

Social consciousness + Authentic culture = Conscious culture

How do we successfully reconcile the rise of social consciousness with employee benefits and the corporate culture in our organizations?

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Our workplaces and organizations are replete with buzzwords, technical terms, and sometimes seemingly complicated ideas. Incorporating employees (current and new entrants into the world of work), their talents and their needs within this framework is no small feat. It's a tough space for anybody working in the traditional HR and rewards space (or human wellness, or human capital, or whichever name for the department you settled on after a long debate about what you actually should be called...). Getting the “stuff” we do on a day-to-day basis to actually cohere with the bigger picture - or at least some bigger picture - of the company can be challenging.

There's the daily grind, pressure and expectations from everyone that HR should fix it - whatever definition of “it” may be at that moment. Then adding into the mix exciting concepts like **generational theory** or **employee wellness**, which may stimulate your thinking but may be a bit difficult to implement practically.

The aim of this article is to present a few ideas in a simplified and user-friendly manner, keeping the jargon to 'n minimum. Think of this article as a thoughtful conversation: the purpose not being to provide an all-encompassing “silver bullet” solution, but rather removing the clutter, stimulating fresh perspectives, and hopefully getting some of those ideas into action!

Setting the tone for the “Conscious Culture”.

A Conscious Culture is a culture built on purpose. Prior to embarking on the process to incorporate and nurture strategies to achieve a successful balance between social consciousness, benefits and corporate culture, one needs to consider the source at a macro level: **The Company**.

Two basic, yet fundamental truths to reflect on when preparing for your approach include the following:

1. Companies are organized.

Any company is organized in a certain way. This may sound a bit redundant, but it is critical to fully acknowledge this notion when it comes to employee offerings:

When people move into a new house, a huge amount of energy is spent on organizing the new space to meet their needs: finding the **best fit**, the **optimal use**, the **best arrangement**. We do this spontaneously at first; and then we tend to lose the energy to continue organizing. We find a status quo, a sort of “energy bargain” with our environment. We soon live in this organized living space, whereafter, given enough time, this set organization becomes almost invisible to us. We don't see it anymore; we just continue to live within and around it. It usually takes someone NOT living there to notice how the space is organized: *“What a beautiful painting – this says a lot about you and your taste!”*. In that moment, you are consciously aware of how your space is organized.

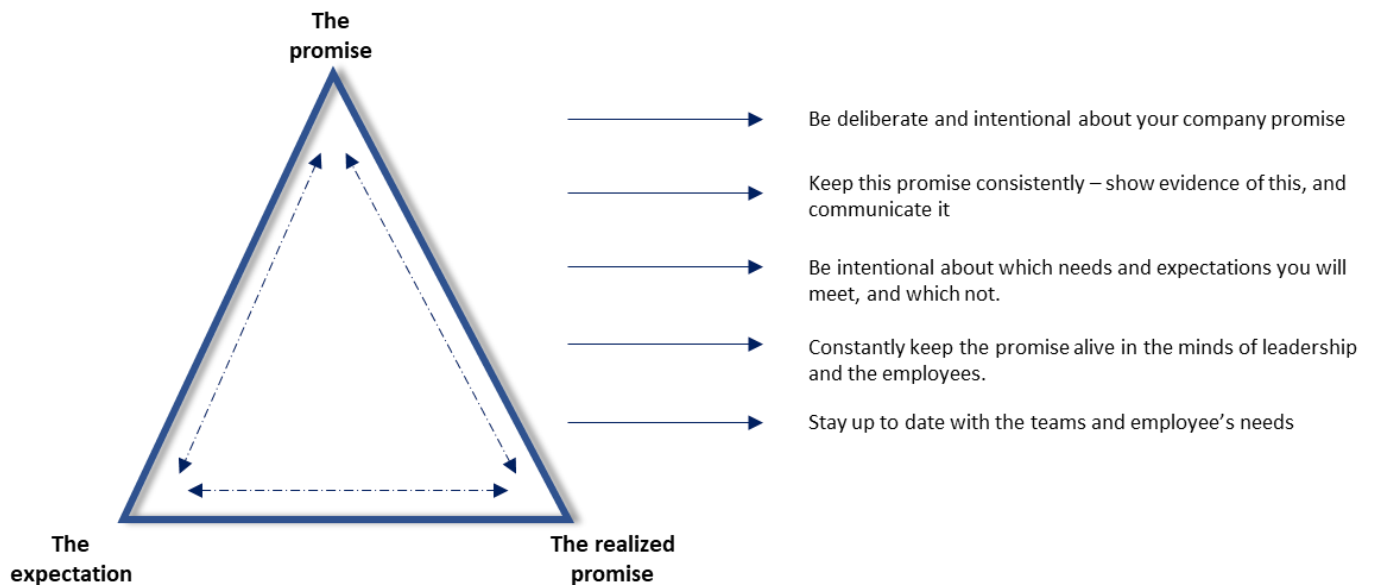
The way in which the company is organized says a lot too: about its history, its development, its stance on social matters and most importantly about its leadership. This organization reflects the company preferences, quirks, mental models and, to an extent, the character of those with the most power to change things: leadership.

