# The Culture Edge: How SureCall Optimizes Culture as Strategy

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Abstract

*SureCall is a Calgary based Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) organization that has gone through significant change since its founding in 1982. The BPO and call center industries have a notorious reputation for how they dealt with their most important asset: their people. SureCall has overcome this reputation to develop a thriving and award-winning culture. This article focuses on the "lessons learned" through SureCall's evolution and gives practical advice to leaders going through similar change in their organizations.*

Building an organization involves considering the values, beliefs, and ecosystem of the organization. Together, these form an organization's culture and are the primary focus of any effective change effort. Whether an organization is rebranding, reinventing, or just rethinking the way it does business, its culture will have the greatest impact on the success of the progression and the future of its business model.

Our company, SureCall Contact Centers, was originally founded in 1982 as a communications company focused on wireless equipment.[1] It has morphed and evolved immensely over the past 36 years. Looking back, although it was a challenging road to take, the fact that we were not hindered with preconceived

notions of what a call center should look like or be like helped us immensely. It enabled us greatly to improve on some aspects of an industry with a notorious reputation for how they dealt with their most important asset: their people.

SureCall currently has over 100 employees across Canada and we partner with clients all over the world. We are a leader in the call center and outsourcing industry, however we pride ourselves more on the dynamic culture we have created. We operate 24 hours per day, 365 days per year and have been honored with a number of awards over the years for our company and the type of workplace we have built.[2] Our most gratifying awards are tied to our team. Landing in the top 50 Best Employers in Canada (BSME Awards) was inspiring to us, as call centers are not typically regarded as being great employers. We were also named a "Best Place to Work" by Avenue Magazine. More recently in 2017, SureCall won the KUDOS Award for employee engagement, again a very meaningful award to us.[3] As a technology leader we were named one of the "Top 10 Fastest Growing Telecom Companies" in 2017 and one of the "Top 10 Most Innovative Telecom Companies" in 2018. We are very proud of our workplace culture and these awards recognize the extensive work we have done on building our culture. This article outlines what we have learned through this journey and shares ten lessons we have learned as an organization while we developed our culture.

## Background

SureCall started as a telecommunications company in 1982 and initially focused on the sales and distribution of wireless equipment, mainly pagers, cellular phones, and radio products. We were in the right place at the right time; at the nascent stage of personal digital assistants that today are the normal appendage to almost every person. Being in the technology industry meant we needed to be ahead of the curve when it came to the next big thing, or we risked becoming obsolete with the last big thing. This meant understanding how to turn inventory, choose the best partners, and communicate with our audience so they could grasp how new products and services worked.

There was a lot going on in telecommunications in the 1980s. We observed the integration of SMS technology into cellular phones and we knew the end of pagers as a mainstream communication device would come. We discontinued that product line and focused our efforts instead on cellular phones and service. This took us through the longest version of ourselves, where we were the dominant player in Alberta, having five locations and a very large client base—both consumer and business. Juggling retail locations and a head office with about 60 employees was not easy. However, it always came down to our product, having the most sought-after models in stock, and being able to service the equipment. Those were our differentiators. But those days are a stark comparison to the type of business we have today. After selling off the cellular business, we took the remaining department, which was our dispatching center, and refined it into the state-of-the-art outsourced Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) organization it is today.

The pivot to a call center and outsourced BPO business was a stretch, but we felt we had a good road map, and a strong vison. Any outsourced solution must be as good or better at providing the service applications it offers compared to what the client could do themselves in-house. We kept this in our minds as we grew the solutions for our customers. Our applications include front end services such as Virtual Reception, Help Desk, and Order Entry services to much more complex programs. They also include critical process management such as Emergency Response Escalation, Work Safety Monitoring, Vehicle Tracking, and Rescue Agent work. Back end support is often required as part of the overall design architecture, such as

e-commerce and customer service response center. All these required far more intricate programing and led us down the path to customize our applications to ensure a successful product for our clients.

As we navigated our way around the industry landscape with an unconventional business model, we were regarded as rebels and cowboys, with untested theories that would surely lead us to reckless failure in our industry. And for the most part "they" were correct! We struggled with understanding our limitations when it came to customer expectations, because in our mind we had no limitations. We often mismanaged our workforce optimization programs because we undervalued the economies of scale process when producing our schedules. We were bent on generating new innovative design processes for an industry that was grandfathered in traditional policies and a structured process.

