

Leadership Lessons from Chick-fil-A

About 40 years ago, marketer Steve Robinson went to work for a growing company called Chick-fil-A. The hiring process took more than five months of talking over desks and dinner tables, in various homes and offices, to dozens of people.

Finally, Robinson said it straight out to owner Truett Cathy: “What are you looking for in the ideal marketing candidate? And am I the guy?”

“I want to know that you and I can work together until one of us dies,” Cathy told him. “The most important decision we make here is who we invite to join the business.”

Robinson was floored. “I didn’t know what to say,” he wrote in his book, *Covert Cows and Chick-fil-A: How Faith, Cows, and Chicken Built an Iconic Brand*.

It was another two weeks before Robinson had a job offer. But then, he stayed for 35 years, retiring soon after Cathy passed away. And even in retirement, Robinson is still cheering for the company.

He’s not the only one. Even after a public-relations crisis—prompted by president Dan Cathy’s affirmation of traditional marriage—that should’ve tanked sales among a population increasingly supportive of gay marriage, Chick-fil-A is growing stronger and faster than ever.

TGC asked Robinson about the fast-food restaurant that inspires such an unlikely level of loyalty among both employees and also customers—and what lessons it can teach the church. Here’s what he said.

Surround yourself with people you trust. Then give them freedom.

The length of time it took to hire me wasn’t unique. In fact, it takes even longer—about a year—to vet someone as a Chick-fil-A operator. (The acceptance rate is very low—last year, only 100 operator applications out of 68,000 were accepted.)

There’s a great advantage to hiring slowly. Since Truett trusted our integrity of character and judgment, he was willing to give us great freedom. That led to an aspect of the culture I think is powerful: people were willing to take risks.

For example, when a fire shut down a major interstate in Atlanta, Chick-fil-A operators provided free food for first responders, then later for carpooling commuters. When an elderly couple trapped in their home after Hurricane Harvey called Chick-fil-A to order food and a boat, employees sent the boat. And when LGBTQ people were protesting outside the restaurants, operators gave them free food and lemonade.

When you attract the right operators, they understand that every customer interaction, every relationship in the community, is a reflection on them, the Chick-fil-A brand and, even more seriously for Truett personally, the reputation of his Savior.

So, they're protective about who they'll invite to work with them. They aren't going to bat 1.000; they're going to get some wildcards now and then; but the hit rate is very high. Turnover is less than a third of the industry standard.

And really, what could be better than exercising your entire personality and value system in the workplace? Truett wasn't siloed. He didn't separate his faith from work or from fun. He figured out that if we lived out our faith in all areas, people would notice.

Write down your purpose. Then actually use it to make decisions.

Chick-fil-A's corporate purpose is "to glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us, and to have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A." Some might say that's too broad or too vague—it really could apply to almost any organization.

When we wrote the corporate purpose in 1982, we weren't writing it from scratch but from decades of Truett's values and his leadership already inscribed on the business by the way he behaved and how he made choices.

If your purpose statement doesn't affect how you make choices, it's worthless.

That purpose statement became one of the greatest litmus tests of how we made decisions in the business. We'd think, *Okay, does this decision or initiative or investment have the potential to glorify God? Will it have a positive influence on others? Is it good stewardship?*

So, there is no question that it's a broad statement. But it is specific to Chick-fil-A in how it's used to make decisions and govern what they spend money on and commit talent to. Any business can have a good statement, but if it doesn't affect how you lead and make choices, it's worthless.

Don't be afraid to choose biblical principles, even when they seem like they'll never work.

At one of our first meetings, I realized Truett was tithing corporate profits. He also kept the stores closed on Sundays, worked hard to eliminate all debt, offered college scholarships to employees, and allowed us to choose kids' meal toys not based on what would catch a child's eye, but on building meaningful relationships in a family.

