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Meet Federico Rodriguez

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See page 16

27

Investigations
of business
kickback reports
Thomas Earl Patton

33

Corporate
governance and your
organization's culture
Robert Purse

37

Snitches get
stitches and wind
up in ditches
Paul Fiorelli

47

The Fraud Section's
FCPA Enforcement Plan:
A carrot or a stick?
Paul B. Cogswell

by Erica Salmon Byrne

Culture and purpose

Purpose is not what you do or even how you do it—it's *why* you do it. The what and the how will change over time. Just think of how different the way you get things done now is from 5 or 10 years ago (This article was written on a laptop at 35,000 feet and sent over plane Wi-Fi, for example. Remember when emailing from planes was a fantasy?). But purpose—the reason your company does what it does—remains steady, or at least it should.



Salmon Byrne

Culture was the word of 2015, according to *Merriam-Webster* (and should be for 2016 as well, I would argue). And culture is important. But what is the difference between culture and purpose, and why should directors care?

Culture and purpose are two sides of a coin, I believe. Culture reflects the company's values, but purpose connects "the heart and the head" and motivates employees to do their best work—thereby connecting the head, the heart, and the wallet.

The reason that directors should care is that culture can be difficult to communicate, especially to new employees.¹ While you can—and should—measure culture, it is something that takes time to establish, to measure, and to change. It's harder to hire for culture (at least without triggering implicit biases, a subject for a different article). But purpose can and should be distilled down to one or two sentences. You can test for a purpose fit. It's simpler than values and less complicated than a mission statement. You can hire for a purpose match.

It tells stakeholders—employees, customers, shareholders, communities—what matters to your organization in relatively short order. That is increasingly important when we look at the data related to Millennial hiring—more and more individuals entering the workforce are looking to align their personal values and their employer's values.²

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Think about your company. Who comes first? *Why* do your employees do what they do? Why do they get out of bed in the morning? Why do you devote one of your most important resources—your time—to serve on the Board? Why do your clients buy from you, your shareholders invest in you, your suppliers sell to you? What's your view on talent—is it an investment or a transaction? What motivates all of that? Boil it down, and you have your purpose. *

1. Graham Kenny: "Your Company's Purpose Is Not Its Vision, Mission, or Values" *Harvard Business Review*, September 3, 2014. Available at: <http://bit.ly/your-company>
2. Aflac: 2016 Aflac Corporate Social Responsibility Study. Available at: <http://bit.ly/aflac-corp>

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