

It's All About Culture — A Company's Distinctive Habits, Customs, Beliefs, Practices, Rewards and Values, with Henry S. Givray



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It's all about culture — a company's distinctive habits, customs, beliefs, practices, rewards and values. Culture shapes behavior. Culture cannot be legislated. But if an authentic culture that guides and inspires can be articulated, aligned, nurtured and preserved, it will mean the difference between having a good year and achieving sustainable success, vitality and long-term endurance regardless of inevitable up and down economic cycles or unpredictable shocks to an industry. Defining and protecting the right culture starts with the CEO who also serves as its most important teacher and role model.

Henry S. Givray is Chairman and former CEO of SmithBucklin, the association management and services company more organizations turn to than any other. The company offers full-service management and outsourced services to trade and professional associations, technology user communities, industry consortia and corporations. Henry served as SmithBucklin President & CEO from August 2002 through December 2015. He previously worked for the company between 1983 and 1996, having served as chief staff executive for multiple client associations in addition to handling other corporate responsibilities. During Henry's 13 years as CEO, SmithBucklin achieved unprecedented success in its 60-plus year history including client satisfaction and retention, employee engagement, company growth and financial performance. Fulfilling his vision and dream to make SmithBucklin a 100-percent-employee-owned company, Henry led the transfer of the company's ownership from its financial investors to its more than 700 employees in 2005. The SmithBucklin Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) allows every employee, regardless of position, tenure or compensation, an equal opportunity to acquire ownership in the company. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to serve others. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and top national news media. He is regularly invited to speak at association conferences, corporate meetings and educational forums. One of Henry's most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings. The SmithBucklin Leadership Institute is for board members from client associations. Leadership's Calling® is for the business and professional communities at-large and includes a selected few top-performing SmithBucklin employees. In 2018, Henry was inducted into the prestigious Events Industry Council Hall of Leaders. In 2013, he was named the TSNN Industry Icon Award honoree by Trade Show News Network. Henry was honored with the 2008 Samuel B. Shapiro Award by the Association Forum of Chicagoland. The award is the Forum's highest honor and is presented each year to a chief executive officer for his or her outstanding service and accomplishments. He was selected as one of the 18 Best Bosses for

2006 by Winning Workplaces, a national non-profit with the mission of helping leaders of small and midsize organizations create great workplaces. Also in 2006, the Destination Marketing Association International Foundation honored Henry and SmithBucklin with the prestigious Spirit of Hospitality Award, which is widely regarded as one of the highest honors in the hospitality industry. Tradeshow Week named Henry as one of the 100 most influential people in the trade show business in its October 2, 2006 edition. Prior to rejoining SmithBucklin as CEO, Henry served as chairman, president and CEO of CourtLink Corporation, an online service for retrieving court records and electronically filing legal documents to and from our nation's courts. He also earlier served as president and COO of Giga Information Group, an IT services company founded by Gideon Gartner, founder and former chairman of The Gartner Group. Henry holds an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago and both a B.S. and M.E. in operations research from Cornell University.

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Thank you so much for joining us Henry! Can you tell us the story about what brought you to this specific career path?

My mother was an accomplished pianist and teacher; my dad a multi-talented and skilled portrait photographer. Both were artists and individual contributors. As a result, I did not grow-up in an environment where business or management topics and issues were ever raised or discussed. Nevertheless, as I reflect upon my life story, I have always been intensely interested in and fascinated with the principles, behaviors and practices of effective leadership and strong management.

In high school and through my junior year in college, I played bass guitar in a rock band. Interestingly, this offered me opportunities to consider and exercise leadership and management behaviors and actions. I was the one who booked gigs, dealt with agents, and kept the band together during the inevitable episodes of bickering, disagreements and squabbles between and among band members. At Cornell University, I served as resident advisor during my junior, senior and graduate years. This not only helped pay my housing costs, it also offered me the experience of being responsible for others and learning how to make things happen through influence versus authority; after all we were all just college students. I was also involved in the Greek system, pledging and becoming a “brother” in Chi Psi fraternity. In my senior year I ran and was elected

president of the Interfraternity Council (IFC), the governing body of the 47 Cornell fraternities. This was a big deal as the fraternity system represented more than 45% of the Cornell male student population. Serving as IFC President offered me a rich and comprehensive set of opportunities to develop my skills and test my talents in management, politics, communication, negotiations, operations and relationship building.

