



## The Unmatched Power of Culture

### Reflections on the power of culture to elevate teams and companies, particularly in times of crisis

A recent survey of more than 6,500 workers around the world<sup>1</sup> found that the COVID-19 pandemic is “reshaping our perceptions, behaviors, values and societies.” Polled respondents highlighted that a company’s actions during the pandemic will shape the loyalty of current and future employees in ways that will persist even once the crisis has passed. This is consistent with my own observations as the President of Bayer Pharmaceuticals in the Americas, where a strong culture has helped us navigate the present crisis. In these unprecedented times, I have seen employees support one another and remain dedicated to serving healthcare providers and patients in truly creative and inspiring ways. I found that even as we have all been social distancing, Bayer employees have searched for and achieved a new level of connectedness over the last few weeks. This unity and focus has demonstrated to me once again the unmatched power of culture to elevate teams, sharpen a sense of shared purpose, and fundamentally transform what a company can achieve.

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*Photo taken before COVID-19*

At Bayer in the U.S., we were at an inflection point only one month ago. We had emerged from an uplifting National Business Meeting with our entire organization; we had recently launched additional life-changing products; and we were well on track to meet our ambitious growth targets for 2020 and beyond. Our strength and vibrancy were at new highs due to a recent cultural transformation that was only one year in the making when the current pandemic struck. It became clear relatively quickly that this crisis would test our entire society, in the case of Bayer challenging our company’s ability to protect our employees and serve our healthcare providers and patients. Through this case study, I will share why I believe in the power of culture and its ability to connect us to a common purpose, why it is even more important to nurture culture in a time of crisis, and how culture defines what teams and companies can achieve.

<sup>1</sup> FleishmanHillard. “Consumers Say Pandemic Has Changed Their Entire View of the World and Their Own Country, According to FleishmanHillard Study.” *FleishmanHillard*, 15 Apr. 2020, [fleishmanhillard.com/2020/04/news-and-opinions/consumers-say-pandemic-has-changed-their-entire-view-of-the-world-and-their-own-country-according-to-fleishmanhillard-study/](https://www.fleishmanhillard.com/2020/04/news-and-opinions/consumers-say-pandemic-has-changed-their-entire-view-of-the-world-and-their-own-country-according-to-fleishmanhillard-study/).

## The importance of culture for business success

While I have been with Bayer for close to 20 years, I think back to an early experience in my pre-Bayer career where a tech start-up I helped launch failed swiftly and memorably. The startup had incredible potential, but its beginnings were doomed by our lack of attention to its culture. In hindsight, my business partners and I weren't really one team. We were a bunch of individuals all chasing our own objectives.

That lesson taught me through experience the old saying, "culture eats strategy for lunch," and has energized my approach to culture building ever since. A strong culture is not a "nice to have," but rather an irreplaceable driver of results. Developing a strong culture takes thoughtfulness, focus, and follow-through. It is truly a fundamental business discipline much like marketing or finance. This is because employees will only believe in and take ownership of a culture when their personal experiences suggest it is real and worthwhile. Culture can only be successfully nurtured when leaders and their organizations understand and apply the full chain of events linking experiences, beliefs, actions, and results.

Employees' experiences will shape their deeply held beliefs about their team and organization. These beliefs, in turn, are what motivate the actions employees will take to drive the business results. When this chain of experiences > beliefs > actions > results is nurtured, teams and companies are elevated and can achieve so much more. If one link in this chain is broken, culture – and business results – will be undermined. Some leaders tend to focus on actions and results. Leaders of culture include experiences and beliefs.

### Five Cultural Beliefs

In late 2018, when I stepped into my new role with Bayer in the Americas region, an employee poll revealed some tangible opportunities to build up our culture. It was an opportunity my leadership team enthusiastically seized upon, recognizing what this work could do for our team and our business. We started a dialogue in the organization that led to us introducing an ambitious set of business goals as well as the five Cultural Beliefs we most needed to focus on to achieve these results: Customer Obsessed, Take Accountability, Speak Up & Listen, One Team and Grow Talent.



