

Implementing a Learning Culture

By Jeff Peevy, AMAM
AMi President



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In the automotive repair industry, we continue to see a growing awareness of the importance of business culture. This is an important step in any industry or business within it and especially for the leadership that guides it. If you are a business owner or manager, it is important to recognize and understand the basics of business culture and your role in it. An increased awareness of culture in general, helps us better understand each other and ultimately appreciate the diversity and wisdom that exists in the world and our businesses.

There are many attempts to define culture, but for this discussion, I believe the definition from Marcia Connor and James Clawson, authors of the book, "Creating a Learning Culture", says "*Culture can be defined as a pattern of learned assumptions that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to the problems of survival and integration.*" Those who have read articles I have written over the years on this topic, will see me refer to this definition of culture often, as I believe it helps define the accepted beliefs or "learned assumptions" that exist and are promoted within businesses. Anyone that has worked in or been closely associated with multiple repair businesses will experience different perspectives on how the business should operate. These perceptions on how their business should run is based on a pattern of assumptions that have become established as the way things are and how to deal with them.

In the past, I have referenced studies, where repair businesses had similar square footage, number of employees and equipment, yet output and profitability were very different. As my personal awareness of culture increased, it became clear that the differences within these businesses came down to their culture. With a heightened level of cultural awareness, it becomes clear these learned assumptions dictate everything about a business. Its productivity, employee retention, level of optimism, or lack of it and most importantly its ability to compete.

Where does business culture start?

Directly put, business culture starts with leadership. It can't be changed overnight, but starts by realizing it exists and founded on a pattern of assumptions. Since staff take their cues from the leadership of their employer, owners and managers must accept they own the culture within their business. This means they also have the ability to start the process of testing and changing "their" culture and at least work to integrate better, more grounded assumptions. As one begins to take an honest look at the culture within their business, it becomes an exercise in personal reflection and examination.

Two important elements within a culture

A business' culture is a mixture of many elements, but there are two interwoven elements that everyone should want. They are open accountability and willingness to learn. These two, I have concluded are the bedrock of good culture, business and otherwise.

- Open accountability is tied closely with trustworthiness and sets the stage for owning the output of someone's role and responsibility. When leadership openly accepts the next level of responsibility, they become accountable and recognize the end result of what they are responsible for is everything. They display a mindset that corrects mistakes honestly and openly and sees a need to constantly learn in order to be the very best they can be, because learning improves output. As leaders, open accountability is infectious in very positive ways and should be sought and encouraged throughout a business' staff.
- Willingness to learn sets the stage for continued growth. It is impossible to separate learning and growing, as they represent a natural process, we are born with, but typically disrupt as we get older, due to adult ego and perception we should already know everything. I refer to a group who has a willingness to learn and share knowledge as having a learning culture.

How to implement accountability and learning into your culture

The following steps may seem to be an over simplification to the task of implementing the learning culture into your business' overall culture, but it isn't. The challenge is maintaining the patience, persistence and determination to slowly recognize and change learned assumptions, putting learning and sharing of knowledge at the forefront of your operation.

1. **Establish Open Accountability** - As a leader, establish open, personal accountability. Remember accountability is the output of our responsibilities and we need to openly accept it. Lead by example. When mistakes are made, "own" them and discuss openly what was learned and solutions that were identified. Since staff follow leadership examples, they will begin to do the same. Reinforce personal accountability as a positive thing. When someone takes personal responsibility, they will naturally see the need to learn all they can to ensure their output is accurate.
2. **Share a Vision** – Ideally, a vision of what a company should be, will be co-created by the staff, in order to get full buy-in. However, it isn't always practical and in some instances a bit awkward for some staff members. The next best thing is for leadership to develop a vision of the company and then share it, taking the time to explain it and discuss openly. While painting this vision, it is important to emphasize the importance of learning and sharing knowledge in order to achieve the vision and why achieving it will be good for everyone.
3. **Create a Learning Expectation** - The message is simple, "learning is the only source of a sustainable competitive advantage" and maintaining a competitive advantage in the business you own or work in is key to success. In a business, everyone must develop an understanding of the role learning plays and accept it. This starts by making sure everyone understands it is OK to admit you don't know something and become comfortable talking about things they learn, whether in a classroom, a magazine article or a mistake. As mentioned earlier, we are born curious and full of the desire to learn, but adulthood often causes us to believe we must know everything and so we mask our knowledge deficits. Make it clear learning is expected and should be talked openly about. A good example is when sending an employee to training. Prior to the class, task the individual with bringing back what they learned and be ready to discuss. This leads to the next step.
4. **Develop a Knowledge Sharing Expectation** – Things known and learned are maximized when the environment worked in expects knowledge sharing. As a leader though, this step requires managing and can test staff relationships if an employee with a "know-it-all" attitude is allowed to stay. Sharing knowledge is expected, but accepting knowledge shared really requires team chemistry, so getting and keeping the right employees demands careful though with this requirement in mind.

5. **Hire to Maintain the Learning Culture** – Once the learning culture begins to develop, hiring the wrong person can bring a halt to progress. We learned that exposing the learning culture in help-wanted ads, helps. Simply express the learning and knowledge sharing expectation in the very beginning. Too many ads read the same and typically attracts the same individuals. Our studies revealed placing the learning and knowledge sharing expectation in ads attracted an individual who had more certifications and training than the average applicant. Over half stated they responded to the ad because of the expectations, which they embraced.

This process works in all small businesses, but especially in automotive repair businesses. Though the changes may seem small, the long-term results are not. A business with a well established learning culture maximizes everything thing the business does, from embracing new SOPs, to getting the highest ROI on new equipment, to repair accuracy and efficiency on the latest vehicle technology. David Leuhr, author of the new book, "The Secrets of America's Greatest Body Shops" states, *"Over the years working with high-performing clients and many of the shops featured in The Secrets of America's Greatest Body Shops, I found the folks running these shops to possess an interesting attitude when it comes to learning. These successful shop leaders approached continuous improvement with an enthusiastic curiosity toward those skills or competencies they didn't already possess instead of being paralyzed by their lack of it. If I could scream one thing at the top of my lungs from atop the highest mountain, it would be this... "Do not limit the majesty of your dreams to your current level of competence. Know that all the education you need will be available along your journey." Shops need to make learning and applying new skills a priority or they will quickly be left behind; anyone can do this!*

From my experience studying shops and their operations, the one thing that was the true differentiator in performance was whether they openly embraced, encouraged and expected learning daily. Their level of curiosity drove a commitment to learn and that kept them ahead of the game.