

LinkedIn’s “collective personality” is its driving force, Asia Pacific Managing Director **OLIVIER LEGRAND** tells Brunswick’s **JEAN TAN**. Yet even with that success, culture is the thing that keeps him up at night

CRACKING THE CULTURE CODE

GOOGLE “ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE” AND you’re liable to get 9 million hits – from textbook definitions to TED talks to myriad academic articles and management white papers. Quippable CEO quotes tout culture’s towering role in the success of their companies. It’s the subject of countless business books and biting corporate satire – “Dilbert” comics would make for very handy, “what not to do” reference guides – and it consistently ranks high in C-suite surveys as a boardroom priority.

For all its current dominance, the topic of organizational culture didn’t become a subject of inquiry until 1960, gaining traction, particularly among scholars, over the next two decades. Cultural concepts such as stories, symbols and rituals were used to analyze and understand organizations. Culture came to be seen as the key to a company’s progress, and it was sold as the management panacea for all corporate ills. Managers were singled out as the people who have the most significant impact on an organization’s culture. Culture was a job for the top.

Unfortunately, like many such ideas before it, culture as a wonder drug proved, at best, a placebo. Despite numerous studies and a multitude of theories, it became apparent that it was impossible to produce the practical, catch-all solutions that many managers were yearning for.

As its name suggests, culture, even within the context of a corporation, is organic, evolving, even irrational. In its intangibility and susceptibility to the human condition, culture requires a company to flex all its muscles – leadership, communications, organizational performance – before it can achieve an enduring advantage. Yet it’s undeniably true that such an advantage exists – for companies that are able to cultivate such an organic, sustaining culture.

From its beginnings, LinkedIn has accepted that challenge. The world’s largest professional network with 500 million users across 200 countries and territories, LinkedIn is a hypergrowth company, catapulting in less than 15 years from startup to



Silicon Valley powerhouse with offices around the world. Steady revenue growth and other business achievements – including a high-profile acquisition by Microsoft in December last year – are widely reported, but so too are its initiatives and commentary around corporate culture. A recent Forbes article described LinkedIn's culture as “thriving.”

That dynamic culture is tangible throughout the company's Singapore office, where we spoke to Olivier Legrand, the Managing Director of LinkedIn Asia Pacific. Perched on the 29th floor of a sparkling skyscraper in the city-state's central business district, the office is the company's Asia Pacific headquarters.

When we visited, it was a hive of activity – mostly work, but also play. Employees are free to hop into one of the game rooms (video games seemed to be the challenge of choice, but classic board games also line the shelves of the inviting space), play a round of ping pong or hit the in-house, professionally managed gym. It might be reasonable to assume this is how a vibrant culture is built, with rec-room amenities.

But Legrand insists that the culture is more of an outcome than a formula. “It's one thing to have a ping pong table,” Legrand says, “it's another to create an environment where people feel safe to actually play ping pong in the middle of the day – otherwise, all you've really got is a piece of space-wasting furniture.”

Legrand joined LinkedIn in 2012 – months after the company went public – and now leads more than 1,500 employees in 13 offices across the region. He says that arriving at LinkedIn's culture today took time, experimentation and a “full bottom-up approach.” The last point, bottom-up, is a theme that Legrand returns to often in our discussion. LinkedIn's culture works, he says because it is “owned by everyone.”

Judging by Legrand's own attitude, expressed in our interview, the company's emphasis on making each employee feel like an owner and ambassador of their culture is paying handsome dividends.

A company's culture can be hard to articulate. How would you describe LinkedIn's?

I would say our culture is the connective and collective personality of LinkedIn. Culture is the product of a clearly defined, highly inspiring mission – I think people want to work for companies that are helping the world in some

shape or form. So for us, our mission is to connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful, and our longer-term vision for the company is to create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce. I believe we have a clear purpose and a strong set of values, which provide an anchor for our employees and guide how we do things.

Can you give me an example of how culture helps you navigate a company that's growing as quickly as LinkedIn?

Before we went public, our CEO, Jeff Weiner, decided that he wanted to get in front of our employees twice a month for a company-wide all-hands. He wanted every member of the company to have the chance to hear directly from the top, where he and other senior leaders would be totally transparent about the company priorities, our product road maps and so on.

After the IPO, I think a lot of colleagues expected this to stop – being a publicly listed company, it might be too risky to continue this level of disclosure and transparency. But Jeff continued with it. Our culture was built on our values of being open and honest, and he didn't want to compromise that. Leaders put the responsibility back on the employees and trusted them to not breach our trust. This company-wide meeting is still something Jeff does every other week. It seems like a small thing, but it goes a long way toward demonstrating how we stand by our culture and values.

