

## **Building on Corporate Culture**

**By Kristin Hill, AIA  
Managing Principal, NELSON**

For many people, corporate culture is like abstract art – they can't define it, but they recognize it when they see it.

Every company is different. Different people. Different products or services. Different goals. Different cultures. The term "corporate culture" refers to an organization's values, beliefs, and behaviors. In general, it influences all the ways in which people interact and measure success within the business environment. Many experts believe that firms with strong cultures that are reflected in published statements and policies achieve higher results because employees better understand what to do and how to do it.

Unfortunately, defining an existing corporate culture or attempting to establish a new one can be very complex. Culture is an active, living, breathing yet intangible phenomenon. In some companies, the culture may be very quick to accept change. In others, it can be slow, resistant or just plain stubborn. The elements that help to define a culture include procedures and business practices, but also extend into virtually every aspect of corporate life from work hours to the average age of employees to office design.

### **Four Major Corporate Cultures**

Most companies fit into one of four corporate culture categories:

- Controlling – tend to be conservative, authoritative, definitive and unwavering with a top-down management style
- Collaborative – more team-oriented, instructive, inclusive, sharing and trusting of both employees and management
- Competitive – very assertive and persuasive while maintaining a conceptual vision and an atmosphere where concepts and standards are constantly challenged
- Cultivating – takes a charismatic approach that embraces positive change, remains committed to employees and favors a "bottom-up" management style

While management preferences and structure obviously have a major impact on which bucket applies, a company's employee base is the real force that adopts a culture, keeps it going, or eventually forces change. On a daily basis, they must respond individually and en masse to cultural standards drivers such as status, hierarchy, entitlement, need, work processes, flexibility and technology.

To make the process even more complex, there are multiple generations of workers in today's corporate environment, and each generation tends to respond differently to the cultural drivers. They also perform very differently under the four main corporate culture umbrellas.

The four generations of workers are:

- Veterans (born 1920 – 1943)
- Boomers (born 1944 – 1960)
- Generation X'ers (born 1961 – 1979)
- Millennials (born 1980 – 2000)

The **Veterans** are accustomed to "hard times." They show respect for authority, take a "no nonsense" approach to the workplace, and relate best to traditional values and roles. Employers tend to like them because they are stable, loyal, hard workers and detail-oriented. However, they

also are slow to embrace change, often have difficulty keeping pace with today's high-speed business environment, and may not be comfortable with the latest technology.

**Boomers** are known as the “pampered” generation, but they are also driven and very optimistic. In the workplace, they are team players and relationship builders with a strong service mentality. These are the people who will do “whatever it takes” to get things done. Some of their potential issues include dealing with conflict and remaining non-judgmental. They also tend to be more self-centered and less corporate-minded.

**Generation X** workers are very independent, yet cynical. They are also experiencing many changes in their family and home lives that may impact their work schedule. Gen X'ers have a true entrepreneurial spirit; they are creative and highly adaptable. In addition, they are fluent in office technology. Their challenges include being impatient and critical, expecting a high degree of independence, and having a very low sense of employer loyalty.

The newest additions to the workforce, the **Millennials**, are confident, sociable and gurus of technology. Like their parents, the Boomers, they are also pampered. At the workplace, Millennials are realists accustomed to multi-tasking. They yearn for meaningful work and expect to be able to maintain a healthy work-life balance. These younger workers grew up in a world of multimedia and over-stimulation. As a result, they now need it to function, which can be a challenge for employers. In addition, Millennials often require structure to be productive and may be susceptible to a “quarter-life crisis,” which can lead to conflicts with coworkers – particularly their parental Boomer generation.

Some corporations attempt to adapt their culture to suit the generations of workers they employ. For example, companies with a “Controlling” corporate culture will probably find Veteran workers to be the most productive employees. A “Collaborative” culture tends to work best with Boomers. The “Competitive” culture often is effective for both Boomers and Generation X'ers since they already tend to have a somewhat adversarial relationship. Finally, a “Cultivating” culture will have the broadest appeal and function well with Boomers, Generation X'ers and Millennials.