Make no mistake, transforming our culture had little to do with posters on the wall – it was hard work. We hosted listening sessions across all levels of the organization, spoke to colleagues in plain, non-corporate language and "watered what we wanted to grow" by recognizing colleagues who created experiences that fostered our Cultural Beliefs and accompanying business results.

## An early test

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly tested our entire society in ways that are relatively unparalleled in recent times. For Bayer, this happened in the early days of our cultural transformation. I recognized that how we handled the crisis would either solidify and enhance our culture or, in the worst case, begin to unwind the best of what we had begun to build. Serving our healthcare providers and patients during and after the crisis would depend on our conviction and strong sense of purpose. For this reason, our leadership team came together on a daily basis to move quickly and with flexibility while ensuring our crisis response would be rooted in our Cultural Beliefs. Below are just a few examples of how our culture shaped our response to COVID-19:

- **Take Accountability:** Ensuring the supply of our products for patients is our highest priority at Bayer, and we worked to keep supply continuous and reliable even as global shipping came under significant constraints. We also recognized that patients across the U.S. were going through real and unexpected financial strains, and we featured a campaign to remind healthcare providers and patients about a Bayer financial support program intended to provide immediate free access to Bayer prescription medicines for uninsured patients facing financial hardship. In addition, we joined the US Government's fight against COVID-19 with the donation of three million tablets of the drug Resochin (chloroquine phosphate).
- **Customer Obsessed:** We understand that our customers need different types of support from Bayer during this time of crisis. Very early on, we asked our field teams to stay home and conduct only virtual interactions with customers in the interest of their own safety and to protect the well-being of the healthcare providers and patients we serve. We also focused on helping our customers address COVID-19 concerns by creating Bayer-sponsored webinars for our healthcare providers. Our first event featured three medical experts who covered topics including facts about COVID-19 and how it spreads; staffing models and minimizing risk to healthcare workers; and priorities for research. In addition, we are driving a rapid and complete digital transformation at Bayer to improve our ability to meet our customers' needs as we gradually emerge from this crisis in a significantly altered healthcare landscape.
- **One Team:** As a father of three boys, ages 8, 11 and 13, I understand well the unanticipated demands now thrust upon families who are schooling and working from home. We are in it together, now embracing, for example, the new "coworkers" (pets, partners, children) who show up in the background of video calls. We have communicated and even celebrated (through a #BayerKids video series) the need for patience and humor during this difficult time. If a co-worker apologizes for disruptions or different patterns of working, employees are encouraged to vocalize their support by saying, "Please don't apologize. This is challenging for all of us and we are all doing the best we can."
- **Grow Talent:** This crisis has moved us to take care of one other in new ways. We have sponsored wellness webinars with all colleagues to address physical and mental stresses during the pandemic – including an especially popular session with celebrity psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Amen (whose well-known clients include Miley Cyrus!). We are keeping an ongoing dialogue

with our managers to provide tips for leading through crisis. Anticipating the financial strain on many households, we approved an early payout for annual performance bonuses. We have also developed new campaigns to keep colleagues informed, engaged and inspired – such as a #BayerHeroes series dedicated to Bayer employees and family members who are selflessly helping customers, patients, co-workers and neighbors during the COVID-19 crisis.

- **Speak Up & Listen:** Weekly leadership calls have allowed us to stay connected and transparent, and to address concerns immediately for colleagues. In fact, during the first month of pandemic restrictions, which was an especially turbulent time for employees and their families, we held weekly calls with all colleagues. I am also personally hosting small, virtual coffee chats with employees to provide a more intimate forum to ask questions or bring up concerns. Many of our most meaningful initiatives have grown out of the feedback we have received through these Speak Up & Listen sessions. I continue to be impressed with the candor and insights from our employees and appreciate their trust and dedication to Bayer.

### **Looking to the future**

The above efforts have given us the chance to step up in a time of crisis, doing our best to protect employees' safety and well-being and deliver on our fundamental purpose as a healthcare company. At the same time, these initiatives have become the new "experiences" of our employees and fed back into the culture we have been building. As a team, we have seen – together – the unmatched power of culture to mobilize our organization to achieve more for the people counting on us. Our Bayer team has come together with a greater sense of purpose, a stronger commitment to one another, and a more pronounced energy to achieve our healthcare goals in a sustainable way today and even post-crisis.