

18 Tips On Maintaining a Dynamic Office Culture



salesforce small business

Introduction

For many employees, part of the appeal of working for small businesses is the unconventional environment. But the dynamic and sometimes chaotic nature of a brand-new business shifts as companies attempt to scale. Growth can bring many benefits – more efficient processes, more clearly defined roles – but it's critical that founders pay attention to office culture in the growth phase. Why? Because research shows that over the long run, culture will dramatically impact your company's bottom line. One study showed that companies that highly value employees, customers, and

owners grew their revenue 4 times as much as those that did not.

Here at Salesforce, we work hard to help your company grow, and we know how important it is that your office environment remain a dynamic place to work for employees. We reached out to small business founders, CEOs, and researchers to get their best advice on what small to medium businesses can do to keep up the energy at work as they grow. Read on for their wisdom, distilled into 18 tips.

Table of Contents

04 Define your culture

07 Walk the walk

10 Engage your people

13 Balance play and structure

“...strong corporate cultures that facilitate adaptation to a changing world are associated with strong financial results. We found that those cultures highly value employees, customers, and owners and that those cultures encourage leadership from everyone in the firm.”

John Kotter

Harvard Business School professor, *New York Times* best-selling author

Define your culture

Before we share tips on how to create a dynamic office culture, it's important to agree on what we actually mean by the word culture. For the purposes of this ebook, culture is “the norms of behavior and shared values of a group.” That definition came from Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter. And his research shows that it has a tremendous effect on how your company will perform.

**TIP
#1**

Know who you want to be

Culture happens in an office setting whether you're paying attention to it or not. That's why leaders need to be aware of its existence – and to set their course deliberately. "It's all about taking the time and creating the space, early on, to define who you are (or who you want to be) as an organization," says Chris Cancialosi, a partner and founder at gothamCulture. "Creating this clarity and aligning the team to that purpose will help shape and embed those ways of working into the fabric of the organization."

**TIP
#2**

Articulate your values

Everyone should know what the company's core values are, and the list should be no more than three to four. Any more than that, and things just get muddled. Simplus, a 3-year-old Salesforce development and consulting firm with 65 employees, has three core values: "We're underdogs. Critical thinkers. Accountable," says founder and CEO Ryan Westwood. "In our interview process and everything we do, we are all about those things."

**TIP
#3**

Define how values play out at work

It's not enough to know what your values are as a company, says Chris Edmonds, a consultant at the Purposeful Culture Group. You need to actually spell out – or somehow demonstrate – what your three to four core values look like at work. Edmonds recommends taking the time to actually come up with a definition. If integrity is one of your core values, maybe that means you "do what you say you will do," or "if you might miss a commitment, you inform all stakeholders about the issue and how you're addressing that issue."

TIP
#4

Repeat, repeat, repeat

What is your company's big, hairy, audacious goal? Why do you exist as a business? "Most people in companies cannot answer those questions," says Westwood. So the founder wrote a one-page document defining his company's audacious goal and its core values, and then repeated it in every meeting for eight weeks. He told his executive team to do the same. He'd quiz employees in the halls as he passed them. "It took eight weeks of repeating it obsessively over 100 times before everybody got it right. What is shocking to me is most people don't listen to their CEOs," he says.

TIP
#5

Share the company's innovation story

As companies add employees quickly, some may not know the early history of the company's formation and growth, says Lacey Leone, of USC's Center for Effective Organizations at the Marshall School of Business. Often there's not much time in the daily grind to tell the tale. But hanging on to that story can serve as a unifying narrative as the team grows. "You can leverage it to inspire," Leone says. "You can use it when you reach out to customers." If the company's story still has something to say about who the company wants to be, it can be a touchstone for defining culture.