On the surface, none of these may appear to be good business decisions. But keeping the stores closed gives Chick-fil-A employees a chance to worship and rest. Eliminating the debt

forced us to grow more slowly, which allowed us to build the right infrastructure. Offering college scholarships means operators attract talented young workers and keep them longer.

The principles behind the behavior are often counter to current paradigms of culture and business acumen. All those things make Chick-fil-A not only unique but almost mystical—what is this business all about? Why is it humming along the way it hums?

It's largely because Truett Cathy was a student of the Bible, more than any other book he ever read. When something in the Bible struck him as a good principle, he tried to live it out. His obedience, in my opinion, was rooted in his gratefulness for God's grace toward him.

Recognize the importance of culture.

Building an organization isn't about marketing or branding strategy. It's about culture. And culture comes from leadership.

Leaders have to live out Chick-fil-A's purpose statement. They have to demonstrate it in how they talk, in how decisions are made, in how they behave around customers and operators.

Culture comes from the language and behavior of leaders.

Culture is created in community. God didn't create us to live alone, but to have a community of people to lean on and help support each other. We have that in the church, but there's no reason why a business environment can't also be a supportive and helpful community. But that almost always has to come down from the leadership.

To build better culture, stay where you are.

One of the biggest things that hinders an organization's ability to build a strong, clear, sustainable culture is leadership turnover. One of the benefits at Chick-fil-A was how little turnover we had at the top. I didn't think I'd be there 35 years, but I was. Our CFO was there 36 years, and I could go down the list. Not one of us went there thinking this was the last place we'd work.

But the values of the culture fit us. And Truett empowered us. The byproduct for him was that, because we didn't go anywhere, we built institutional knowledge—not just in strategy and operating systems but in how we talked about things, in how we knew what was important or not. You can't do that if you have leaders turning over every three to five years.

You can put all the corporate purposes on paper that you want, but if it means one thing to this guy and another to a leader who comes three or four years later who wants to rewrite it, then it's just words. If you don't have continuity in leadership, it's difficult to live out a purpose and clear values. I think that's true in business, in ministry, in churches. Turnover is the No. 1 enemy of cultural sustainability.

Take the long view. Trade chasing numbers for building relationships.

I came to the business in the 1980s with some paradigms, particularly some marketing paradigms on how to drive sales. Within two years I realized, “Wait a sec—with this kind of culture and this operator model, we shouldn’t look like all the other fast-food brands or behave like them.” That was the fundamental turning point for me.

How do you channel that into different behavior? It was a journey of more than 30 years. We focused on creating enduring relationships with customers instead of driving transactions. I didn’t enter the business thinking that way. Nobody else does either. Everything you read is on transactions, analytics, and data. It’s potentially counterproductive to building relationships with customers.

We want the relationships, not to end with just a click.

It’s easy for people to sit in an office somewhere and count, weigh, and measure every marketing or media investment to figure out how many clicks or transactions we got. That’s easy. It’s harder to figure out how we were going to actually show people we cared, to engage with them, to treat them like individuals, to give them more than they felt they were paying for.

That takes leaders willing to have a longer-term perspective of building the brand—or even the local church. It’s not just trying to get people in the pews but trying to build relationships with them. What are the issues they’re struggling with? How could the gospel speak to them in ways they don’t even know about?

This can be especially hard at church because you often have a lot of people in church leadership outside the staff, such as elders and deacons, who live in a performance-based environment at work or school. It’s even in the books they read.

There is a place for data-driven performance, but it must be held in healthy tension. We wanted the relationships, not to end with just a click.

Even when you’ve arrived, you haven’t.

Working for a company that has a reputation for integrity is scary.

That’s because it’s easier to build something than to sustain it. All you have to do is start taking a little of that for granted and it can lead to spiritual and intellectual laziness, to mediocrity, and ultimately to complete collapse. And that can happen very, very quickly.

Let’s not be reading our own press clippings. Let’s try to get better every day. Let’s give people an incredible experience and gracious service. And let’s remember we didn’t build this on our own strength and brains but were blessed by God’s grace.