



# Corporate Culture... Facts and Lessons Learned from Feathered Friends

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Corporate culture reflects the values, beliefs and attitudes that permeate a business. Corporate culture is often referred to as “the character of an organization” representing the collective behavior of people using common corporate vision, goals, shared values, attitudes, habits, working language, systems and symbols. Corporate culture is interwoven with processes, technologies, learning and significant events. It is a total sum of the values, customs, traditions and meanings that make a company unique.

Think of culture as an iceberg. Icebergs float on top of the water and are visible to the eye. Beneath the surface, the iceberg is significantly larger than what is visible above the waterline. As a metaphor for organizational culture, the tip of the iceberg is the visible culture including things such as dress code, work environment, benefits, titles and job descriptions, organizational charts, policies and procedures and formal processes. In looking beneath the surface, however, we find clues to “the ways things are really done around here” – norms, unwritten rules, attitudes, beliefs, shared assumptions, moods, emotions and unconscious interpretations. Often, what is above the surface is often not consistent with what lies below. It is what is beneath the surface that truly supports or inhibits organizational culture.

### Strong and Weak Cultures

A strong culture exists when employees respond to stimulus because of their alignment to organizational values. Strong cultures help firms operate like well-oiled machines cruising along with outstanding execution. Minor tweaking of existing procedures enhances performance. In thriving, profitable companies, employees embody the values, visions and strategic priorities of their company.

Research indicates that the strongest cultures embrace the importance of Kaizen, or continuing improvement. Kaizen cultures require both conscious and subconscious thinking about improvements from everyone.

Conversely, a weak culture exists when there is little alignment with organizational values and control must be exercised through extensive policies, procedures and bureaucracy. Signs of a weak culture include lack of trust, focus on problems, staff losing confidence in their leaders and systems, and people spending more time focusing on problems rather than opportunities.

### Research

Over the past eight years, Beyond Insurance has collected over 5,000 responses to its Beyond Insurance® Organic Growth Survey. One of the questions states “Our staff is enthusiastic and energized by our business model, systems and growth strategies.” 35% of the respondents “agree”; 6% are “uncertain” and 49% “disagree.” This simple question touches on the essence of corporate culture. High performing organic growth agencies “agree” to this question, while under performing agencies are “uncertain” or “disagree.”

We have concluded that organizational growth, profitability and agency value is maximized in an environment of enlightened leaders who create a culture of creativity and innovation. They inspire their staff to “think outside of the box” to develop value propositions which differ from their competitors. High performance, best practices agencies are winning the battle against commoditization as a result of their ability to uncover client issues and deliver cutting edge solutions. They go about their business with a sense of confidence, simplicity, purpose and passion.

### Merging Organizational Cultures

The biggest challenge in merging two or more companies is organizational culture. Every organization has its own unique culture and often, when brought together, these cultures clash. When mergers do not live up to expectations, it is usually issues such as identity, communication problems, human resource issues, ego clashes and inter-group conflicts – all which fall under the category of “cultural differences.” It is much more difficult to change a corporate culture once it has emerged than to create a culture from scratch.

Unsuccessful mergers and acquisitions are evidenced by fuzzy vision, bureaucracy, poor vertical communication, minimal cross functional collaboration and the lack of knowledge and idea management.

### Facts and Lessons Learned from Feathered Friends

In building a positive corporate culture, great insights are gained through the study of the migratory habits of geese. Anthropologist Angeles Arrien uncovered the following facts about how geese survive the long journey South in the Fall and North in the Spring. The facts of their migration translate into important lessons in how to enhance corporate culture.

#### **Fact #1:**

As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an “uplift” for the birds that follow. By flying in a “V” formation, the entire flock has 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

**Lesson:** People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the strength of each other.

#### **Fact #2:**

When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

**Lesson:** If we have as much sense as geese, we should stay in formation with those headed where we want to go.

#### **Fact #3:**

When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies at the point position. It takes advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

**Lesson:** It pays to take turns doing hard tasks and sharing leadership. Like geese, people are dependent on each other’s skills, capabilities, and unique arrangement of gifts, talents and resources.

#### **Fact #4:**

The geese flying in formation honk from behind to encourage those up in front to keep up their speed.

**Lesson:** We need to make sure that our honking from behind is encouraging and not something else. The power of encouragement is the quality of honking we seek.

**Fact #5:**

When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help or protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation to catch up with the flock.

**Lesson:** If we have as much sense as geese, we too will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.

About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America."

Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.