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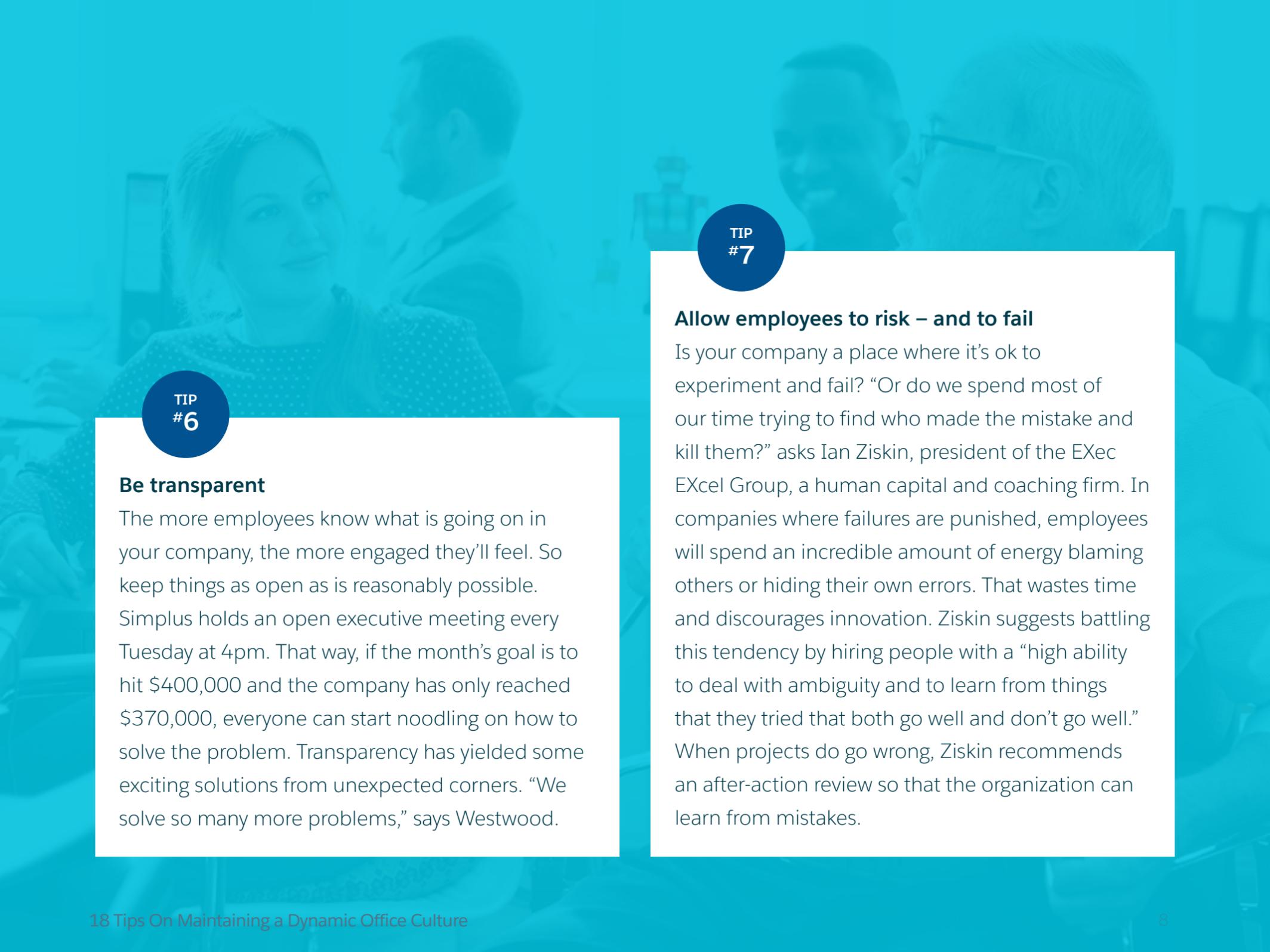
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Walk the walk

It's not enough to talk about your office culture or your values – employees need to see them demonstrated in order to truly get on board. Leaders must reflect company values in their own behavior.





TIP
#6

Be transparent

The more employees know what is going on in your company, the more engaged they'll feel. So keep things as open as is reasonably possible. Simplus holds an open executive meeting every Tuesday at 4pm. That way, if the month's goal is to hit \$400,000 and the company has only reached \$370,000, everyone can start noodling on how to solve the problem. Transparency has yielded some exciting solutions from unexpected corners. "We solve so many more problems," says Westwood.

TIP
#7

Allow employees to risk – and to fail

Is your company a place where it's ok to experiment and fail? "Or do we spend most of our time trying to find who made the mistake and kill them?" asks Ian Ziskin, president of the EXec EXcel Group, a human capital and coaching firm. In companies where failures are punished, employees will spend an incredible amount of energy blaming others or hiding their own errors. That wastes time and discourages innovation. Ziskin suggests battling this tendency by hiring people with a "high ability to deal with ambiguity and to learn from things that they tried that both go well and don't go well." When projects do go wrong, Ziskin recommends an after-action review so that the organization can learn from mistakes.

**TIP
#8**

Leaders, admit your mistakes

Creating a culture where workers feel secure enough to own their messes starts at the top. Melinda Emerson, a small business consultant known as the SmallBizLady, likes to update her team on her own projects – including mistakes she’s made. This helps defuse the fear of admitting failure that most people feel when their projects go off the rails. But in today’s fast-paced world, the quicker you can admit mistakes and move toward finding a solution, the better the impact on the bottom line.

**TIP
#9**

Leaders, act out your values

A company’s culture starts at the top. If a core value at your company is “work hard, play hard,” but every time someone plays air hockey the CEO stares them down, then employees will feel like the core values are a joke. Or say your company is all about putting customers first. “If the CEO has a calendar conflict and he drops a meeting with a potential customer to go meet with his brother-in-law or accountant or fill-in-the-blank, and he does that sort of thing enough, he is creating cultural confusion,” says Kotter, the HBS professor.

