

“The best corporate strategy in the world will not be successful without the right people with the right culture. That’s why they say Culture eats Strategy for breakfast.”

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One thing I will always remember about my stint in Axiata will be the company’s efforts in building a brand new culture. The Group CEO, backed by the Axiata Board, wants “Uncompromising Integrity, Exceptional Performance” (UIEP) to be shared core values for the whole Group. “Please make it happen,” was the instruction to the “culture” team.

Culture, a big word, is fuzzy to many. We say values get translated into behaviours and practices that can be observed. Add all of the above and you get the Axiata culture. That’s the theory in simple terms.

In practice it’s very hard to achieve. The effort began in 2013 to educate, engage and instil the values, beginning at the Axiata Corporate Centre, then cascade them throughout the Group. This was not a one-off campaign, but a transformational mindset change that will take many years.

Put simply, UIEP means pushing ourselves to high levels of performance, while holding ourselves to the highest standards of conduct. It’s aspirational but, at the same time, inspirational. The UI part of the value was more challenging. What is “integrity” to an employee? It’s not just about rejecting corruption but acting ethically and professionally in your everyday behaviour, doing the right things - even when no one is watching you.

Naturally, there was a healthy dose of scepticism. “Is the top management walking the talk?” “If I speak up, I’ll get into trouble.” “What if my boss does things which are not right?” “It’s harder to win business because the competitors are not very strict about these things.”

There are good answers to all the above questions. In the course of conducting workshops, town halls, coaching sessions, manager interactions and other touch-points, these concerns were discussed and internalised. Not to the satisfaction of all, I’m sure, but to most.

When discussion and open questioning of matters like these are encouraged as part of the culture-building process, then people will feel empowered to contribute and embrace the values. And consequences must be clear and enforced. Do well in living up to the values and you’ll be rewarded; violate them and you’ll face the consequences. The Company has taken action when necessary - against junior colleagues and senior executives - usually with some regret and disappointment that misconduct happened in the first place. At times we share high-level anonymous information only to let others know we are serious. However, we avoid humiliating people.

In enforcement sometimes we get it right, sometimes we seemed not to. We’ll get better at achieving the right balance, but the intention is never in doubt. Have we achieved our lofty goals? Far from it.

I think we have achieved good progress in increasing awareness about our values, demonstrating our commitment to stakeholders and taking action to internalise them in our behaviour. The commitment to UIEP, now a commonly used term in the Group, is measured annually ensuring that this is always on our radar.

Trying to nurture this thing called “corporate culture” has no ending. The journey itself is important because that’s culture in action. The best corporate strategy in the world will not be successful without the right people with the right culture. That’s why they say Culture eats Strategy for breakfast.

