off and have fun and bond together as a team, absolutely, go do that, go hiking, go bowling. I've seen all kinds of benefits come from that being the intention, the intention to really bond people together and get to know each other. But if your purpose is to have a strategy session and really figure out what's going on for the rest of the year with the company, I haven't seen that work so well.

Instead, let me propose an alternative. An alternative is you take whatever time that would have been those eight hours or however many, and spread those out across time, meaning an hour here, a half-hour there, another half-hour there and expand that across time because what happens is you get people churning their thoughts around it. You put those provocative questions out there, those goals that you don't quite even know how to accomplish and then people are thinking about it when they go home, when they shower, when they're walking their dog, when they're running at the gym.

Those thoughts keep percolating up because they want to think about that and remember it for the next meeting. Then you chew on those ideas and bring them together, and then you discuss it again and again until it's refined because this is what inevitably you need. You need to refine that thought around it. You're not going to figure out that whole strategy out within one day and have it stick. Maybe parts of it would but if you're going to invest that much time and energy, experiment with stretching it across time and you'll get much better thoughts and you'll also get much more enthusiasm and dedication to it because people will have contributed more, thought about it more, argued it more. Even if it's not their position, they get to argue the opposite side and feel heard so you'll have a lot more support if you really cancel the offsite and spread that dedicated time across time.

A. HOW DOES YOUR COMPANY COME UP WITH STRATEGY SOLUTIONS? DO YOU GO OFF-SITE; STAY ON-SITE?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF THE WAY YOU DO IT NOW, AND HOW CAN YOU IMPROVE IT?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

#6

ALIGNMENT.... TO WHAT?

Alignment is a big buzz word these days. Everybody throws it around a lot, "We need alignment. We need alignment with our teams, with our managers, through our front-end employees." It's thrown around a lot and, I think, sometimes very carelessly so because if you don't say what you're aligning to, the subscript of that is that you're saying, "Align to me and my will," and that's not something people can easily do or rely upon or even know, necessarily, if you're just simply using the word "alignment" by itself. But if you're aligning to something like the values, then that's something that everybody can play by because everybody can bring that up in conversation. Everybody can say, "OK. This is my interpretation of it. Let's discuss this. Let's have this out on the table." Then it becomes a lot less personal because you're discussing a value, which you both agreed is important. So you're aligning according to something that you both feel is important. If you aren't aligning to something that you both agreed to is important, then it's essentially just a coercive tactic to get people to do what you want them to do. Alignment to what?

A. DO YOUR EMPLOYEES KNOW WHAT THEY'RE ALIGNING TO? OR ARE THEY ALIGNING TO THEIR OWN INTERPRETATION OF THE WORD?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. THINK ABOUT WHY YOU WANT YOUR EMPLOYEES TO ALIGN? ARE THESE REASONS CLEAR TO YOUR ORGANIZATION? IF NOT, HOW CAN YOU MAKE THESE REASONS CLEAR?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

#7

FRUSTRATION IS GOLD

I know a lot of managers, myself included in the past, have really looked to shy away from frustration, whether it be my own or an employee's, because it feels so negative. It feels like negative energy. "Things are much better than you think. Let's put this away." Until I realized that this is a theme that so many people feel and it's actually a good thing because what frustration is means that you've got a vision for something that you think it should be "X" way but something's blocking that, and it's really upsetting, which means that you're actually passionate about that vision that you have for it or that your employees have for it. If the frustration wasn't there, then that would be apathy and you can't work with apathy. There's just no energy there to move around. But if they're frustrated, that means there's passion, that means there's energy, which can be discussed, debated, a healthy tension coming up, really rolling up the sleeves and getting into figuring out what that is.

So what I like to say is that when you found frustration, you've actually hit a gold mine because you've tapped into a deep passion that can then be figured out, leveraged, understood, played with. If you have this concept in your mind and you teach it to your people, it can really do this 180 around what's typically perceived as something very negative because a lot of the best cultures actually have a fair amount of tension to them. Sometimes, there is tension between and amongst values themselves. What if you want to wow a customer but you also want to do more with less and there's an idea that costs a lot but somebody's saying, "Wait! How are we going to do this for less money?" And then there's that tension, that debate between those two values. So frustration is actually something to be cultivated because it's there whether you like it or not. If you don't cultivate it, what happens is it leaks out in other places where you don't want it. It leaks out to places like the water cooler where you can't see it or the smoke breaks or when people go home and complain to their spouses. Then all that energy went out to places where it's not serving anybody. It's actually just bringing people down whereas if you harness that energy, you can benefit from it and then they can go and be talking about much more important things on those breaks. Frustration is gold.