**TIP
#10**

Signal culture in physical space

Ziskin, the consultant and coach, suggests using what he calls “artifacts” – office set-up, dress-code, decor – to reflect a company’s culture and values. A startup might begin very informally in someone’s garage, but then it loses that informality when it moves to an office. An open office plan and casual dress code can keep things feeling more flat, Ziskin says.

Ask yourselves these questions when interviewing to find top talent that fits into your culture.

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Engage your people

You know what kind of culture you want; you've made sure it's being talked about and demonstrated by the leadership, and now you want everyone on board. What steps do you need to take so that a dynamic office culture is not just something the C-suite talks about, but something that your employees actually feel, and ultimately buy into themselves? Read on.

TIP
#11**Look for culture over skill**

It's easier to hire people who naturally share the values of your company than train professionals to adopt your company's values. So give preference to job candidates who already share your firm's values. That doesn't mean you don't want a diversity of opinions and perspectives at work. But when it comes to the core values, "hiring for culture over skill helps to buttress the mission of the company," says Curtis Blair, founder of Froghair, a small business specializing in corporate gifts and awards.

TIP
#12**Regularly solicit internal feedback**

Edmonds suggests having employees provide feedback on their leadership a few times year to get a sense of whether teams are aligned with the company's values. So, if critical thinking is a core value, teams can rate whether they feel free to offer helpful criticisms or whether their inputs get shut down. Employee surveys are a great way to track whether company values have trickled into teams, and for identifying areas where work is needed.

TIP
#13

Recruit culture champions

As important as leadership is for setting the strategic tone for an organization and embodying its core values, it is rank-and-file workers who can buoy or flatten attempts from the top to create a dynamic office culture. When Westwood wanted to stress the emphasis of his company's core value of being "underdogs," he asked a group of "change champions" – people who are influential and respected within the organization, but not in

leadership – to tackle the problem. They came up with the idea to wear "underdog" outfits: dog costumes gussied up with Superman-style capes. "It was amazingly effective," Westwood says. "People would go into a meeting and say, 'That's not what an underdog would do!'" Having a little fun – from the bottom up – can go a long way toward reinforcing the kind of culture you want to have.

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Balance play and structure

As you grow, hang on to the best of what small organizations do well, but don't be afraid to adopt the best practices of more mature organizations. There is strength in every company phase and change is not only inevitable, it's a good thing.





TIP
#14

Copy what large organizations do well

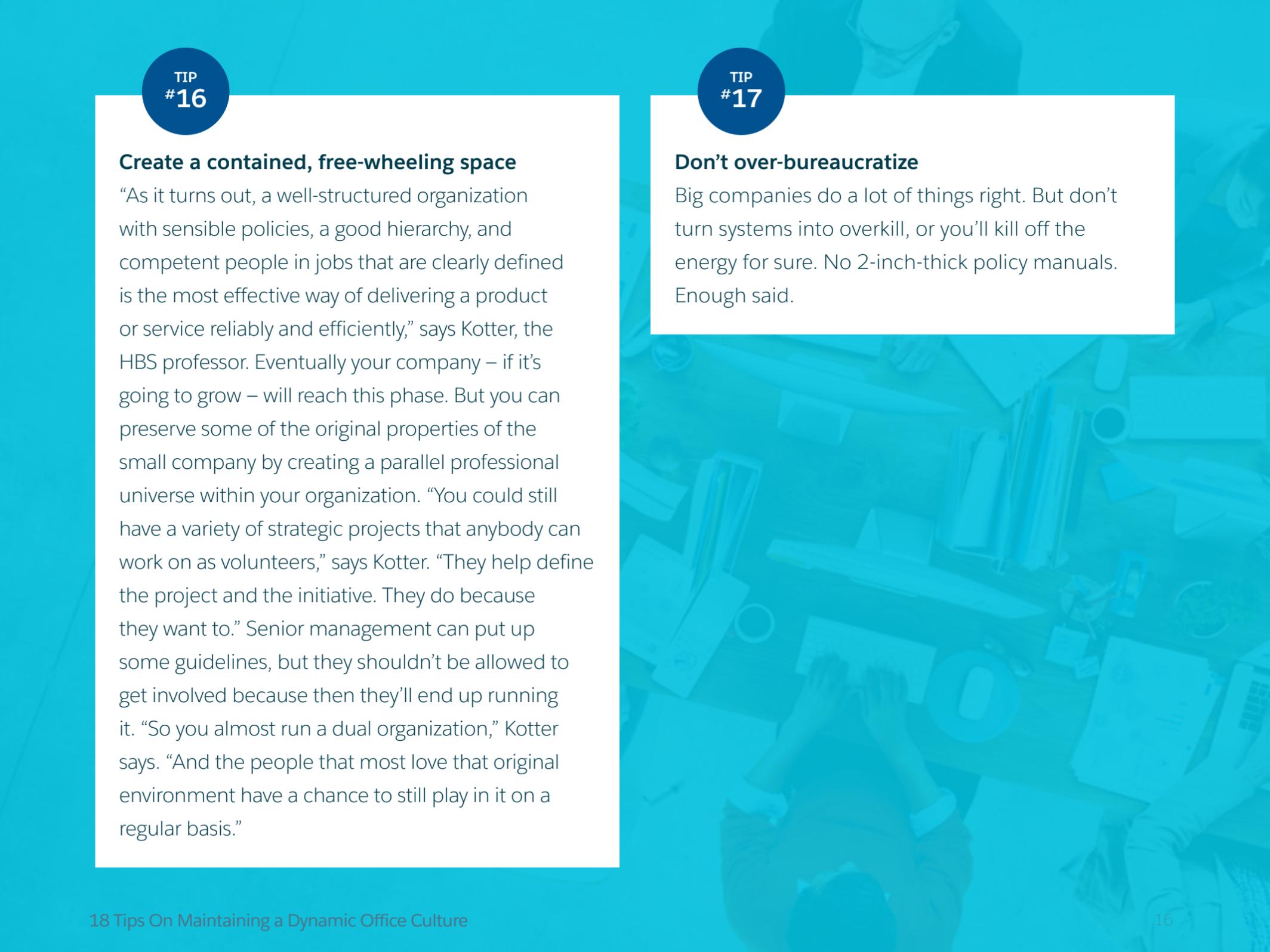
“Big organizations get a bad rap for being big and bureaucratic, being places where it’s hard to get work done,” says Alec Levenson, an economist and co-author with psychologist Jennifer Deal of *What Millennials Want from Work: How to Maximize Engagement in Today’s Workforce*. “Smaller organizations have this myth about being more entrepreneurial places where it’s easier to get things done, where it’s more relaxed, there’s less process, it’s more enjoyable to work there as an employee.” But life is a lot more complex than that, Levenson says.

