

Corporate Culture and Performance

By John P. Kotter, James L. Heskett

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Going far beyond previous empirical work, John Kotter and James Heskett provide the first comprehensive critical analysis of how the "culture" of a corporation powerfully influences its economic performance, for better or for worse. Through painstaking research at such firms as Hewlett-Packard, Xerox, ICI, Nissan, and First Chicago, as well as a quantitative study of the relationship between culture and performance in more than 200 companies, the authors describe how shared values and unwritten rules can profoundly enhance economic success or, conversely, lead to failure to adapt to changing markets and environments.

With penetrating insight, Kotter and Heskett trace the roots of both healthy and unhealthy cultures, demonstrating how easily the latter emerge, especially in firms which have experienced much past success. Challenging the widely held belief that "strong" corporate cultures create excellent business performance, Kotter and Heskett show that while many shared values and institutionalized practices can promote good performances in some instances, those cultures can also be characterized by arrogance, inward focus, and bureaucracy -- features that undermine an organization's ability to adapt to change. They also show that even "contextually or strategically appropriate" cultures -- ones that fit a firm's strategy and business context -- will not promote excellent performance over long periods of time unless they facilitate the adoption of strategies and practices that continuously respond to changing markets and new competitive environments.

Fundamental to the process of reversing unhealthy cultures and making them more adaptive, the authors assert, is effective leadership. At the heart of this groundbreaking book, Kotter and Heskett describe how executives in ten corporations established new visions, aligned and motivated their managers to provide leadership to serve their customers, employees, and stockholders, and thus created more externally focused and responsive cultures.

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Editorial Review

From Kirkus Reviews
An attention-grabbing audit by two Harvard Business School professors of the role that culture (broadly defined as the shared attitudes, behavioral patterns, and values that cohesive human groups pass on from one generation to the next) can play in the capacity of major corporations to succeed or fail in the marketplace. The accessible study compiled by Kotter and Heskett is noteworthy on several counts. For one thing, it is based on empirical rather than anecdotal evidence, gathered from a canvass of more than 200 blue-chip enterprises in 22 industries, covering an 11-year span through 1990. For another, the authors measure performance against such valid bench marks as annual growth in net income, average returns on invested capital, and appreciation in stock prices. Last but not least, they refuse to advance a one- size-fits-all theory. While willing to state that corporate culture can have a significant impact on a company's reported results over the longer term, Kotter and Heskett caution that there's as much art as science in evaluating its contribution. Indeed, they assert that cultures adequate for one economic context may prove disastrous in another--as can those identifiable as arrogant, bureaucratic, and/or insular. The authors point out, for example, that K mart's lack of a customer-service ethos cost it dearly in competition with Wal-Mart. What's really needed, they argue, is an adaptive culture that automatically aligns an organization's interests with those of employees, investors, patrons, and other key constituencies. Drawing on case studies from their four-year research program, Kotter and Heskett outline practical ways in which top-down direction can motivate corporate personnel to pursue this objective. Down-to-earth analyses and advisories from authors who grasp the substantive differences between leadership and management. The reader-friendly text has a wealth of helpful tabular material throughout. -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review
Michael H. Walsh President, Tenneco Inc. As one who's up to his neck in the challenge of making change in a mature, multi-billion dollar organization, I found this book to be immensely insightful and reinforcing.

Edgar H. Schein Massachusetts Institute of Technology A landmark research study and a truly remarkable book that must be on every CEO's and senior manager's essential reading list.

Nicholas J. Nicholas, Jr President and CEO Time Warner Inc. A substantial follow-up to the culture studies of the early 80s. The authors describe the characteristics of low and high performing corporate cultures and the arduous process required to migrate from the former to the latter. Compelling reading for all leaders concerned with renewing the vitality of their institutions.

Peter C. Browning Chairman and CEO, National Gypsum Company Excellent book! Sheds new light on the themes of leadership and culture and produces some surprising conclusions about how they do and do not contribute to successful organizations. A must read!

Walter R. Trosin Vice President, Merck & Co., Inc. Adds realism and fills in many blanks in earlier studies of corporate culture. It will have practical application at every level of the organization and will excite controversy, discussion and re-evaluation of the typical corporate succession planning and executive selection process.

Donald J. Schuenke Chairman and CEO, Northwestern Mutual Life To a corporate world that values strong

and strategic cultures, Kotter and Heskett bring another dimension--the need to guide positive culture change in the corporation. This book should challenge every corporate leader in America.

Thomas N. Urban Chairman and President, Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc. Having passed through five years of significant change in a sixty-five year old company, I found the dissection of the relationship between culture and performance fascinating. It will provide an intellectual framework for even more detailed analysis of specific situations.

John B. McCoy Chairman, Banc One Corporation A solid roadmap for understanding the roots of culture and the powerful influence it has on business.

Richard C. Bartlett President, Mary Kay Cosmetics, Inc. This book takes a long needed look at the lingering culture theories of the 80s and puts teeth in them. It is must reading for my competitors, or they'll soon be seeing a pink Cadillac gaining in their rearview mirrors!

About the Author
John P. Kotter is the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School. His most recent book is *A Force for Change*, (Free Press).

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Terry Holmes:

The actual book Corporate Culture and Performance has a lot of information on it. So when you read this book you can get a lot of profit. The book was written by the very famous author. This articles author makes some research prior to write this book. That book very easy to read you will get the point easily after reading this article book.

Jennifer Rogers:

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