



Lisa Martin has successfully created a culture of superheroes at GoFiBure.

Join the Culture Club

Lisa Martin highlights the real value in creating a positive office culture within your business.

The term 'office culture' is creating a buzz. It's a fashionable topic and it seems that everyone from stalwart business traditionalists to young, innovative tech entrepreneurs are talking about it. But what does 'office culture' actually mean? What does it look like and how do you go about getting a good one for your business?

When people talk about office culture they are referring to the ambiance (or lack of it), that exists within a particular place of work.

It describes the atmosphere and the tone of the organisation. The core philosophy, if you like, and the values and the work ethic that employees adhere to. It's the feeling you get not so much when you walk into an establishment as a visitor but once you've signed your employee contract and you've been there for a few weeks.

Having said that, some businesses do openly wear their culture on their sleeves. Think Air New Zealand – you only have to

watch their current safety video, Safety Old School Style, to get a flavour of what working for the company would be like. There's also a growing trend amongst technology companies (like San Francisco-based, credit card payment company, Square, and our very own accounting software company, Xero) to ooze their positive culture via their website, their logo, the language they use, the visual images they display, the innovative ways they set up

their offices and, importantly, their emphasis on keeping their staff happy.

In my experience, the spectrum for types of office culture is huge. Workplace cultures vary from business to business and even then

encouraging new employees to act and think in the same disrespectful way. And, believe me, there will be lots of new employees. Negative work environments go hand in hand with high staff turnover.

Something else I learned was that

I'm looking for. Aptitude tests and personality questionnaires help me find those people quicker – as does being really clear at interview stage about the work ethic we have and the expectations that we all respect.

Once you've got your team

“A positive workplace culture simply won't happen if there are big egos in the room – especially yours.”

are often laced with another layer of differentials based on industry, location and demographics. The size of the business also matters – a company with 1,000 employees will have a very different culture than one with 100. But don't make the mistake of thinking that office culture is a phenomenon best left to the big brands. Creating an office culture is something that every business, big or small, should strive for. You just have to make sure you create the right type – i.e. a positive one.

Typically, the good, happy cultures are ones that business owners and managers have intentionally nurtured. Not-so-good cultures tend to be those that have evolved either in the absence of any deliberate plan or soured as a direct result of negative influences from those leading the charge.

Once, I was fortunate to work for a company whose office culture can only be described as abominably dreadful. I say fortunate because it gave me real insight into what not to do when I started my own business.

For example, I learned that if, as the boss, you don't implement any standard office systems around HR, performance, pay and promotion you'll leave your office atmosphere wide open to contamination. I also learned that if your approach to your business is very much 'hands off' this will have a detrimental effect on how your staff view and respect you – and the business in which they work. Without doubt this will fuel a fire of negativity,

a positive workplace culture simply won't happen if there are big egos in the room – especially yours. If you want to put a good work ethic in place you have to want to do it for the good of the business as a whole.

It's not about you

Creating a positive culture is not just about making yourself look or feel good. You are not the star of the show. The success of your business is the most important thing at stake here and to create a thriving business you have to shift the focus away from yourself and onto the people who are going to make your business work – that's your employees.

If you want a great office atmosphere, you have to aim for the best team you possibly can. This will mean that there will be people who are smarter and more able than you. But remember this isn't about you. This is about ensuring your business succeeds – so why wouldn't you have the very best people working in it? Why wouldn't you encourage them to excel, to be the real stars and the heroes?

Getting the right team will involve a bit of trial and error. There is no given formula for attracting the best people to your business first time around. However, I have found that psychometric testing really can help here. Over the ten years that GoFi8ure has been in business, I now have a clear idea about what personality traits work best for us (discipline and tenacity being essentials), and what type of people

together you have to value and stimulate each and every one of them. If you remember that all business is primarily about people – about customers and about employees rather than about making a profit – you'll find this easy.

This is where the office systems we talked about earlier come into play. If you have in place firm policies around HR, performance, pay and promotion and a positive, team-spirited attitude yourself, your staff will thrive on being part of your club.

I'm an advocate for giving each member of my team as much responsibility as possible. This coupled with guidance and nurturing, financial reward, incentives, team building and having a bit of fun really works. And what makes it all worthwhile for me is when I hear my team describe (with absolute, unwavering sincerity) our brand values and promises to a customer.

I have to say, I'm really proud to be a member of the superb 'together' culture we've created.



Lisa Martin is managing director of specialist small-business bookkeeping and accounting company GoFi8ure. She founded GoFi8ure in 2002, recognising a need for efficient, accurate, mobile and on-site financial administration and accounts management for small businesses operating in the greater Wellington region. She is currently vice president of the New Zealand Bookkeepers Association.