

# Company Culture Gardens Behavioral Practices

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I had an article published in the Huffington Post that I called Culture and the KISS principle - the acronym referred to Keep It Simple Stupid (reference 1). The piece referenced my Midwest farm heritage: be straightforward, tell it like it is, keep harmony with neighbors, talk plain, and keep things *simple*. The *nourishment* that sustained the neighborhood's simple appetites came from home-grown gardens and animals.

This caused me to wonder if there could be a similar model for sustaining employee appetites for a healthy workplace neighborhood? What I'm about to present could get socially and psychologically complex - but it can also be presented as simple common sense in Midwest plain talk.

In the article I said Culture = Values + Behaviors. This equation has a problem in that the words used for "values" and "behaviors" are often interchangeable and can be confusing. For example, the word "respect" is a word that is a value and a behavior and there are many ways in which people would explain the word. Similarly, ask a group to define "culture" and you'll get a mixed bag of responses.

A clearer way of explaining the word respect is with relatable behavior practices. Examples might be "We focus on two-way communication - listening and giving clear and constructive information." and "We respond quickly and positively to requests and maintain a professional approach under pressure". (reference 2) There could be several practices for any given value. Everyone can understand such examples and conduct themselves in a manner that support root core values. Also, when employees themselves come up with the example practices it creates credibility.

So, I would change the culture equation to simply equal behavioral practices. Over time these collectively tell the story about a company's culture.

I suggest that believed and *practiced behaviors* are the *nourishment* that feeds and sustains employee desires for a healthy workplace. I propose the imagery of a garden, depicting a place where employees in teams select and grow their own behavioral practices which become their nourishment and feed *their appetites*; a “behaviors garden” if you will. When behaviors become firmly implanted and flourish, a culture is being solidified.

Explicit stand-alone values are important as they are reference points for decision making. One example might be integrity. When faced with a decision, a manager or executive should ask “does this approach or solution fulfill our requirements for integrity?”.

Example behavior practices for the integrity value might be: (1) We follow ethical business practices and are trustworthy (2) We are honest and straight talking (3) We deliver on promises and have a fair-minded approach (4) We have a consistent positive attitude (5) We are willing to stand up for our beliefs and (6) We take responsibility to get things done. These are pieces from the Williams and Wybrow book entitled “The 31 Practices”. (reference 2) Notice that each starts with “We”.

Other words that could be either values or behaviors are compassion, love, kindness, caring, forthrightness, and honesty, and accountability. Putting such words into descriptive action sentences creates behavioral practices.

For a behaviors garden to flourish it requires feeding, noticing what is or is not producing the desired results, and pruning when a need for change is noticed. The soil for the garden needs to be constantly enriched and plucked of weeds that could choke it. Observing efficacy through *feedback* is essential or else growth and development will be stymied or stunted. Feedback needs to be open, honest, and compassionate. Honesty without compassion and understanding is not honesty but, rather, masked hostility.

My friend and co-author Dr. Irv Rubin, a friend and prominent organizational scientist, shared this story with me about a physician colleague who was CEO of the biggest clinic in his town for five years. He was a cardio-vascular surgeon, not likely to be the kind of “farmer” you'd expect to have an intuitive grasp of what it took to “nourish” the plants under his care. (reference 3)

Once every week for those five years, he'd sit down and write (not type) a personal note to employees. The notes were always very simple and direct. To a particular maintenance person, he might say: “I recently noticed you mopping the floor by the Ladies Room outside of the O.R. Thank you for helping to keep our hospital germ free.”

Such a note reflects a behavior practice such as “We go out of our way to thank people for caring.” The hidden power behind his feedback was the fact that he was “attending” to the nourishment needs of his employees. News of his notes spread like a virus: “Did you hear that X got the note from 'the doc' (as they called him) this week?!”

These bits of nourishment carried no concrete reward for the recipients - but were actually much more powerful. In order to pen a note every week to a different employee for five years, Doc had to be very observant of the human behaviors happening around him. At the same time, he was walking through the hospital to patients in need of care, and “attending” to others in his “garden.” (reference personal conversation)

The need for feedback has been emphasized. It is important to note that companywide surveys probably have no value for how well behavior practices are being achieved. Only the people within a close-knit team know how well their teammates are practicing the behaviors.

A team in a Cincinnati sales office has no idea about the practices of a software development team at headquarters in another city.

If you don't yet have a culture garden growing healthy thriving behaviors, think about starting one.

- Reference 1 Culture and the KISS Principle, Huffington Post, Gerald R. Wagner, August, 2017.  
Reference 2 The 31 Practices, Alan Williams & Alison Whybrow, LID Publishing Ltd., December 7, 2016.  
Reference 3 Dr. Irv Rubin, CEO Emeritas, Temenos, Inc.