We made many mistakes, however, we found these to be the best learning opportunities. Today I am not sure we would have the intestinal fortitude to risk so much, however I am extremely happy that we did. There are so many times I think about how close we came to giving up on our methodology, because it was not working as intended. However, we stuck with the adage that if it were easy, then everyone would be doing it, and onward we went. I now realize that through that time, we were developing our strategy around the culture we wanted, and that our culture was very unique from that of most call centers, and in fact, is still unique today. It was the major significant differentiator we had over other industry leaders.

## The Importance of Culture

In the 1980s most organizations worked with a certain structure and hierarchy. The mindset of managing people and managing strategy in an authoritarian way was abundant. Everyone worked hard to get their next promotion, which was often given due to tenure and not results. There were many silos and peer cliques that employees had to maneuver around or integrate into if they wanted to get ahead. Today, progressive organizations are shifting toward healthier work environments, and a culture that leads to both client *and* employee happiness.

Culture is a strategy, with a plan of action and policies designed around it. Just like a product or service, culture needs to evolve continuously. We found that it had to be part of our agenda, included in conversations with our leadership team and built into the very fabric of our organization. As we were culture building we experienced several iterations of who we wanted to become, and some ugly truths did surface. We continued to refine, always knowing that there is no finish line with culture. We spent a significant number of years investing in cultural development, and that investment has paid off, however, we had to tactically plan out a strategy for it to be successful. One of the hardest lessons learned was how to get people to "buy in," not only from the overall team and front line, which are key, but also the top executives. Building it into our day to day processes and work flows, including at the onboarding stage for employees and customers, took a lot of time and effort. If we did not have the support of our leadership team, the culture shift would not have happened.

And how does this happen? Not overnight! On average, I believe it takes five to seven years to truly change a company's culture and beliefs. Cultural change is not just changing one or two things, it is changing everything. Change can be the inhibitor or the catalyst for progress. Most people do not like change. They like to be comfortable knowing each day will be the same, with no surprises. But in order for a company to grow it has to change. So how do leaders get their people to rise to the occasion, to accept that change is normal and good for the company, and good for them? We found we had to show them progress. Communication is a big part of that, and something that took us a long time to establish. If the leadership team knows, but no one else does, then dynamic change will simply not happen in the

organization. Culture is more than espousing core values. It is a necessary and empowering piece in order to meet objectives and goals. Once people are engaged and believe in the change, they will truly become the foundation of the success their company achieves, and will be more engaged in the company overall.

A key learning for me with communication is that I have to be honest and transparent no matter what. I was always keen on communicating good news to the team, and often left bad news behind closed doors. I had no idea the impact of not sharing everything. I did not want to affect the morale of the team, but in reality, not saying anything showed a lack of caring, and came off as disingenuous once the real story came out. Today we strive to be completely transparent with our team, and although it is not always fun, and some truly tough conversations have to be had, I would much rather function with all our cards on the table. It is far more comforting to know my whole team is aware when we have an issue, and I have support and real commitment to get the problem resolved.

What leaders do is important when creating culture, but what they do *not* do is just as important. Number one on the "do not do" list is to not break promises. When implementing programs for our team, like incentives, or bonuses, we failed to deliver or follow through many times. After a few months the program would just stop. Other priorities seemed to always get in the way, and this hurt our ability to grow our culture. Building an open and transparent organization means leadership is going to listen, and act, contributing to the most important piece of culture: trust. The team has to believe their input is important, and the leadership has to be authentic.

We instituted authentic leadership in a number of ways. One that is still popular today is our CEO Council calls. Every quarter we schedule a call on a first come first serve basis. Any employee can sign up for the call, and it is often wait listed. We ask for agenda items in advance and we ask that team members come to the call with a concern or issue. We also ask that they bring at least one solution. The call is recorded in an effort to capture all the great ideas coming from our team, and we send out a follow up communication on what we plan to implement, and then we ensure we actually implement those. Once we started keeping our promises things actually began changing.

We have certainly learned a lot as a company over the past 36 years, about just being human. Although there are probably hundreds of lessons learned, here are ten tips I feel are important around designing culture in organizations.

## Focus on Culture Fit

The right people in the organization are key. After trying to fit the wrong people into the right seats we ended up having to ask them to find success elsewhere, but not until we incurred significant costs both financially and emotionally. We finally implemented a recruitment program that was extremely valuable in bringing us the right people by matching profiles with champions within our organization. We take the right attitude and behavior over experience or skills, as we believe that skills can be taught. We stopped looking at resumes and started focusing on who *actually* fits our culture.

