Building a Customer-Driven Culture

What practical steps can leaders take to adapt company culture?
Stephen Ingledew, Managing Director for Customer & Marketing at Standard Life, explains what he's done to shift the long-term savings and investment business

Culture affects everything, every part of the business, everything we do. In today's technology and consumer-driven world, the commercial winners will be those who can create a customer-focused culture.

To achieve this it means it moving away from the traditional top-down form of leadership that has dominated financial services for many decades. There are many aspects involved in this, three of which I highlight here:

1. Leadership

Leadership in the context of culture is not about getting up on a soapbox and saying 'follow me'. It's about mobilising the organisation around the driving force of customer needs and going with them. Leaders have to empower teams by creating the right environment.

At Standard Life, we are breaking down our over-arching purpose into numerous smaller ones so that teams can bring >

about change in a more tangible bite-sized way, rather than having a two year change programme that has to be done across the whole organisation.

For example, we found it difficult to make a breakthrough in customer experience, so we created a small cross-functional team, they called themselves – Team K – to focus on the employee and customer experience. They were in the same building but created a different environment. They changed how they worked, when they worked and the working environment, including what they wore so they operated more like a retail-orientated business.

We also set up Team Novo to drive decision making through data analytics rather than merely using data as a form of historical reporting. Employees from technology, operations, finance, sales and marketing are all on this team; they now co-create how data will be used across the business.

Genuine collaboration across the business is required; this cannot be solely a marketing exercise. Each cross-functional or co-located team must be unified by a common language and purpose.

2) Measurement

It's important to show the evidence base for change so decisions are based on real data rather than being subjective. In other words, let the numbers do the talking.

Make key customer metrics very visible, and ensure they are shared throughout the organisation alongside financial performance. In this respect data visualisation is key as it enables

the facts and figures to be 'democratised' across the organisation

This means going beyond stating how many customers have joined and left. It's also about measuring the type of experience customers have, how easy it is for customers to engage, how quickly a customer issue is resolved and, of course, their level of advocacy.

A range of metrics on a regular basis means colleagues across the organisation are more likely to relate their role directly to the customer. Colleagues then become advocates too.

3) Entrepreneurship

Encouraging entrepreneurship through innovation and disruption can have huge benefits.

In order for this to happen, you need to move away from the heavy handed bureaucracy that can sometimes control large organisations. Break the traditional mould.

Set up and empower cross-functional teams that adopt an agile 'test, fail, learn and scale' way of working. Embrace a start-up culture geared towards implementing new ideas, testing, refining and iterating continually, all aligned behind the organisations over-arching purpose.

At Standard Life we used technology to automate a lot of communication work, releasing talented individuals from doing more mundane tasks. At the same time, clients needed more bespoke communications, so the supply and demand for something new and different was there.

This enabled the team to set itself up in a different way, creating a new revenue stream for the business as a start-up communications consultancy, which we called 56 Degrees. The team had been running for a few months before the new enterprise was explained to other executives. By that time, we were making a six figure revenue from our new service

Future businesses will succeed not solely because of their products or services but because the leaders have built a user-friendly environment for colleagues who want to learn, share, converse and shape how customer needs are met.

The right leadership, measurement and entrepreneurial spirit will be pivotal in evolving to a customer-driven culture. ■

Stephen Ingledew was a speaker at Criticaleye's 2016 CEO Retreat, in association with Accenture and Warren Partners. Click here to find out more

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Stephen joined Standard life in 2007 and is currently Managing Director of Customer and Marketing. His role is to establish the company as a leading customer brand for life savings. Since joining the company, he has held several executive roles in sales, strategy and marketing.

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