

Culture on the Dessert Menu

„Which culture do you have in your company?“ This sounds a bit like „What car do you drive?“ or „which scent do you use?“. The latter questions are easy to answer: „Ford Focus.“ „Chanel“.

With culture it's more difficult. What should one say? The short answers are so terribly bold and empty: „We have a performance culture.“ „We have a culture of excellence.“ „We have a culture of innovation.“ „We have a startup culture.“ Do you. Interesting. Or rather no, it isn't.

With the topic of culture there is a strange double-track phenomenon: on the one hand everybody agrees that it has an absolutely crucial significance and will decisively influence success or failure. „Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast“, as Mr. Drucker puts it.

On the other hand if you ask about culture the topic often has a striking resemblance with vampire victims: it's anemic and pale. This is often because people loaf too much in the middle area:

For in more or less stress-free daily business you will not see big differences: one follows the conventions of decency at our latitudes and the rules of the right business tone: people greet each other politely, maintain a relaxed-positive writing style in mail conversations, are open for change, look forward to receiving feedback, people don't burp up in the corridors, smile, are smart and solution-oriented. Everyday life is coined by norms and the guardrails of social acceptance, which makes interactions relatively predictable.

And relatively uneventful. And maybe even a bit boring.

It gets more interesting when you approach the edges, when things go wrong, when conventions are stretched or broken. There is a still quite harmless zone where we talk about criticising performance, about missed deadlines, or unorthodox clothing (and if you think this only applies to dusty large corporations, you are wrong: even Silicon Valley has it's uniform consisting of Jeans, Sneakers, T-Shirt, and a Hoodie).

It gets really exciting when important projects fail, when you lose key customers, when revenue breaks down. Then potentially surprising explanation models and reaction patterns emerge that seemed much more intelligent and much more civilised at nine in the morning at the coffee machine.

It's much like living in a small town: early in the morning at the bakery everybody gets along splendidly, but when the neighbour walks around smelling of alcohol in the afternoon, when the local council member loses his job, or when the bank representative shows up with a dark-skinned girlfriend, other dimensions appear.

Culture is like Tiramisù: it's multilayered. Depending on the characteristics of the situation there will be culturally specific reactions. So if you intend to deal with culture development, you are wise to differentiate the layers and to observe what happens in situations involving conflicts, divergent behavior, and threat. That's where the excitement is.

There is a tendency to remain in the templates of the middle area. This is a bit of a pity as there is not much happening there: only beyond the templates dimensions like vitality, uniqueness, resilience, and ability to change will show.

So do as you do with a Tiramisù: dig deeper, only then will you know what makes a Tiramisù – or your culture.