

How to Grow a VEO

What's a VEO, and why do you need to build one?

By Joanne G. Sujansky

Your organization's culture tends to get neglected when times are tough. But your culture is the very place you should be focusing your energies. To survive and flourish, you must create the kind of environment that not only attracts the most talented people, but frees and nurtures their inner entrepreneur. We call such a culture the *vibrant entrepreneurial organization*, or VEO.

So what does a vibrant entrepreneurial organization look like? Here are five steps to creating such an organization:

1. Share the "big picture" so people will take risks and hold themselves accountable.

A VEO is completely transparent. There are no secrets. Employees know beyond the shadow of a doubt where the organization is now, where it wants to go, and what values will take it there. If employees don't have the big picture — in terms of the quintessential vision and in terms of day-to-day projects — how can they take the right kinds of risks?

Without risk there can be no significant gain. In an entrepreneurial culture, people know that you trust them to take measured risks, risks calculated to advance your organization's vision. When people are free to take risks, they're likely to explore possibilities and find unexpected solutions. They "own" these solutions, and will hold themselves accountable. If you force them into a rigid mold, they'll hold you accountable for the outcome, since you "made" them do it that way.

To inspire risk-taking in your employees, take risks yourself. In this way you model the creative spirit you want them to embrace. Tell them you expect them to take well-thought-out risks and own the results. Encourage and reward



confrontations and questions, as they are part of the process.

2. Exemplify the new face of loyalty.

You've probably heard that employee loyalty is dead. And if you're referring to the toe-the-line-for-30-years-and-retire-with-a-gold-watch mentality of yesteryear, it is indeed dead. Most employees (the ones worth keeping) aren't looking just for a place to go, put in their time, and collect a paycheck. They want challenging, meaningful, enriching work. In return, they look for ways to build and improve their organization's future. If they're viewed as a commodity that can easily be replaced, they'll look elsewhere for opportunities.

Leaders in entrepreneurial cultures look beyond the lukewarm, overused goal of "employee satisfaction." They seek to challenge, inspire, and develop their staff, creating ways for people to use their unique talents to advance the organization's vision. They help

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people get the resources and support they need to accomplish their goals. They provide opportunities for employees to grow and develop and become more marketable.

People tend to give more loyalty to organizations that view them as complete human beings. Sure, salary matters. But a healthy work-life balance means as much, and, to some, even more. Employees want to know that you value their personal life as well as what they bring to the organization. Provide opportunities for them to balance their work and personal lives. If you're a true leader, you'll model such behavior yourself. Find ways to build and maintain your own resilience. Not only will this keep you from burning out, it will alleviate the subtle pressure others may feel to put in unproductive "face time" to keep up with you.

3. Support high productivity while minimizing stress.

Scarce resources have created workplaces marked by chronic anxiety and chaos. People are stretched to the breaking point. Their days are stressful and fragmented. They look busy and seem to be working at almost superhuman speed and intensity. Though this may seem like a good thing, it is actually harmful. When stress rises, mistakes increase, opportunities are lost, and productivity declines. People become physically ill and start missing days. Such environments are highly destructive, counterproductive, and unsuited for the quick response times necessary in today's environment.

Don't confuse activity with progress. Just because there's a lot going on doesn't mean things are getting done. People must be given specific, challenging, yet attainable outcomes they're expected to meet. Put systems in place for

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measuring productivity, and live by them. Remember that what gets measured gets done, and make certain that what you're measuring really matters. Create policies that ensure that the "urgent" doesn't take precedence over the "important," and do everything you can to eliminate redundancies and unnecessary busy work. Establish ongoing and final evaluative processes so people can get feedback.

But don't limit feedback to formal evaluations. Give it on the spot. You should tell people in real time what they're doing wrong so they can correct it, but it's even more important to tell them what they're doing right. That's spontaneous coaching, and it's one of the most crucial elements of an entrepreneurial culture.

4. Build a winning tradition.

Success breeds more success. People who become accustomed to winning want to keep on winning. Indeed, losing becomes unacceptable. Winners take losing personally and will do whatever they must do to avoid it. This is a reality of human nature and one that serves entrepreneurial cultures well.

Create a cycle of winning by seeking out and hiring only the best people. Hire for raw talent and values and character, not just for skill sets. You can teach people the skills they need, but you *can't* always teach work ethic or integrity or optimism. Consider using proven selection tools and assessments to ensure that you hire the right people for your culture. Find ways to "keep the keepers." It's difficult and expensive to attract new talent. Likewise, get rid of people who aren't contributing, as they will hamper progress and destroy the morale of your high performers.

When your organization is made up of winners, it will be unstoppable. And that, in turn, will attract more winners to your organization.

5. Elevate communication to an art form.

In a VEO, communication goes far beyond sending out e-mails at the right time or holding employee forums on critical issues (although these tools may well be valuable for your organization). VEO leaders make sure people understand and buy into major change initiatives. After all, real change is always voluntary.

VEO leaders also take steps to assure that employees make their voices heard. People on *both* sides of the leadership desk care enough to share their heartfelt viewpoints, not just exchange information.

How you communicate your culture to employees has a strong and unbreakable connection to employee retention. Employee satisfaction surveys bear this out. The number-one concern voiced by employees isn't about salary; it's about feeling included in the organization. People want to know what's going on at every level. They want to feel like they're a part of it all. They want to see the value in what they do. Communication is how you provide that sense of participation and accountability, which leads to increased job satisfaction, which leads to productivity, which leads to employee retention.

When you realize that buy-in can't exist till people are really, truly informed, you'll start to view communication as an *individual* issue, not a *group* issue. Consider the communication style of each person (here's where personality assessments pay off), and tailor conversations accordingly. This is especially important when you're talking to people of different races and cultural backgrounds. Look for opportunities for mutual, two-way communication. Ask for feedback, and make sure your demeanor invites it. If the information is critical, communicate it at least four times — for instance, via an organization-wide announcement, an e-mail, a

personal conversation, and a follow-up memo. When something really matters, you can't say it too many times.

Better than the Best Idea

No matter how brilliant an idea or innovation may be, if your people don't have the drive, the commitment, and the dedication to nurture it and bring it to fruition, you might as well not bother. There will always be a competitor who can take your idea and do it cheaper, faster, better.

What your competition *can't* replicate is your culture. If you have an organization full of passionate, dedicated people, you have an endless source of brilliant ideas. Your employees have a stake in your organization that goes beyond grabbing the next paycheck. They're committed to your vision. They engage customers. They enthusiastically showcase your brand. Everyone wants to be a part of what you have. You have an entire organization full of vibrant entrepreneurs—and *that's* the key to success. ■

Culture Tools to Power Your Organization

For more details on creating a vibrant, entrepreneurial culture in your organization, see these *Nonprofit World* articles, available at www.snpo.org/members:

Regular People, Spectacular Results, Vol. 23, No. 4

How to Hire the Right Person the First Time, Vol. 21, No. 2

Take the Gamble out of Hiring with Assessments, Vol. 25, No. 4

Easing Stress in the Workplace, Vol. 25, No. 4

How to Ignite Entrepreneurial Spirit in Your Organization, Vol. 20, No. 5

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