

# IT'S EASY



## HIGH PERFORMANCE CULTURE

By Bryan Adkins Ed.D., CEO, Denison Consulting

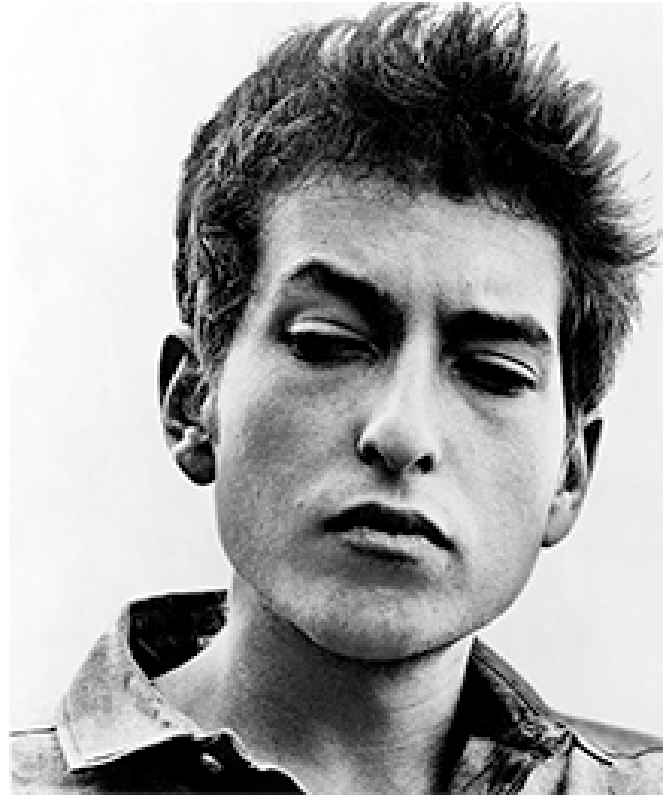


Every day millions of people across the globe spend their hard earned money seeking a simple solution to things that in our hearts and minds we know are not easy to do. An exercise machine that promises amazing benefits with little effort. A pill that will cure whatever ails you. Three easy steps to financial freedom...or maybe its five. Our (virtual) bookshelves are filled with 'how to' guidance and the potential of great benefit if you follow a few simple steps.

## It seems like just yesterday

that those of us that work in the organizational culture space were fighting to make the case for why culture is important and how it needs to be both understood AND managed. The reactions to the 'C' word ranged from 'isn't that the soft stuff?' (and therefore less important) to 'what is it and why should I care?' Well, as Bob Dylan said 50 years ago – the times they are a changing. And the temptation of an easy cultural solution is following close behind.

Today we use the 'C' word habitually, and to describe almost every facet of our existence. When people behave badly in sports we blame the culture of the NBA, NFL or FILA. When financial systems collapse, we talk about the culture in banking or on Wall Street. Watch or read any news source and you will find a reference to culture on a daily basis. In recent weeks we've seen references to the culture of law enforcement, the culture 'inside the belt-way' (sure to come up in every election cycle), and on the heels of the recent emissions scandal - the culture of Volkswagen. If anyone needs convincing of the link between culture and real business results, take note that early estimates suggest the culture that allowed for Volkswagen's behavior will cost them an estimated \$75 billion to settle, not to mention the cost to their reputation.



# CULTURE

We no longer need to make the case for culture. The 'C' word is accepted as a way to describe the values and norms that are reflected in the behaviors we witness in organizations every day. Culture is mainstream. Is it any wonder that as culture has become recognized for the powerful force that it is, the line of consultants and firms that are promoting themselves as culture experts is getting longer? Should we be surprised that the line of those offering the promise of an easy answer to what we know is a complex topic is growing? Want to improve your culture – ask your people what their mood is today. Want to improve your culture – ask employees if they are happy. If your expertise is in employee engagement or climate – simply use the terms interchangeably. Call them one and the same.



We like to say that some of us were 'culture' when culture wasn't cool. We sought to understand what culture was and, more crucially – how it impacted organizational performance. We believed culture had consequence. Individual engagement is important. Wanting your employees to be in a good mood and happy are worthy objectives. So too are profits, growth, quality, innovation, safety and customer satisfaction. It would be great if a good mood was assurance that the organization would perform at high levels. Hand out raises, offer more perks, set up the game room and bring in the beverages and your employees will likely be in a better mood. They might even be happy!



Every day we see a business landscape that is littered with organizations that have had individual employees who were personally engaged and quite likely, often in a good mood. However they failed to tap into the collective ability of those engaged, happy individuals. The bottom line is that business is a team sport.

When you hear the word culture you think of groups, not individuals. By definition, culture is about the collective. At Denison we have been studying culture and performance for over two decades. We have witnessed high-performers up close. When asked what it is like to work in those organizations it is rare that employees mention mood or happiness. What you hear are terms and phrases such as demanding, accountable, high expectations, delivering on commitments, putting the customer first, and a belief that everyone in the organization must work hard together to deliver superior performance.

How satisfying it would be to look leaders and employees in the eyes and say 'Do you want an

organization that is demanding, accountable and that delivers high levels of performance – that's easy'. Let's ask your employees if they are in a good mood today. Let's ask them if they are personally going above and beyond (to which most every employees will say yes). The hard truth is that it is the collective effort of people – the culture – that is the best predictor of how well your organization will perform across important measures including profitability, growth, innovation, safety, customer satisfaction and many other critical business metrics.

If aligning the collective effort of the workforce sounds like hard work, it is. It requires a shared vision and strategy for the future. Goals must be aligned in support of that vision and strategy. It requires a common understanding of customers. You need values that, combined with the Vision, Strategy and Goals, provide agreed upon boundaries for what people do, why they do it and how they do it. People need to develop effective working relationships in the organization that span divisions, functions, locations and levels. You have to make sure you have the skills

you need today while building the skills needed for the future. And oh by the way, you need to create an environment in which employees are willing to share successes and failures – and the organization must learn from both.

# SOUND EASY?

We wish it was ...

The good news is that we know the drivers of a high performance culture and we see examples of it every day. We see it in every industry, sector and region of the world. We also know that you can determine where your organization is today on these critical success factors and get the support you need to understand, make sense of and ultimately manage your culture. It is *real*/work that delivers *real*/results.

Finally, as you lay awake at night, are you wondering if your employees are in a good mood? Do you wonder if they are happy? Or do you wonder whether your people understand your mission and strategy and can collectively execute against that mission and strategy? Do you wonder if everyone is acting in accordance with your values? Surely there must be an easy way to create a high performance culture ... a pill that creates instant clarity and alignment throughout the organization. If you find one, take it! Until then roll up your sleeves and get to work on what is one of the most rewarding experiences imaginable – working together with others to deliver performance far beyond what any one of us could possibly achieve alone. Do so and ...



... you might even  
find yourself in a  
better mood!