## Have your Narrative Ready

If a leader wants the team to believe in the systems and processes that are changing, he or she needs to have a great story that relays the "why" behind the change. If the leader can explain it to others, it also gives the team clarity while making the change tangible for everyone. For example, in 2013 we moved to a remote agent model. This model provided our agent pool access to our systems remotely so that they could handle the client calls directly from home, on their own home computers. This meant certain work

space regulations had to be adhered to and strict data protection protocols were put in place. As we moved to this agent model, we had no idea how meaningful it was for some of our agents to come into the office each day, and we had a lot of push back on the idea of 'working from home.' We told the story of how we would be able to allow more flexibility with schedules by moving to remote agents. We explained that many times due to inclement weather, our service levels suffered and how this program would offer some relief to those agents who needed immediate assistance with high call volumes. Through this narrative, the agents started to see the value in the program.

## *Be Transparent*

It is common for leaders to feel that they are the only ones who need to know what is going on in the organization. We were guilty of that as well, but changed this perspective after we lost some of our top team members. We realized that everyone needs to feel like they are trusted enough to be told exactly what is going on. Good news or bad, if we did not tell team members what was going on, they came to their own conclusions. They filled in gaps in communication with their own imagination, and this hurt the overall organization. So we do our best to be transparent in everything we do as a leadership team.

## *Walk the Talk and Lead by Example*

An organization's entire leadership team needs to practice the behaviours that shape the culture of the organization. As soon as the team can see that its leaders are truly invested, then they themselves become invested. Leaders must know the impact their words have on others, and then back them up with action. During our initial onboarding of employees, we train on the Disney Institute of Business philosophies on service, loyalty, and leadership.[4] Specifically, we talk about our leaders being in their role to ensure the success of our front-line agents. In order to hold our leaders accountable to that, our performance evaluations for leadership at SureCall are designed around how the leaders have created growth and success within their own team members. This is critical to our cultural framework and has proven to be very effective. Our overall employee turnover has gone from nearly 20% to less than 3% in the last 5 years. This is unheard of in the call center industry.

## *Accept Feedback Readily*

No matter how smart and talented they might be, leaders do not have all the answers. We have found that the best feedback comes from our front-line staff who are actively engaged with our customers every day. Town halls, CEO councils, and team huddles are all great communication conduits that we use, but they are not effective if they are just a one-way conduit where the leader "tells" everyone else what to do. These are excellent opportunities to get insight from the most important people in the organization: the front-line staff. Client engagement is also important and again in a two-way format. Leaders must find ways to improve their business from all the data they have. This will improve the partnership and earn loyalty on all sides. Every quarter we do a NPS (Net Promoter Score) survey for both customers and our internal team.[5] We have improved from a score of 29 to a 56 on our client NPS, and a 36 to a 70 on our employee NPS. These are significant numbers of promoters over detractors since we started measuring, and we are proud of our improvement in both areas.[6]

## *Accept Failure*

Making mistakes opens up our minds, and allows us to reflect, learn from what happened, seek other opinions and options, and look for better outcomes and methods to improve next time. As long as we learn from them, mistakes are a welcome teaching tool. But this learning only comes when mistakes are not punished. This is far more difficult to implement than it seems, as most companies do not like facing the consequences of mistakes. We have found over the years that most errors are due to process, not people. If a team member ends up learning because of a mistake, then that mistake was well worth making. A great example of this is one of our young leaders. This person was enthusiastic and well meaning, but was promoted beyond his ability on the operations side. We moved him from a place of success and gave him an opportunity in a very critical role. In hindsight, we promoted him before he was ready. He was unable to handle the role and after two months tendered his resignation. He felt he had let the team down and that his only option was to resign. After a conversation with him, and showing him that he had just learned a lesson in where his strengths were, we designed a position where he could use his energy and experience in another role within the organization. He remains a key part of our success strategy.

## Be Disciplined and Accountable

SureCall has an open, dynamic, and inclusive operation. But that does not mean that there is no structure or discipline in the processes. On the contrary, there is immense accountability toward goals and objectives in our environment. Balance is necessary. It creates self-accountability that comes from belonging to a team in which its members do not want to disappoint. One of the toughest hurdles in forming a great team culture is to introduce and sustain openness and honesty, and having critical conversations about real issues. Leaders and teams often gloss over the real discussions that have to take place, and do not fix the core issues. Healthy conflict is a must and a no blame environment is absolute. Once the fear of difficult situations is taken away, people can focus on the issues at hand and not struggle with concerns about whose fault it is.