When I was 28, two years after joining the marketing division of a data services and modeling consulting company, I was promoted to consultant manager & assistant branch manager. The promotion ended up being a crucial point in my career as it was my first experience in management. I quickly became fascinated about the requirements, challenges and impact of business management. I instantly knew this is where I wanted my career to be. Over time, however, I began to doubt whether I had what it takes to become a senior executive. What I observed from company executives was an intense and almost obsessive focus on “the numbers” — i.e. what I believed to be more short-term quantitative measures such as quarterly and annual sales figures, number of customers, branch profitability ratios, sales quotas and market share. Though I understood and was exceedingly comfortable with the quantitative nature of business, I also found myself thinking more about and focusing my attention around the human element — i.e. qualitative aspects of what I thought it took for a company to be successful beyond any one year. Though at the time I couldn't fully articulate, what I was essentially pondering and thinking about was culture — the values and principles that guide decisions and interactions between colleagues and with customers.

A few months after turning 30, I joined SmithBucklin, the world's largest association management and services company. After 13 years of rapid personal growth, increasing executive management responsibility and a strong track-record of success, I decided to leave SmithBucklin and join a start-up offering IT research and analysis founded by an industry icon. I was the president & COO. My tenure there lasted only 18 months. I realized that I am not well-suited for the COO role. My passion, beliefs and principles surrounding culture, strategy, management, and leadership principles and practices are strongly held and deeply imbedded for me to be anything other than the CEO. After all the CEO position requires the holder to make decisions and judgment calls around culture, strategy, people, management, finances, markets and operations, and, ultimately be held accountable for a company's performance and long-term success.

After nearly five years as CEO for another start-up company during the 1990s/early 2000 “dot-com” period, I returned to SmithBucklin as its CEO in August 2002. At the end of 2015, I relinquished my CEO role though I continue to serve as Chairman of the Board in a non-executive capacity. Given my age and energy combined with my love and passion for all that is SmithBucklin, I could have continued for many years. In my estimation, however, unless there are extraordinary or mitigating circumstances, 10 to 15 years is about as long as any CEO tenure should be no matter how talented and impactful that CEO is.

Can you share one of the major challenges you encountered when first leading the company? What lessons did you learn from that?

When I returned to SmithBucklin as its CEO in 2002, the company was in a weakened state. The company was losing clients at an alarming rate, overall employee morale was low, overhead expenses had ballooned, productivity had fallen from previous years, and operating margins were at unacceptable levels. As the new CEO, I knew a successful turnaround required focus and attention to communicating and engaging employees, establishing my management team, connecting with and retaining clients, closing new business, managing key financial performance metrics, and reaching out to the industry community. But what surprised and even concerned board members and even some on my team was my passionate commitment and devotion of time and energy to articulating and nurturing the SmithBucklin culture. For me, however, it was an easy and obvious decision as I have come to know that articulating, nurturing and preserving an authentic culture that guides and inspires is a foundational requirement for building a great, enduring company. Moreover, strong and passionate dedication to such efforts must start at the top.

Another challenge was the impact of the 2009–2010 economic crisis on client associations and the strain on SmithBucklin and its employees deepened by bank debt restrictive covenants which limited options. But I’ve learned that adversity offers valuable opportunity to not only demonstrate and validate core strengths but to also drive learning and change toward an ever-higher standard. I’m proud that in 2011 the company emerged even stronger and better positioned for the future. In 2013 and for each subsequent year since, the company achieved record-breaking financial performance.

What are some of the factors that you believe led to your eventual success?

