



Today's Topic:

The CEO as Keeper of the Culture

Guest Speaker:

Bill Cameron, CEO, American Fidelity Assurance

Facilitator:

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An organization's top leader plays a pivotal role in preserving its culture. By modeling and recognizing target behaviors, the leader sets an example and expectations for what type of business the organization will be. One such leader, Bill Cameron, CEO of American Fidelity Assurance and Chairman of the Board of Directors, joined Jane Weiss of Great Place to Work® Institute to explore his role in shaping and preserving the company's unique culture. American Fidelity Assurance, a family-operated insurance company based in Oklahoma City, has been recognized on FORTUNE's "100 Best Companies to Work for"® list since 2004.

A Family Legacy

Bill represents the third generation of leadership at American Fidelity Assurance and part of his style of leadership comes from the example of his grandfather, the founder of the predecessor to the current organization. Bill shared:

"When I was in a much more junior position in the company and I would talk to people, they would always comment on how my grandfather would just get in the elevator and he would talk to them, and how good that made them feel that no matter what else he had going on, he would find out about what was going on in their day and interact with them. That's something that always made a big impression on me. I've always tried to remember that it's the little things that a CEO can do that have a big impact."

As a result, Bill takes personal responsibility to do the small things to make that difference. He knows that he does not have a lot of one-on-one time with the 1,500 employees, but in passing people in the hall or cafeteria, he is highly aware that even the quick interactions can help set the tone in the organization. Bill explains, "I feel like, to a degree, I'm on stage when I come into the company," and he knows that his employees hold him as a standard of behavior and values. His behavior serves as an example, so he tries to treat people how he would like to be treated and have interactions with people that convey that "everybody is in a role here and everyone is wanted here." Bill also believes that his mood can be transferable to employees, so he tries to be genuine and real with a positive attitude and relaxed demeanor so that others are encouraged to do the same.

Connection to Culture and Success

When considering how a CEO's behavior can affect the culture of an entire organization and its success, Bill approaches the issue in two areas: company security and fair practices. He cites the positive, upbeat culture at American Fidelity as the source of people's confidence that the company is stable, especially since the company is privately held. Bill added, "I think when people can have a comfortable feeling about their jobs, it gives them the ability to focus on what they're doing as opposed to focusing on what their future looks like."

One of American Fidelity's five values is that they are "always fair." Bill explained that "if people feel like they're being treated fairly and have that understanding ... then that fairness should extend to the customers." He points out that, especially in the insurance industry, fairness is of high value when dealing with contracts and obligations. It is clear to Bill that, in order to expect his employees to demonstrate fairness to their customers, they need to be treated fairly by their managers and leaders first.

The other four values ("AFs") are being **always flexible, future-oriented, focused on niche markets, and financially secure**. These values came into place 15 years ago after a process where the senior management team came together to conclude what American Fidelity was all about. Bill takes responsibility to adhere to these values – especially in decision making – even if it can be "uncomfortable," as he puts it. For him, there is no gap between corporate values and personal values: "It's important that the values you hold for yourself really are your values and not just something you are trying to do that's not real."

When employees are considered for promotions, living out the AFs is part of that evaluation process. Bill said frankly that "if people don't adhere to [the values], the organization culture is strong enough that it kind of rejects it. It's like a transplanted tissue item; the organization will reject you." He cited a specific situation several years ago with a person in a senior role who was saying one thing and living out another. When describing the means necessary to repairing the culture and business aspects of the conflict, Bill called it a painful process. In that division, trust was broken down and fingers were pointed, so the decision was made to have, for a set time, an open forum for people to come forward and tell what happened. Employees were able to release their anxieties and the experience was ultimately a healing one. At the root of the problem was a lack of fairness, a value that is so highly-regarded and emphasized, but it was clear that this failure resulted in broken trust. Bill admits that American Fidelity may have lost a portion of market share during this period, but despite temporary financial loss, the main focus was to take care of the people and the culture which they worked. As Bill summarized, "It wasn't a big thing moneywise, it was a big thing culturally."

Senior leaders took the initiative to communicate to other employees about the action they were taking in response to the problem they had encountered. Every colleague was addressed in person at meetings so that they could hear the whole story; Bill took it upon himself to deliver this message much of the time out of personal responsibility. He said, "I think it was a big part of our culture that, when we had something like this happen, that I got up and basically apologized. Ultimately, the buck stops with me and that one got by me." This deliberate action helped to rebuild credibility within the culture.

Conclusion

American Fidelity Assurance has built a strong culture of fairness and respect that looks to Bill, as the CEO, as an example for behavior and values. With a high degree of accountability for upholding the company values and a goal of maintaining people's confidence in the organization as a whole, Bill is well aware of his role in the culture of the organization and takes personal responsibility for upholding the culture already in place.



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