

Culture From Where?

“Do you wanna dance, and hold my hand? Tell me I’m your lover man? Oh, baby, do you want to dance?” Familiar enough, the Bobby Freeman hit tune sounded discordant here on a Saturday summer morning in the bowels of the Evansville Country Club caddy shack in 1964.

Jimmy, the acappela singer, must’ve been 19. He had longish black hair slicked back with grease, the pack of Marlboros popped off his muscled bicep where it was trapped by the upturned sleeve of his tight-fitting white T-shirt. The cart’s tires screeched loudly as it slammed to a stop and Jimmy jumped off.

Jimmy glared at the group of us youngsters sitting passively on the bench waiting to get out. The wide smile flashed his big silver tooth---it was disconcerting, threatening. We looked away, this way, that way, up at the sky, down at the asphalt, any way but at him. His cracking falsetto invited giggles and ridicule, so too did his little soft shoe routine. But there was none of that. We all knew Jimmy was dangerous, and catching his attention was not going to turn out good.

Jimmy and a handful of other guys dominated life at the caddy shack. That life had clear norms and cultural rules, things we all knew you should and shouldn’t do if you wanted to survive as a caddy. You did what the older guys told you, from benign tasks like driving a cart back to the cart barn, to running down to the halfway house and fetching a grilled hot dog with mustard and relish, to sitting in that crooked poker game in the back of the barn and gambling your day’s pay before going home. Like never ratting on another caddy even when he is cheating for his golfer by kicking the ball, like never complaining to the caddy master about your golfer no matter how he treated you, like never talking about your family or home life, let alone your sister.

The norms of the caddy shack were strongly enforced. We all knew that defying them could lead the other caddies to not cooperate while on the job, never getting out on a bag at all, or complete expulsion from the shack and the associated loss of income. Even violence. Yes, violence--small and large, episodic and repeated. Guys like Jimmy rarely resorted to violence at the caddy shack, they didn’t need to.

Yet the culture of the caddy shack reflected who we were and where we came from, it was raw, it was street, it was working class. The language was vulgar and obscene. We took chances when we got them because we often didn’t get them.

The caddy master knew all this, because he came from our ranks. So too did the club pro. Maybe some members did, but most them just didn’t care enough to be bothered. The executive director of the club? I doubt it. Same with most of his staff.

The culture of the caddy shack was what is often called a “bottom up” culture. It emerged organically from us at the bottom of the organization, and we enforced it. While the example may seem extreme, the process is not. It is not even rare. To some extent, every organization has cultural elements that emerged from the bottom up. For example, large city police forces often operate with rigid hierarchical cultures dictating much of a police officer’s behavior, but there is also often a widespread unwritten norm known as the “blue wall of silence,” which prevents an officer from reporting the errors, misdeeds and crimes of other officers. There are also plenty of successful organizations with cultures that consist primarily of bottom-up norms. In its early days, for example, Google encouraged open expression by its staff, especially the engineers; when there was a consensus, these discussions turned into practices and then norms.

What’s the alternative? At the other end of the spectrum, we sometimes see a culture designed and imposed by the owner, founder, CEO or other top leader of the organization. That apparently was the case at Cypress Semiconductor, a Silicon Valley company that defied the odds in successfully making microprocessors for decades in competing with corporate giants. The strong culture at Cypress was developed by its founders. As ex-CEO T. J. Rodgers tells it, “In the early days, the six founders had long discussions, often late into the night, about what this company should stand for. How should we treat our customers? How should we treat our people? How should we hold ourselves accountable for performance? In short, what are our corporate values?”¹ Cypress was dominated for decades by the ever-present headstrong Rodgers, who personally exemplified its “tough as nails” culture and bragged about micromanaging details like purchase orders. I don’t think you can call the Cypress culture in T.J.’s reign anything other than “top down.”

Some managers adopt a hybrid approach to defining the culture, using elements of both the top-down and bottom-up processes. Founder and CEO Tony Hsieh of Zappos did this in elaborate fashion. He started by reviewing his evaluations of various employees but then realized that he needed input from others in the organization. As he describes it:

“I thought about all the employees I wanted to clone because they represented the Zappos culture well, and tried to figure out what values they personified. I also thought about all the employees and ex-employees who were not culture fits, and tried to figure out where there was a values disconnect.

As I started creating the list, I realized that I needed to get everyone’s input on what our core values should be.

¹ Quoted from page 6 of T.J. Rodgers, William Taylor and Rick Foreman, No Excuses Management. New York: Currency Doubleday. 1992.

Over the course of a year, I emailed the entire company several times and got a lot of suggestions and feedback on which core values were the most important to our employees.”²

That’s right. Hsieh took a full year--12 months--to generate, vet and finalize the Zappos cultural statement of core values. The process was driven from the top by him, but it relied heavily on ideas and suggestions and feedback from people all over the firm, including at the bottom of the hierarchy.

So, which way is best, bottom up or top down? As the examples illustrate, both approaches can be effective. That makes the question more or less moot. I should point out, however, that the agentic nature of choice implied by the question may be misleading.

There are social contexts where one or the other approach may be the wiser choice, or even almost mandated. Professionals like doctors or lawyers chafe at the prospect of being told what to do, attempting to impose a top-down cultural regime on them likely will lead nowhere good.

The institutional environment also matters, and it can change over time. One of the more dramatic shifts in my lifetime concerns leading and coaching sports teams. In my youth, head coaches dictated unilaterally how their teams trained, played and behaved. Think of Woody Hayes or Bobby Knight. Today, the most effective coaches regularly consult---some would even say coddle---their players on all manner of things involving playing and living. Think of Phil Jackson or Steve Kerr. That institutional change is most visible to us in the professional sports leagues but it has in fact permeated sports coaching at all levels in the US.

By Glenn R. Carroll
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² Quoted from Tony Hsieh, “How Zappos Infuses Culture Using Core Values,” Harvard Business Review, May 24, 2010. Accessible at : <https://hbr.org/2010/05/how-zappos-infuses-culture-using-core-values>