



FOSTERING CULTURE

A leader's guide to purposefully shaping culture

SHANE
JACKSON

Chapter 36

Environments Matter

One of the recurring discussions we used to have among the leaders in the early days of our company was about dress code—the old debate about what we should wear to the office. Business? Business casual? Casual? Pajamas? What qualifies as business casual? Can women wear leggings? What about casual Fridays? Are t-shirts allowed? Ugh.

In one of these discussions, someone was arguing that being required to wear a certain type of clothing to work was an outdated concept. “I can be just as productive wearing jeans as I can a suit,” he pointed out. “In fact, I’d probably be more productive because a suit is so uncomfortable.”

This is a valid point, but I observed that you cannot deny that wearing different types of clothing makes you feel differently and act differently. Regardless of how comfortable you are, when you wear a tuxedo or a formal gown, you feel more, well formal. And generally, you act more formally as well. You certainly act differently than when you are wearing gym clothes.

I tried a different track. “What would you think if you went to see a movie about the Civil War, and instead of wearing soldier uniforms, the actors all wore 1980s era sweat suits?”

“Well, that’s different. That wouldn’t fit their roles.”

But don’t we play different roles in our lives? We play our work role, our friend role, our parent role, or our sibling role. In each of these roles, we speak differently, act differently, even hold our posture differently.

If you played sports, you remember feeling the difference between the practice uniform and the game uniform. When you put the game uniform on, it just felt different. It hung a little heavier or fit a little better. But mainly, you remember how it

made you feel—it's game time. Time for the adrenaline to get going.

As an actor, I have played many different roles. When you take on a new role, you attempt to get into the mindset of that character in that setting. You work to feel less like yourself and more like the character. It may not happen right away, but once you put on the costume and see yourself in the mirror, something changes. You truly feel different.

This isn't just about clothing. The set, the props, everything on stage or in a movie must be right. It helps the actor, but more importantly, it communicates vital information to the audience. Every detail that is seen and heard has to be right in order to effectively transport the viewer to that time and place.

I was not always in tune to the impact that environment can have on a person. When I first got married, I was moving out of my man cave house that I shared with other single buddies and into a home with a woman for the first time. At first, I was skeptical about all the decorating that she wanted to do—I mean that bean bag was perfectly comfortable. But since I wanted to stay married for a while, I decided to let her do her thing.

One day I entered a room she had recently decorated and turned to her and said, "I love coming into this room. I just love the way it makes me feel."

My wife is too big of a person to say, "I told you so" and just took my changed attitude as a compliment.

Spaces affect how we feel, how we think, and how we relate.

Have you ever gone back and visited a place from your childhood? Maybe the home you grew up in, your high school or a park you played in? How did being in that space make you feel?

Nostalgic, young, old?

But it's not merely spaces that have this effect. It is everything in our environment.

How many times have you heard a song for the first time in a while and you felt the care-free moments of your college days? Or

smelled something cooking and experienced a powerful memory of your grandmother? Or pulled a shirt from the bottom of your drawer and remembered the nerves you felt when you wore it on a date with the person who is now your spouse?

Our mind creates associations with the elements of our environment that puts us into certain frames of mind. Walking into a stadium makes us feel energized while going to a funeral home makes us somber.

When we walk into our bedroom, our body says “Oh, I guess I should get ready to go to sleep.” Going into the gym causes our heart rate to increase and adrenaline to flow. Going into an office or workspace sharpens our focus and brings our to-do list to our conscious attention.

In our company, we have done everything we can to create an office atmosphere that makes people feel like they are somewhere special, and therefore, that they should act special.

One time a recently hired executive told me, “I used to be so cheap when it came to spending money on the office environment. Who cares? It’s just the place we work. If you want to be somewhere nice go to your house or a trendy restaurant. But I have totally changed that view since coming to work here. Every day I come in and am surrounded by beauty. It inspires me to act in a beautiful way. Plus, it makes me actually want to be in the office, so I guess that’s good for the company!”

Thinking about environments has become even more challenging in a post-pandemic world, where remote and hybrid work have become so much more prevalent.

We must realize that whether we are working from home or in an office, the truth about the importance of our environment holds. To the extent possible, someone working remotely should take advantage of these truths by creating a separate environment within their home so that when they enter it, their mind says “OK, I’m ready to work.” The same principle applies to what we wear. While we certainly don’t need to dress up to the same extent as

when we are among other people, it is still helpful to put on our “work costume” to signal to our body and our brain what we need from it.