Whatever success and accomplishments I've achieved over the years have come about not only through my own talents, growth, hard work and perseverance but also through the assistance and encouragement of countless other people, in both professional and personal contexts.

As it relates to me and what I have focused on, it starts with my unwavering commitment to lifelong learning, personal growth and self-discovery. Another factor has been my determination to surface and confront issues and conflict, and my continuing efforts to develop skills around successful resolution. Yet another is my dedication to effective verbal and written communication that is frequent, clear, truthful, direct, open, credible and gracious — up, down and sideways. I make it my highest priority.

There are many other factors that I could share. I'll mention one other that I have learned over the years: Developing and nurturing meaningful, enduring relationships — deep, intimate connections with other people built and nurtured around trust, respect, confidence, loyalty and genuine care — produces what turns out to be your most valuable and treasured professional asset.

What are five things you would tell a new CEO?

1. **It's all about culture — a company's distinctive habits, customs, beliefs, practices, rewards and values.** Culture shapes behavior. Culture cannot be legislated. But if an authentic culture that guides and inspires can be articulated, aligned, nurtured and preserved, it will mean the difference between having a good year and achieving sustainable success, vitality and long-term endurance regardless of inevitable up and down economic cycles or unpredictable shocks to an industry. Defining and protecting the right culture starts with the CEO who also serves as its most important teacher and role model.
2. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Make it your highest priority to all audiences including employees, management team, clients, shareholders, board members and industry colleagues. And to ensure effectiveness and desired outcomes, develop and continuously hone your written and verbal skills in all types of communication, including brief reports and memos, formal letters, facilitating

and leading meetings, emails, formal reports, presentations, thought pieces, performance reviews, trial balloons, handwritten personal notes and all other forms of communication, always providing both clarity and context.

3. **Assemble and continuously develop not only a talented management team but one that is also cohesive.** Cohesiveness is a much higher state of teamwork. Cohesive teams comprise individuals who are united in purpose, possess common values and develop shared meaning. As a result, their efforts are multiplied rather than summed. Cohesive teams exemplify and consistently exhibit certain behaviors and group dynamics.
4. **Be resolute in your determination and commitment to surface and confront issues and conflict.** Do so with openness and candor balanced with diplomacy and empathy. Unresolved issues and conflicts restrain human potential. If they persist unabated for long periods of time, they also become cancerous, ultimately destroying the soul and fabric of an organization.
5. **Know where you want to go but be comfortable with not knowing exactly how you are going to get there.** Be steadfast and vigilant about your desired future state but also flexible and open because new information will surface, new or changing conditions or circumstances will emerge, and unexpected surprises will appear.

What advice would you give to your colleagues to help them to thrive and not “burn out”?

Above all else, replenish your energy. Time is finite, but energy can be expanded and regularly renewed. The key is to first know the type of renewal strength you need, whether it is mental, physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, or a combination thereof. Then identify your sources of needed energy, which could be a place of beauty and serenity, physical exercise, quiet moments of reflection, a type of music, joyous memories, family time, conversation with a special someone, or a specific set of activities. Tap into your sources of energy with discipline and relentless commitment not only when needed but also in preparation of what is ahead.

When I was CEO, I worked 60–70 hours or more per week including most if not all weekends. However, I never worked after I came home which was typically 6:30pm. Evenings were always reserved for time with my wife and earlier in my career, with my

children. Watching movies in my home theater and being completely enveloped in the sound and visual experience helped me relax and replenish. I made sure that I did that often regardless of the number or urgency of items on my to-do list.

Speaking of time, we all have exactly 24 hours in a day. We must work through and navigate the 24 hours we have. We do this by first focusing on the things that only we can do. Consciously identifying and acting upon what to delegate is also essential. We also must prioritize what tasks are most important and practice letting some of them go at 80 percent knowing others must be delivered at 100 percent.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped you get to where you are? Can you share a story?