What is a common mistake companies make when they try to build a culture?

There are two that come to mind. People tend to relate their company culture to who they are, rather than who they want to be, who they aspire to become. This notion of aspiration is key for me. It provokes questions like, what sort of company do we really want to build? Who do we want to be when we grow up? Even more importantly, it permits imperfections. When you're aspiring, you know you can do better. It creates this motivation to work together toward being that company, to achieve what you set out to do.

The other possible pitfall when it comes to building a culture is the emphasis on “fit.” You hear that a lot these days: is so-and-so a culture fit with us? But I don't like the word “fit” because there is a tendency to interpret it as, “is this person like me?”

OLIVIER LEGRAND

Olivier Legrand joined LinkedIn in 2012 and became Managing Director for Asia Pacific in December 2015. He also leads the company's Marketing Solutions business for the region. Previously, he was General Manager, Asia at The Wall Street Journal Digital Network, a part of Dow Jones. He was also founder and CEO of Creasia Marketing House, a marketing and digital production agency in Hong Kong.

There are many ways to fit our culture – people have many dimensions to them, and we all don't have to be the same. So there is risk to diversity when people over-index on hiring; trying to get the right fit, you can wind up picking only people of similar background or thinking.

I have a hard time generalizing people and putting them into buckets, by the way. I know it's a natural thing, but I don't believe it's true or helpful – for leaders, or the people they lead.

You said once that culture is the thing that keeps you awake at night. Why is that? Isn't culture one of LinkedIn's strengths?

Yes, and it's precisely because our culture is such a strong competitive advantage for us that I worry about sustaining it as we grow.

It's hard enough when you have 500 people. But as you grow to 1,000, and then 5,000 and so on – at LinkedIn we have nearly 12,000 people now – it gets more challenging. But for us, to maintain the pace of growth we've experienced, it is absolutely necessary to have a strong culture. It guides how we behave and the sort of decisions that we make, especially for the leaders, and particularly at the point of hiring.

I want to make sure we are bringing in the right people, who will help us nurture this incredible culture, and will continue to make this a place where people want to work. So yes, I'm paranoid about losing it.

Would having a Chief Culture Officer help?

I can see how that would work for some companies: if someone "owns" culture then you have focus, and it's someone's full accountability. But as I mentioned earlier, culture here is the collective personality of LinkedIn. It really should be owned by everyone. If anyone should prioritize this, it should be the CEO. That sort of example from the top has a powerful effect at all levels of the organization.

It's true that our talent department owns certain work streams that directly influence our culture, initiatives that look to foster diversity, inclusion and belonging, for example.

Still, when I look at how things get done, I can see that HR may be driving the agenda, but there are a lot of grassroots efforts from employees themselves, where they feel empowered to start different resource groups and other initiatives to help the cause – this to me is culture at work.

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You have 13 offices across Asia Pacific. Do you find it challenging to codify your culture and make it relevant from Sydney to Singapore?

It's a challenge for any organization to provide a clearly codified culture and avoid multiple subcultures within the company. So when it comes to communicating anything around culture – expectations, behaviors, defining the values, and the actions that you want to see – words are powerful. But the best-intentioned words can turn into little more than pretty posters on the wall. You need people to live them, and live by them.

If your team believes in your culture and your purpose, and if they see the leadership team living by that culture, that's when the magic happens. That's when culture becomes an actual competitive advantage.

As for making our culture relevant across different countries, I think it's about hiring the right people. The right hires are culture agents. Five years ago, we were opening a lot of new offices around the world – we have 26 today. The right culture agents made sure that whichever office we opened had the LinkedIn culture, but it also brought in the local dimension.

Whenever I walk into one of our offices, I'm always reminded that it's a LinkedIn office, but it has the flavor of Bangalore or Tokyo or Melbourne. So it's less about making the culture relevant, and more about respecting the local environment while fundamentally staying true to our mission and vision, and being very clear on how we do what we do, and why we do what we do.

You've been with LinkedIn for six years now. What's your biggest lesson so far?

With this organization, seeing how important culture is and how organic it has to be, I've become more aware that I'm hiring people who have the ability to choose. They have made the choice to come and work here.

As a leader, once you start believing that the people you hire have other choices, you will lead them very differently. Don't take your people for granted. Make it a place that they want to be here for – make it a place that *you* want to be here for. That's the essence of a great culture.

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