



DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE

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Insights about the Zappos experience

What are the most effective things that Zappos does to keep employees engaged with the company's mission?

Michelli: "From the onset, Zappos socializes applicants so they understand they will be responsible for "defending and growing the Zappos culture." Leadership at Zappos has culled 10 core values that are the foundation for all decisions made by the company. From orientation forward, employees are involved in projects to make the core values at Zappos more prominent. In the book, I offer an example of one of the new hire group projects called "you got faced." In order to deliver the value "build a positive team and family spirit", one group of new employees developed a mechanism for Zapposians to get to more easily get to know one another. Beyond initial onboarding projects, leaders demonstrate, talk about, and structure activities that enliven values like "be humble", "create fun and a little weirdness," and "do more with less." Inexpensive, quick re-energizing, mini-play vacations in the middle of a work day (like Zappos parades,

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spontaneous karaoke, etc) are examples of living and stewarding a values based culture."

...identify and respond to the needs of customers?

Michelli: "Zappos asks about, watches, infers, and tracks customer behavior and input. They are restlessly looking for scalable ways to make the customer experience quicker, easier, and more emotionally engaging. They are not content with satisfaction and as such strive to find "personal emotional connections" with customer that produce a "wow" reaction and that form the basis for customer loyalty and advocacy. At the individual level, staff are charged with and empowered to do what it takes (even if it means sending a customer to a competitor) to secure engagement as opposed to just a sale."

...make sure that every interaction lives up to its brand promise?

Michelli: "Zappos leaders audit all their touch points with customers looking at them from the perspective of operational excellence and whether they deliver wowful happiness. Take a call to the Zappos call center for example. These calls answered by "customer loyalty team members" are reviewed by supervisors and evaluated for accuracy, rapport, and whether they connect and wow customers. In addition, customers are sent a post-call email that asks questions that get at whether customers were merely satisfied or truly "wow'd"."

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How does the management team operate differently from management teams at other companies?

Michelli: "The management team is hard to distinguish from the non-management staff at Zappos. Tony Hsieh the CEO and multi-millionaire sits in a cubicle easily accessible to all employees and that spirit of humility and availability is pervasive. Leaders are required to spend time with their people outside of work, to foster a family spirit beyond the walls of the office. This type of leadership approach is not for everyone but it works for the environment Zappos is seeking to create. Leaders at Zappos also work with staff to develop a true "pipeline" plan that helps employees grow at Zappos and acquire the skills needed for viable succession planning and the creation of a sustainable culture of service excellence."

What limitations are there, if any, for a large established company to adopt some of Zappos practices?

Michelli: "I think there are several major hurdles to overcome. The first of which is the "that will never work here" mindset. While the exact values that drive Zappos should not be imposed everywhere, the passion for values-driven culture is directly applicable across all settings. Moreover, many large established companies have so much hubris and legacy that they are unwilling to drive change. They have lost the entrepreneurial hunger of companies like Zappos or Apple. A visionary leader at an established company can accomplish the crisp break from competitors that Zappos enjoys if he/she creates a

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compelling vision, anchors to defining values, selects for culture fit, inspires people to grow and change, and challenges people for significance beyond success."

What's the weirdest thing you found while doing the research that is NOT IN THE BOOK?

Michelli: "I saw customers and business people coming for a free tour of Zappos in Las Vegas and being oddly giddy. It was almost like they realized a spiritual quest or they were having dinner with their favorite celebrity. The strength of Zappos customer bond built through online videos, twitter, live chat, phone support, and lightening fast delivery has almost created a cult following. I've often said there is a fine line between cult and culture and some of the tour goers demonstrate that the Zappos internal culture is forging a powerful connection externally."

The bottom line: Zappos service is an extension of its culture

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