

Applying company philosophy to business culture

 By [Felix Kessel](#)

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The HumanKind principle - that 'Creativity has the power to transform human behaviour....' was adopted in 2014, when we merged Owen Kessel with global brand Leo Burnett, but before that, our mantra was 'Do the right thing'.

It's one thing to have a driving philosophy, as the stated mantra for your business, but such words will naturally ring hollow if they are not applied to your employees as well as your clients. The philosophy must be applied to the business culture overall.

When Vaughan Owen and I co-founded Owen Kessel, we were aware of a few significant issues that needed to fit in with our mantra of 'doing the right thing'. On the surface, they may seem to be disparate elements but ultimately they segue together in the quest to root employees within the right culture, which in turn works to build a successful organisation. For me, these elements are the importance of family, making sure that our employees love their jobs and finding clients that are a 'fit' with the agency.

To put it into practical terms, the layers that I work with are as follows:

1. To have a successful business you have to have the best people
2. You have to have a culture that works with your business
3. This must inform your business processes

Attracting, keeping staff

This may not be revolutionary but to produce the world's best work, I must have these three things working together in tandem. So how do we attract and then keep the best people?

Certainly, acknowledging the importance of family to our employees makes them feel appreciated, valued and understood, while those who enjoy the ins and outs of their work are further inclined to stay. "Look at the process and not the outcome," I often tell people, "because the outcome takes care of itself if you love the process." Only if you love what you do can you achieve the exceptional, which then informs your culture further.

Finally, I believe that finding clients that are a fit with your business philosophy works to keep alive and nurture the sparks of the culture you have worked to define and create.

Not only about clients

Life – which brings with it children, illness, death and divorce – happens. I strongly believe that employers need to show empathy during individual crises and, where possible, allow employees the relevant time off to deal with the situation. We also encourage our employees to come to us with their work goals annually, which we agree on together and then to check on progress through the year.

We also track against our own cultural imperatives, even when measuring ideas. We ask questions such as, “Do you love it? Is it something that you feel right about?” In short, we try to care for, nurture and understand the real needs of our employees, both inside and outside the business, so we can help them in tough times, and benefit from them in good ones.

Growing operations with clients

We have always been keenly aware of the importance of choosing our clients carefully, because they are our future. For example, Amstel was one of our founding clients, for whom we have won a number of awards, and they are still with us after nine years. They believe in our creative philosophy. They are a fit with us, and we with them.

Over time, the way we have changed in terms of certain systems and processes has also been largely driven by our clients and their specific needs. We began by adopting a media agnostic approach, and were one of the first to do so. This has now become the standard that everyone talks about. Using Amstel as an example, we began with below the line work, then we moved into above the line and then into digital. We have grown our structures, functions and operations as an agency with our clients because it was the right thing for us to do at the right time.

Moving our clients' requirements into our decision-making processes became a cultural centre point for the agency.

Moving forward

As our journey continues, so have our central tenets of doing the right thing, being in partnerships with our clients and co-creating our own futures with our clients. However, we have moved from being focused on ‘doing the right thing’ to trying to figure out exactly how we go about doing this right thing. We work out what our clients need and then structure ourselves to service them.

When you start asking how to do this right thing, you end up in an interesting place. In solving business problems for our clients, we work on including an understanding of the very human side of things to be able to create wonderful work that will affect behaviour of their audiences and customers.

By looking towards, and caring deeply about, the human side, we derive insight. When you start unpacking what drives behaviour, you begin to understand that how people behave is a manifestation of their beliefs. In this way, we find out which clients we connect well with.

It is not possible to have a purpose without a philosophy that underpins it. At Owen Kessel, it means consistently trying to do the right thing, for both our clients and our employees. In this way, I feel we are significantly more enabled to keep on improving the work that we put out into the world, with, in turn, the great knock-on effect that the love of what we do keeps on growing.

ABOUT FELIX KESSEL

Born a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, where writing was the only way to survive the suburban ennui of his homeworld, Felix wrote his way into a strange land called advertising. Currently, he is the creative lead at WPP's agency for Distell, TeamLiquid.

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