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When you choose advisors, don't forget about the culture connection

By Marissa Levin

Advisory boards may seem independent of your company, but in reality, they represent and impact your corporate culture. When selecting advisors, you need to consider how the advisors will integrate into your organization.

As you prepare to select your advisors, review your foundational identity elements, including your core values system, your mission statement and your vision statement. These elements are essential in defining your organizational culture. If you don't have them in place, you will base your key organizational decisions (whom you hire, whom you fire, with whom you partner) on urgent needs that are directly in front of you, rather than on a long-term strategy.



One of my favorite quotes is from the philosopher Plato: "The beginning is the most important part of the work." Creating these foundational elements is the most important part of launching a company. Revisiting them, refining them and reinforcing them as your company grows must be an essential piece of your strategic planning.

Consider your business model

When selecting advisors, it's critical to choose the ones that support your business model and your leadership style, and will integrate into your company with as little disruption as possible.

You want your advisors to align with your business model because in today's business environment, there are so many ways to build a business. There are brick-and-mortar businesses, and there are completely virtual, online businesses. There are countless hybrid business models that employ workers and serve customers around the world, representing myriad cultures.

At the same time, the differences in entrepreneurship by generation are vast. Members of the millennial generation have very different visions and goals for their organizational structures, for the role that philanthropic endeavors will play, and for how their personal and professional lives intersect. All of these nuances shape an organizational culture. An advisor who has a 40-year career history building brick-and-mortar businesses will not be aligned with a 30-year old business owner who is building an internet-based, virtual business.

The inevitable culture shift

To some extent, adopting an advisory board will shift your corporate culture. You are instituting higher levels of accountability and stepping aside as more experienced leaders weigh in on the direction of a company. These are required and non-negotiable behaviors as you build your company and your board.

As you build your advisory board, your organization will become less centered around the CEO or founder, and more centered around the strategic direction of the company.

In my own experience of building a 20-year business that endured many market shifts, I had to pivot countless times to remain relevant and viable. Everything changes in business growth: your leadership, customers, employees, partners, vendors... nothing stays the same. This includes your culture. This is why selecting advisors who can move you from one level of growth to the next — and potentially from one culture to the next — must be done thoughtfully and strategically.

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