I think most of us learned from the pandemic that people can do more working from home than we thought. Indeed, in 2024 the percentage of people working remotely across the country is significantly higher than prior to 2020. However, something that nearly everyone learned (or had reinforced) from the pandemic was how vital it is to be with other people. Businesses everywhere continue to struggle with the mix of virtual and onsite. Certainly, some roles lend themselves to remote work more than others and some teams can work effectively remotely and some need to be together. We must continually test to find this balance.

It is interesting, though, that while we hear about the many companies that become virtual after the pandemic, we rarely hear about the many companies who were completely virtual prior to the pandemic but began looking for more opportunities to bring their people together. They may not be able to get everyone together all the time, but having seen the energy and connection that comes from being in the same space together, they try to create those environments through events like all-company meetings.

I am a fan of all-company meetings and we have used them for a long time. We gather not only to update everyone in the company with the big picture and other information they need to do their jobs, but also to cast a vision and create a picture of who we are and where we are going. For years, I would drive the team that helped me put on these meetings crazy with all the details that I insisted on directing and personally inspecting. I would check the lighting, video, and sound. I wanted a specific dress code for anyone who was going to be speaking. One time, someone's aid to me, “It’s just a company meeting; this isn’t the theater.”

“Oh, but isn’t it?” I replied. “I’m trying to create the right atmosphere for people to learn and be inspired. If there are things

in the environment that distract from that, then the message gets watered down and we will be wasting our time.”

Over the years, our teams have learned my idiosyncrasies and take pride in creating the perfect environment for our meetings.

Creating an environment conducive to communication isn't just about offices or company meetings though. It's just as important in one-on-one settings.

I know a guy who once played offensive lineman on a football team at a Division I school. This is a huge guy. An injury kept him from going pro, but he still looks like he could easily go around some defenders today. It cracks me up when I hear him speak to one of his young children. He crouches down to them, his voice goes up an octave, and his words sound more like cooing than English. Can you imagine this massive guy on the football field cooing at his teammates as they drive down the field?

Acting differently in different situations and with different people doesn't necessarily mean you are being fake. It means that you are communicating in the style and method that is most effective for the other person. You would never speak to your children using the same tone or language you use to speak to a work colleague. And you shouldn't even speak to each work colleague the exact same way.

Remember also that much of communication is nonverbal. People often get more meaning from your expression than they do you words. Your appearance and everything else they see and hear says something to them. Create the environment that reflects how you want your team, family, or friends to feel and act. Whether virtual or in-person, be as purposeful about what the environment communicates as you are the words you choose.

It's Not Just How, But When And Where You Communicate

If you are married, my guess is that you have experienced a day like this:

You're up early to prepare for a last-minute meeting that was called for 8:00 a.m. regarding a new problem with an important customer. After the meeting, you spend the rest of the day behind a closed door with two coworkers creating a presentation to show the customer how you're going to resolve the issue. You work so hard that you don't realize until 2:30 that you haven't eaten lunch, and by that time, the café is closed, so you eat a lunch consisting of food from the vending machine.

After work, you speed to the park to pick up your daughter from soccer practice and then order the most nutritious sounding items at the drive through. Once home, you put the foil-wrapped food on plates to pass for some semblance of a family meal.

After dinner, your son remembers that he has a project due at school tomorrow that he hasn't started, so after running to the store to buy poster board, glue, and glitter, you spend an hour reading to him off of Wikipedia about the Industrial Revolution while he draws.

You make sure the kids are bathed and in bed. You brush your teeth, get in bed, and pull a book off your nightstand, but quickly realize you're too tired to read. Then, just as you reach over to turn out the bedside light, you hear this from your spouse who is lying next to you: "So, something you said the other day really bothered me, and I'd like to talk about it."

Seriously? Now?

There is a time and a place for everything. The environment matters.

Continue Reading



SHANE  JACKSON



About the Author

Shane Jackson is a writer, speaker, and business leader – and the author of two books: *Fostering Culture: A Leader's Guide to Purposefully Shaping Culture* (2018; second edition 2024) and *This Is the Thing: About Life, Joy, and Owning Your Purpose* (Greenleaf Book Group, 2025). As president of Jackson Healthcare®, the trusted authority in healthcare talent and workforce solutions, Shane puts into practice the same principles he writes and speaks about. He has served as a contributor for *Fast Company* and *Forbes*, shares insights on ShaneJackson.com, and is a keynote and motivational speaker at conferences and events across the country.



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