## Don't try to Change Everything at Once

Redesigning the cultural mindset and strategy of a company is an exciting endeavour. However, changing too much all at once can cause unrest and anxiety. Leaders should show the team that things can change and the results can be great, and that usually starts with small changes. Starting small also diminishes the risk of something going wrong. The fewer things to focus on the better. Leaders should make meaningful decisions and make sure they communicate and amplify it throughout the organization. Many companies try to change culture with one giant stroke, and it ends up causing damage far beyond repair. After an acquisition several years ago, we felt that our relaxed culture and open environment would be a welcome change to the new members of our team. We came in and we changed how they did everything, believing it was the better way. Regardless of whether our processes were better, the change was massively different to what they were used to. In the first few weeks of the change, many employees in this acquired organization left. We ended up causing immense damage with the remaining employees and it took us some time to mend the relationship and regain trust. We were able to then slowly transition them over the next several months, which is what we should have done in the first place.

## Remind People that you are Still in Business

Some companies go too far with cultural change, and they forget to tie it into their business results. That is why using culture as part of an *actual* strategic business plan will allow leaders to implement changes that are good for their business. This could involve tying in paid volunteer activities to meeting target

Service Level Agreements (SLAs) each month. Or bringing in gamification platforms that monitor target Objectives and Key Results (OKRs), while they create a fun comradery among the team. Leaders should select strategic behaviors that exemplify a company's core values but also tie into the business success model. It took some time for us to realize that the additional cost to put in dashboards and proper monitoring programs would pay back immensely over time. The team can see who the top performers are at any given time, and this incentivizes everyone to try to be their best. Our rewards program is also tied into these performance measures and ends up adding to the excitement of doing well.

### Remember the 'Bigger' Purpose

Purpose has become a key motivator for employees to do good work. People want to feel like they are contributing and making a difference, not just collecting a pay cheque. Having a purpose that is meaningful and ties into more than profits for the company. It will get more people excited about working for the organization, and if a customer is shopping for a new product or service, having a greater purpose will give the team an advantage. Customers want to work with companies who are doing more for the community and their teams in general. Our company does this in numerous ways, but we make sure we tell our story to our team, and to the public. Our "Good Call" program takes a percentage of our revenues and puts it into a fund that goes to educate females in underserved regions around the world. Our agents connect to this as they understand that every call they take contributes to this cause. Every company can do this. It is not that difficult and can be something designed right into the business model or something done through a third party. Either way leaders are creating social capital for their organizations, which is a truly great investment.

## Conclusion

SureCall continues to evolve and grow as a company. It has been a challenging road to take, but we have learned a lot about organizational change and culture through this journey. We have committed to this model in an industry that is not known for treating employees well. We believe that we gain a competitive advantage by treating our team members as the most important assets we have. And we look forward to growing in the future amidst more exciting opportunities locally and internationally.

## About the Author

*Desirée Bombenon is CEO & Chief Disruption Officer at SureCall Contact Centers. She is on the board of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce and Children First Canada and was awarded a fellowship in Advanced Leadership at Harvard University. Desirée has been honoured with being chosen as one of Canada's Most Powerful Women 2016 & 2017 by Women's Executive Network. She can be contacted via LinkedIn or by email at info@surecallcc.com.*

# Endnotes

[1] See https://surecallcc.com

[2] See https://surecallcc.com/awards-and-recognition/ for a list of awards SureCall has received

[3] Kudos is a Calgary-based company that offers employee recognition software to organizations (see https://www.kudosnow.com/). For a further description of Kudos that includes a description of how SureCall specifically uses Kudos, see Vanderpyl, T.H. (2018, April). Social recognition: The Kudos solution. *Western Talent & Innovation Review*, 3. Article can be retrieved from: http://wtireview.com/social-recognition-the-kudos-solution/

[4] See https://www.disneyinstitute.com/ for more details of the Disney Institute's programs

[5] Net Promoter Score®, or NPS®, measures customer experience and predicts business growth. This proven metric transformed the business world and now provides the core measurement for customer experience management programs the world round. For further clarification see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Net_Promoter

[6] With NPS anything over a 50 is excellent as your lowest score can be -100 and highest score 100. Neutral numbers are not included (7&8) as they are passive, 0-6 are detractors and 9-10 are promoters.