2. Company organization creates expectation and promise.

The way things are organized at a company creates an **expectation with** and a **promise to** the employees. How things are organized guide new employees to make predictions about what they can expect (and also what not to expect). It also navigates current employee expectations about their company and its culture.

And here’s the golden nugget: Employees are, and have always been, very sensitive to that promise the company makes at the beginning of employment and whether that promise is realized as they continue with their employment tenure.

The secret lies in matching up **the initial company promise, the employee’s expectation and the realized promise.**



Make them believe.

In the 2023 State of HR report from the HR Exchange network, it was highlighted that the workplace transformation was well underway. *“In this environment, HR must be positioned as a strategic function with laser focus on transforming culture, creating an employee experience, reinforcing retention, and developing leadership in order for any organization to succeed.”* - Sebastien Girard, Chief People Officer at Centura Health.

With a greater sense of social awareness ingrained in younger generations, the emergence of call-out culture on social media and the role of diversity of thought, it becomes even more crucial to support initiatives to deliver on the Company’s initial promise – especially with GenZ’s entering the workplace. HR needs to maintain their agility in moving from transactional to strategic in support of this.

Consider the following principles when strategizing around employee benefit offerings and culture within the framework of the rising social consciousness:

- **The power of the individual is growing.** With millennials and Gen Zs at the forefront, people are actively questioning the core premises of corporate behavior and the economic and social principles that guide it. The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey indicated that many Gen Zs and millennials are willing to turn down jobs and assignments which don't align with their values – this is particularly true for those in leadership positions. The concept of *“Walk the talk”* has become far more significant, and companies need to ensure this is evident in their overall people strategy.

- **Stop normalizing the grind.** The increase in burnout among employees remains a concern today. Flexible working arrangements are evident across various businesses and companies are pushing the envelope of traditional thinking around the way we work. However, this has resulted in the challenge of drawing clear boundaries regarding when the working day starts and ends. Be creative and encourage flexibility, but also be cautious of blurring the home / work balance.

- **Wellness VS Wellbeing.** Very often, wellness programs tend to have a limited focus or consist of one-time endeavors such as health screenings. In comparison with wellness, many definitions of well-being are more holistic. It is essential for organizations to expand the scope of well-being programs to go beyond just physical health, looking at an employee as “a whole person” and not just aspects that relate to the company.

- **Personalized, agile and holistic rewards.** Determine and offer benefits and rewards that employees truly value. Consider that employees may value different benefits at different stages in their life cycle, and how this could provide an opportunity for rewards teams to be innovative in compensation and benefit offerings.

- **Prioritizing sustainable choices and environmental action by employers:** Protecting the environment remains a top priority for Gen Zs and millennials. About three quarters of respondents in the Deloitte survey believe that the world is at a tipping point in responding to climate change, but less than half are optimistic that efforts to protect the planet will be successful. Being viewed as a responsible corporate citizen is a significant factor when evaluating potential employers. Be visible in your leadership intent when it comes to matters of sustainability and environment.

- **Build a culture of continuous learning:** The very definition of a career as a mere job has changed. In social enterprises, careers will have a series of developmental experiences, offering employees the opportunity to learn a variety of new skills. HR teams have an opportunity to be creative and play a key role in designing programs that equip the workforce with the skills of the future.

- **Diversity of thought:** This is the range of mindsets, perspectives, and thought processes that are found within the workforce. Nobel Prize winner Richard Thaler touches on this in an interview with McKinsey on debiasing the corporation. *“There’s lots of talk about diversity these days,”* says Thaler. *“We tend to think about that in terms of things like racial diversity and gender diversity and ethnic diversity. Those things are*

*all important. **But it's also important to have diversity in how people think.***" When we listen to and respect other people's thoughts and ideas, we can learn new things and make better decisions together.

- **Opportunities to work beyond retirement:** More than a quarter of Gen Zs (26%) and millennials (31%) are not confident they will be able to retire comfortably. Further to this, proposals around accommodating older workers within companies remain relevant. The older generation represents a proven, committed, and diverse set of workers who can become a valuable resource for training and mentoring. With the changing composition of the workforce, HR needs to get involved in conversations around their talent management approaches to different emerging workforce models across the ecosystem (i.e. using contingent workers, contractors, and freelancers).

The world of work has, and still is, changing at a rapid pace. No organization can possibly meet everybody's expectations and changing needs. We have to be realistic but still intentional about the way we do things at work. The most important thing is to be **authentic** in what is offered by companies today: stay on top of your promise, as well as the employee expectations and their actual experience of that promise. It seems that the alternative can become quite expensive in the long run.

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