COLUMNIST

Andrew Thornton

Getting your culture right

The best retail teams are built on a platform of shared values and behaviours in which everyone is invested

Some of the Thornton's Budgens team at one of our working sessions on our culture

In previous articles, we've looked at purpose – individual and organisational. Job done? Sadly not – this is just a starting point. No matter how brilliant your purpose statement is, it's never going to be specific enough to guide everyone day to day.

Every organisation has a culture and it's either consciously stated or exists unconsciously. This is something I wish I'd known years ago. I think it's the single-most-important aspect of what defines how a company behaves in the world.

When I took over my stores, they shared the Budgens culture, which was very much 'command and control' – policing, issuing instructions, the centre knows best and so on.

It was a fear-based culture, as is common with so many retailers, in which you do what the centre says, because that's where the power lies.

On top of that, each store had its own unique culture. This was probably because the Budgens culture hadn't been consciously stated or consistent over time, and both stores had long-standing managers who imprinted their own interpretation of the Budgens way onto their store.

Converting an unconscious culture into a conscious one is a huge job. I've learned how to do this the hard way, but that led to frustration and wasted energy.

I wish I'd tackled the issue of culture upfront at Thornton's Budgens, as Dave Lewis did when he joined Tesco.

When I interviewed him for our book, Dave was clear – behaviours lead to culture, and those behaviours are modelled by the leaders. Prior to his time, all the words spoken were about serving customers, but all the behaviours were about the numbers, so the culture became about the numbers.

✶ Thornton's Budgens culture

HAVING REALISED THE importance of culture, I worked with the team at Thornton's Budgens on our manifesto – our one-page summary of how we wanted to show up in the world. It built on our purpose that we are 'the community supermarket that really cares about people and planet' with what we called 'heartsets' – which we will cover next month – and laid out these and how we would deliver them in a way that could not be misunderstood, and encouraged everyone to be as 'authentically themselves' as possible. We got all of the full-time members of the team involved in this process over a three-month period, so we all had full ownership. It is time consuming, but in my view, there won't be ownership without detailed involvement, and, gradually the culture we were striving for started to appear.

> **When people live one life and talk about something else, don't be surprised when the audience notices the words and music don't add up**

Indeed, as with the culture, the purpose of the organisation became the numbers. If there isn't a powerful, stated purpose, unconscious behaviour drives the de facto purpose.

Dave said: "You can't talk yourself out of something you behaved your way into. The behaviour had to be that no one tries harder for customers; we treat people how they'd like to be treated; and the leaders, behave consistently with these values. We got rid of the offices, the executive suite, the hierarchy and the planes.

"We exist to serve customers. When people see you do that, they know you're not just saying it. When people live one life and talk about something else, don't be surprised when the audience notices the words and music don't add up."

How often have you heard people saying one thing and doing another? Does that inspire you to want to follow the talking or the acting? You can also see at work here another part of the purpose process – what needs to go.

To ensure this new culture was embedded, they retrained everyone and said: "If you can't go home at the end of the day and tell your mother, wife, daughter or sister what you did today and be proud of it, don't do it." So, are you ready to tackle your culture?

Andrew Thornton is the former owner of Thornton's Budgens, founder of Heart in Business and author of 'Putting the Heart Back into Business', scheduled for release on 21 April 2022