As mentioned above, whatever success and accomplishments I've achieved over the years have come about not only through my own talents, growth, hard work and perseverance but also through the assistance and encouragement of countless other people, in both professional and personal contexts. One person stands out and that's my mom. She gave me what I believe to be the greatest gift any parent can give a child — that of self-esteem. My mom cultivated a loving home environment where freedom to be self-expressive was readily given to me even when I was quite young. This allowed me to explore, develop and test my thoughts, talents and boundaries. From early childhood on, my mom consistently celebrated, rejoiced and cheered even the smallest of my achievements. In this way she developed and nurtured in me a strong sense of self. However, even though my mom always encouraged the positive, she never falsely built me up by inventing or exaggerating achievements. Over the years, I've come to understand that a strong sense of self is actually self-confidence combined with self-knowledge.

Though an accomplished piano teacher, my mom never held a formal position of authority or a management job. However, her instinctive actions and decisions, and the leadership lessons she unknowingly imparted to me, have had a profound and lasting impact on my life. One lesson that stands out relates to my bout with cancer at age 14. Doctors gave me little chance of surviving past nine months. My mom, always smiling and in good cheer, would continually reference the future in countless and varied ways. Seeing my mom 'up' bolstered my spirits and gave me hope and strength. Without a

doubt, her abiding optimism had a profound impact on my recovery. Reflecting on my mom's actions, I learned that confronting difficulties and hardships while maintaining an optimistic frame-of-mind with courage and conviction can lift spirits, give hope and build strength in others. Moreover, it is often the difference in creating the conditions for a better tomorrow.

What are some of the goals you still have and are working to accomplish, both personally and professionally?

As a lifelong student of leadership, I recognized the integral role that leadership plays in ensuring an organization's enduring success and vitality. Over the years, I have studied, observed, thought about, learned, discovered, refined and applied various aspects of leadership. As a result, I have been developing my own evolving body of knowledge and practice around leadership's true meaning and its impact on people and organizations. I've also concluded that you can't teach leadership but you can teach leadership's timeless principles, and you can offer insights, share experiences and provide tools so others can learn through a process of active engagement and self-discovery. It was these tenets, among others, that influenced and guided my decision to create and launch unique, high-impact leadership learning programs while I was SmithBucklin CEO, the first in 2011. Today I lead-facilitate two such programs, one for board members of SmithBucklin client associations, the other for the business and professional communities at-large that includes a select few top-performing SmithBucklin employees. The nearly 300 students who have completed my leadership learning programs have noted the powerful impact the experience has had on their professional and personal lives. It has been a privilege and profoundly fulfilling for me to be on the journey with each of them. Though I will continue with my programs into the indefinite future, I also know that I must write the book and leave behind detailed notes and instructions so that my body of work can live on well beyond me. For me at this stage of my life, this is a high priority goal.

What do you hope to leave as your lasting legacy?

I aspire to leave a legacy defined in two ways. The first is on making a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of others. This starts with my immediate family and their families whereby I have nurtured, supported, taught, strengthened, inspired, created the right environments, and served as a role model that helped build strong character and

enabled each to reach his or her utmost potential. I also want my legacy to be about the number of leaders I helped grow by advancing knowledge and practice through writing, speaking, teaching, and creating and facilitating high-impact leadership learning programs.

The second aspect of my legacy is about SmithBucklin and its continued success, durability and impact, today, tomorrow and for the indefinite future. Here's why. CEOs drive quantitative results. But CEOs who are also true leaders build great, enduring companies. After all, the mark of a true leader is as

much about what happens after he or she is gone as it is about performance while on the job.

You are a person of great influence. If you could start a movement that would enhance people's lives in some way, what would it be? You never know what your idea can trigger!

For all human beings to embrace, live by and consistently practice the following universal principle that is eternal, absolute and without qualification: To evaluate, assess or otherwise judge another person based solely on the things that he or she can control such as character, behaviors and choices, demonstrated abilities and performance, and the results achieved and outcomes produced, not on attributes that a person is born with, cannot change or are otherwise immaterial to his or her ultimate success and impact.

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