As you grow, you’ll need to take on some of the structures of a larger company to operate effectively.

Smaller organizations often tend to have a flatter management structure, with leadership stepping in to fight fires alongside regular staff. Big companies are more formalized and often have effective systems for managing and developing their people. As your company grows in size, learn from what large companies do well: shift to a more hands-off management approach that gives people the room they need to figure things out and succeed on their own. Making regular feedback to employees part of your company culture, even implementing a formal review system as the company grows, can actually help keep employees more satisfied as the company shifts into a new phase.

TIP
#15**Consider succession planning**

A downside of being in a smaller organization is that there may not be much room for an employee to grow beyond his or her current job description. If that's the case, "It's much better to be open and clear about it," says Levenson. "You may want her to be there another five years, but if that's going to be stifling and you have nothing for her in her career...take the mature, adult way of approaching the transition." Smaller companies need to be thoughtful about succession planning as they scale up. This is something that even more established companies struggle with, though they have an advantage simply because their sheer numbers give them more internal candidates qualified to step into a role. But being open about career prospects during a growth phase may allow you to retain some of your valuable employees if you can find new opportunities for them. Or, it may give you more time to prepare for their departure if there's not an internal next step.



TIP
#16

Create a contained, free-wheeling space

“As it turns out, a well-structured organization with sensible policies, a good hierarchy, and competent people in jobs that are clearly defined is the most effective way of delivering a product or service reliably and efficiently,” says Kotter, the HBS professor. Eventually your company – if it’s going to grow – will reach this phase. But you can preserve some of the original properties of the small company by creating a parallel professional universe within your organization. “You could still have a variety of strategic projects that anybody can work on as volunteers,” says Kotter. “They help define the project and the initiative. They do because they want to.” Senior management can put up some guidelines, but they shouldn’t be allowed to get involved because then they’ll end up running it. “So you almost run a dual organization,” Kotter says. “And the people that most love that original environment have a chance to still play in it on a regular basis.”

TIP
#17

Don’t over-bureaucratize

Big companies do a lot of things right. But don’t turn systems into overkill, or you’ll kill off the energy for sure. No 2-inch-thick policy manuals. Enough said.

TIP
#18

Provide the perks people actually care about

It's not about the ping-pong table or the crushed ice machine. Employees value perks that really add benefit to their lives. And by being in a small company, they're likely trading the security of a big corporate job for the adventure of a smaller organization. That might mean they've taken on some personal and financial risk. As the company grows and you are able to afford to, offer the perks that employees really care about: 401k matches, transit benefits, work-from-home policies, and parenting-related perks like egg-freezing or long-term paid leave. Also, make sure your vacation policy (and your culture) actually encourages people to take their vacations.



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