### **Design – One size doesn't fit all**

With all these variables, as well as the ever changing needs of businesses and the constant call to control costs, it's easy to see why space design and utilization requires careful consideration. If done well, the physical characteristics of an office can convey corporate culture. Even outsiders may be able to draw conclusions about organizational hierarchy, the ability for self expression, opportunities for collaboration, and the perceived value of creativity and innovation based on design choices.

But how can a company address the needs and desires of four generations of employees and multiple types of workers in one space while also reinforcing its corporate culture? Boomers want privacy. Millennials want to tear down the walls. Teams must have areas to gather in large and small groups. Telecommuters need places to plug in when they have to visit the office. Storage and support services must be accessible to all. Guests may need a spot to work for a few hours or a few days. Employees need a place to socialize, eat and recharge their brain cells. Can everything possibly coexist under one roof?

The answer is yes. If you work with strategic planners and designers who take time to understand the culture, assess the requirements for flexibility and adaptability, determine the level of receptivity to change, and understand the different work styles that must be accommodated, a space can be successfully designed to meet all of a company's cultural and corporate needs.

NELSON recently created such as space for a confidential client in the financial industry. The team of NELSON strategists, architects and interior designers developed an Effective Workplace pilot program that will reshape the client's real estate portfolio to make workplace effectiveness

an integral, branded component and reinforce their cultural drive to become the world's most admired company.

The three main goals of the effort were:

- Enable efficient and effective use of employee time by creating a choice of where and when to work
- Attract, develop, deploy and retain world-class associates and partners
- Enable an effective response to growth with manageable capital expenditure

The overall design concept for the Effective Workplace program maximizes space efficiency, provides choice to associates for anywhere-anytime work, and is contemporary and forward thinking. The design principles move visitors from the entry "on-stage" area to open, collaborative workspaces and the associate center. Upon entering, there is a clear delineation for mobile and full-time associates, yet the differentiating elements are visually integrated to create a cohesive environment that is welcoming to everyone.

The on-stage area is the greeting point for visitors and location of concierge services. A large conference room is immediately accessible from the main entry for ease and flow of large groups, and a variety of smaller conference rooms rotate around each other to create a convergence of meeting spaces convenient for all work zones. These activity areas are central and visible to the associate center, while dedicated areas are located at the far ends of the footprint in quiet zones. The dedicated space includes sixty 8' x 8' and six 150 SF small conference rooms that can be converted into offices. A "drop-in" area, available on a reservation basis, is for mobile workers that need space for 2-4 hours. This space provides room for circulation with concentrated workstation clusters that can be converted into larger, more enclosed work areas with minimal installation effort.

The combination of these workspace sizes allows for flexibility to accommodate future needs and uses, and the rotated layout distinguishes the informal workspace from the more formal, dedicated areas. The associate center, with its informal, soft seating, a coffee bar area, water-wall and a virtual fireplace, is available for associates to engage in informal interaction and collaboration while serving as the integration point for the various work zones.

The space plan has an efficiency of 119 SF per associate based on a 2:1 space utilization factor. Overall, the space offers a dynamic wireless work environment with the right blend of collaborative and private spaces to support different work models.

Utilizing this concept has had many benefits for the client. Most importantly, it gives the company a competitive edge by providing a more flexible, cost-efficient use of space. It also supports their corporate culture, which promotes a collaborative, flexible work environment to meet the needs of all employees. As a result, the company feels that it is in an excellent position to attract and retain the best talent and be the financial industry's "employer of choice."

Space design is one of the most tangible and easily recognizable elements of any corporate culture. When it's done well, it will support desired patterns of behavior and help a company to achieve its goals.

And at the end of the day, nothing beats the culture of success.

*Kristin Hill, AIA, is a registered architect and a managing principal of NELSON, an integrated services firm specializing in strategic planning, interior design, architecture, engineering, workplace services and information services. She can be reached at [khill@nelsononline.com](mailto:khill@nelsononline.com). For more information about NELSON, visit [www.nelsononline.com](http://www.nelsononline.com).*