CULTURE - It could mean the difference between success and failure.

What is culture?

It's how you feel when you walk in the front door and interact with the people.

It's the electricity in the air; the vibe you get from being serviced in a unique way that makes you feel like royalty; the mood and attitude that sets the tone for the workplace, which is in harmony with how its people feel in their heart-of-hearts.

Peter Drucker famously said: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

The premise held by Drucker is that a company's culture will trump any effort by a management team to enforce a strategy that is incompatible with that culture. In the end, it's culture that wins.

When leaders get it right, it's like catching lightning in a bottle. It becomes one of the most treasured elements to transform the employee experience from one that drains and discourages, to one that energizes and empowers.

Ensuring that culture is upheld - its beliefs, behaviours, purpose, and values - falls squarely on the shoulders of senior leaders as "caretakers of culture". They advocate the company's identity and protect its culture for competitive advantage.

They are caretakers of the people that make up the culture -- its employees, who then are held responsible for living out the principles that hold the culture together.

But what makes these "caretakers of the culture" stand out?

1. Invite feedback.

It takes humility, an open mind, and a lot of active listening with employees' interests in mind to be open to feedback. As caretakers of the culture, good leaders will ask peers and respected high-performers the tough question, "How am I doing as a leader?" And then they listen. They are truly interested in receiving honest feedback so they can grow themselves and others.

2. Play for the team.

Leaders that forge ahead with a win-at-all-costs agenda at the benefit of some and expense of others will quickly create silos, alienate people, and lose respect of the whole. Caretakers of great company cultures don't seek the glory or take the credit; they empower their people to brainstorm solutions that add value and benefit the whole team and give them all the glory after a great effort.

3. It doesn't happen without trust.

Leaders championing a company's culture need to ask a very important question: "Does my behaviour increase trust?" If you want to ensure your culture is safe and its common set of values are held tightly without being violated, trust is a non-negotiable pillar that every person -- leaders, employees, and other stakeholders alike -- should stand on.

4. Selfless leaders that serve the culture.

A leader who operates with a primary emphasis on self-interest naturally views other people as a means to that end. You cannot be a true leader if you operate at that level of consciousness. Selfless does not mean eradicating the ego...it is about harnessing the ego in healthy ways. As the Dalai Lama has said, '[W]e must make sure it is a *serving* ego and not a *deserving* ego.'

5. Foster vulnerability across the organisation.

Creating a space in which people can feel vulnerable means a person can walk into their boss's office to admit a mistake without fear of losing their job. It means someone can raise their hand and ask for help, admit they have been given a responsibility they don't feel prepared or knowledgeable enough to complete, or admit they are scared without any fear of humiliation or retribution. In contrast, in a work environment that lacks good servant leaders, people will go out of their way to follow the rules at all costs, cover up mistakes, and deny accountability.

6. Firmly believe in their people.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine in one of the lowest points of his career, Apple founder Steve Jobs once said: "What's important is that you have a faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them the tools, they'll do wonderful things with them." As Jobs evolved as a leader, he demonstrated increasing faith in his employees. As caretakers of the culture, you adopt a "trust first" mindset before trust is earned because you accept and believe in your employees' abilities to use their brains and talents to create and innovate.

7. Create trust

The culture of any entity is its internal attitude, a successful culture breeds trust, a trust that can be displayed both internally and externally. Then following on from this is the reputation a company builds up. It may take many years for a culture to be demonstrated in reputation, but a failure of culture can destroy a reputation. As Warren Buffet once said; '*it can take 25 years to build a reputation but 5 minutes to destroy it.*'