A. WHAT "FRUSTRATION" (PASSION) CAN YOU IDENTIFY IN YOUR COMPANY?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. THINK OF A SITUATION WHEN FRUSTRATION PLAYED A POSITIVE ROLE.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

#8

KILL THE WORD "BUY-IN"

I'm serious; remove this from your vocabulary. The word is heavily, heavily loaded. It's a term about sales and who wants to be sold something? You can just get that image of that used car salesman feeling that you don't like because even if it's something that you want, it's got that feel of being sold. Buy in, "I need to buy into this. I need to part with my resources and give them to you because I'm buying into your concept." The word has a lot of baggage to it. It's something that if you eliminate it from your vocabulary, you have to think in a different way because you have to think about, "How is this in alignment with the values? How is this something that we all agree with?" as opposed to selling me something I now have to buy. So if you use more words like "alignment", "agreement", "how this gets back to the core values" and force yourself not to use that term "buy-in", then it's going to create a lot more harmony and you're going to actually enjoy these conversations a whole lot more. Kill the word "buy-in". Experiment with it. See how that goes.

A. NAME ALL THE AREAS YOU USE THE WORD "BUY-IN" IN YOUR ORGANIZATION. WHAT WORDS CAN YOU REPLACE IT WITH?

B. ARE THERE ANY OTHER WORDS YOUR ORGANIZATION USES FREQUENTLY THAT YOU FEEL HAS A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON YOUR OVERALL CULTURE?

#9

RITUALIZE YOUR ENERGY

Energy is key. If you've got a lot of energy in your organization, you can direct that to any initiative, any program, any strategy, any goal that you want because there's a ton of energy there. Imagine everybody just coming in dead tired. What are you going to do with that? How much can you really leverage a little energy? Rather than being very random about it, you can actually create rituals that make sure it's there no matter what. I'll give you an example of one that you're welcome to use. In the morning, it typically sets the tone for the day. So what do you want people to focus on? What do you want them to think about? I've found that focusing on two simple things gets the energy going and gets people focused and directed. One is, "What are you happy about? What are you excited about? What are you thankful for?" and have each person say that one thing, just one thing, just pick out one, specific thing and have it be different all the time, otherwise those meanings get boring. Get that positive energy going as a ritual.

Then the second question for everybody is, "What's that one thing you want to knock out of the park today?" What's great about that is it gets people focused and other people in the room, on the team, hear that and can be there to support them in that goal. If they keep bringing that goal up in the meeting, that one focus, people start saying, "Hey, are you going to get that done or what? What's going on here?" So it holds people accountable. If you create this very simple, very quick ritual within a team for each person to quickly answer the question, "What are you happy about, excited about? What's a win that you had?" This is a great one because sometimes we don't get celebrated for things that we know we did but nobody else did so let's celebrate that. What's a win you had yesterday? That one positive energy question, "What are you thankful for, excited about, happy about?" and then, "What are you going to knock out of the park today? What's your focus? What's your priority?" Ritualize your energy. Don't leave it to chance.

A. DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION HAVE ANY RITUALS YOU FOLLOW TO HELP FOCUS AND DIRECT ENERGY EACH DAY?

B. IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU CHALLENGE AND HOLD YOUR EMPLOYEES ACCOUNTABLE IN A POSITIVE, ENERGETIC WAY?

#10

SHARE WHAT YOU WANT TO KEEP

This is a fascinating principle I learned being at Zappos for three years, which is I think there is absolutely no coincidence that Zappos makes it offices available for tours for anyone, 25,000 people coming in 2012 alone, and the opportunity to meet with various departments, learn all kinds of things, going to CultureBook.org to get their culture book for free and spreading all about what the culture is. Low and behold, it becomes the number one brand in customer service and a top ten company for best places to work. What I realized is that you share what you want to keep because anything you hoard and keep to yourself and don't, tends to disappear. It tends to be temporary. Whereas, for example, with the tours at Zappos, bringing in fresh eyes all of the time of people who are looking and saying, "Wow. This is incredible." It keeps people grateful and it keeps people in integrity because they say, "OK. We've got to really uphold what we're all about because we're under public scrutiny constantly, whether it be the press or others. So the people at Zappos can really get that and stay that in integrity.

So whether it be tours of your office, creating your own book about the company that you want to give away, videos about the culture. There's a great company called Vooza that's doing funny videos within their culture and sharing that. They're highly comedic. Anything, whatever's really unique to your company, if you take that, what you really love about it and share it with others, it could be the philosophy, it could be the manifesto. There's a great company called "Balsamiq" with a Q at the end that makes design software that has incredible videos and a manifesto that's just amazing, that has people saying, literally in quotes, "I want to buy your software even though I don't need it because I just want to be a part of what you stand for." It's amazing how much you can sustain a great culture if you share it. Share what you want to keep.

So these are the top ten culture hacks here. Thanks so much for listening. Pay attention to Richman.LA and CultureBlueprint.com for the upcoming "Culture Blueprint" and I look forward to hopefully meeting you someday and talking more about your culture.

A. WHAT CULTURE PRACTICES ARE YOU
PROUD OF WITHIN YOUR COMPANY? WRITE
THEM DOWN, AND TELL A COUPLE PEOPLE
AT THE CONFERENCE!

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION PRACTICE
GRATEFULNESS? HOW DOES THIS HAVE A
POSITIVE IMPACT ON YOUR DAY-TO-DAY?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Knowledge Translated Into Results