




# Organizational Culture

Video-Podcast Interview Transcript



Blue Ridge Crossroads SBDC and Twin County Chamber of Commerce  
TRANSCRIPT OF A VIDEO-PODCAST INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY CHAPPELL BUSINESS STRATEGIES



As staffing issues continue through 2021 businesses are looking for answers to attract and retain adequate levels of employee support. Numerous studies recently released have exposed the core issues are not related to wages and perks, but rather to the culture of businesses.

With these findings in mind, Penny Chappell Luckraft, founder of Chappell Business Strategies, sought out a long-time employee of Lands' End to discuss the topic of Organizational Culture.

Lands' End has often been highlighted as a poster child of successful organizational culture, and many times has received the honor of Best Place to Work Awards.

The following is a transcript of the interview with Lynette Dornink, Contact Center Manager, Lands' End Business Outfitters.

**Penny:**

Thank you for joining me today as we discuss a topic of growing interest. And frankly, it's a subject that is of significant and timely relevance for organizations of all sizes and across all industries. It's a topic I'm very passionate about organizational culture. I'm passionate because I know the magnitude of impact that culture has had on the success and/ or the struggles of organizations having worked in cultures that were less than desirable. I experienced the stress that this placed on the human resources of a company, as well as how the bottom line suffered as a result.

Conversely, I spent over 16 years working for a fantastic organization that really understood the value of a healthy culture, Lands' End, the apparel and home products company that we all know and love. To help me explore the topic today is a woman who I have long admired, Lynette Dornink. Lynette, and I work together in the B2B division of Lands' End for many years. And in fact, Lynette still works there. She just today celebrated her anniversary at the company. Welcome Lynette.

**Lynette:** I really thank you so, so much.

**Penny:** So, you just celebrated 25 years today, you said. Congratulations!

**Lynette:** Exactly. Yeah. It's one of those things where time has flown. And yet it's been such a cool thing to work here and to have met people like you. It's very much a family here, which is wonderful.

**Penny:** That's awesome. You know, unlike generations past, it's really unusual for anyone to stay at an organization. And I think in this day, the average is about five years for someone to stay at a company. This pandemic has changed everything, though, that will probably drop. If I had to guess Lynette, I would venture to say that the culture at Lands' End plays at least a part and why you've chosen to remain there this long. Is that right?

**Lynette:** There's no doubt the brand of Lands' End is what brought me here. And the culture has what has allowed me and made me stay here. I'll say there is a community, a family feeling, a feeling of doing things together, that it's priceless.

**Penny:** Right. That's really neat. I know that I, like so many others, really appreciated the culture that was put in place by the company's founder, Gary Comer. He truly valued his employees and his customers, and it showed through in every aspect of the culture there. Would you agree?

**Lynette:** Yeah. Completely. You know, Gary started this company back in 1963, and he was a writer, a creative writer by trade. And I know you remember some of his quotes, but one of my favorite is the quote that says - again from Gary Comer- "Take care of the employees. They'll take care of their customers, and the rest will take care of itself." And it's simple. And yet it is really true. So, yeah. He was such an entrepreneur. And he came from Chicago up here to literally rural Wisconsin farm country. And here we are almost 60 years later.

**Penny:** I was doing the math the other day. I was like, wow, it's 60. I remember I was all excited at 50 years. Right?

I know one of my favorite quotes from Gary Comer was: "I will never be critical of any action you take on behalf of the customer." That simple statement empowered every employee there - from the people on the phone talking to the customer all the way down to the end of the process, the person packing up the orders to ship out to the customer - everyone was empowered to stop the order or do whatever was necessary to ensure that the customer had a good experience. It is so powerful.

**Lynette:** That is completely true.

**Penny:** So, I know that the organization of Lands' End is not about a lot of Gary Comer or inspirational quotes that are just hanging on the walls of the office or the campus there. But it really was a philosophy. And it still is a philosophy that's a living, breathing way of doing business. I find when I was there that people really took a lot of pride in working for Lands' End. Is that true?

**Lynette:** Yeah, completely. I know you mentioned about the idea of someone that's on the phone or a person that's shipping the product that extends out to also the technical designers, people that are designing their product, they're thinking about what have I heard that the customer wants? What have I heard her say? In Business [Lands' End Business Outfitters] it is - what are the industries? What are the industries that are thriving? That oh, my gosh. If we did this, this would help them. And again, back to your point at order time, then what is it that in any situation, this doesn't look right. Somebody needs to look

at this. We not only want people to do that, but it is. It's ingrained in the culture here, but it doesn't look right – say something.

**Penny:** Yeah, I know.

**Lynette:** We're lucky.

**Penny:** I found that one of the reasons I thoroughly enjoyed working there was just how empowered it made me feel to be able to take control of the advancement of the business interests. It was something of more value. And can you think of any other ways that Lands' End has benefited from the legacy of Gary Comer or the culture that's there?

**Lynette:** Yeah. I think probably one of the biggest things – You know, again, he started in Chicago, on Elston Avenue in 1963. And then in the early to mid-eighties, he was looking for a place to be able to build a company. Instead of him and a dozen people, he could see (again, amazing entrepreneur), he could see the need for designers, merchants, to be able to develop product and figure out what is it going to look like, you know, planners, inventory planners, that type of thing, as well as individuals, like with what I work in, you know, people being the voice with the customer, finding individuals that would monogram items, embroider hem pants.

And he came here to Dodgeville, Wisconsin. And I promise you, when I say rural, I mean it. We are surrounded by to our west is this beautiful corn field. And to our south is this beautiful soybean field. And it changes every year depending on how the crop rotation goes. But what he knew, what he wanted

was people that knew how to work. And in general, especially at first, what he found was women that were farm wives that had work at home. But coming here and getting health insurance and a good wage was a wonderful thing for the economy and for their families.

And that's how it started. And now it is moved into we are one of the no doubt major employers in this area. And it is families work here, you know?

Oftentimes people say, Lynette you work at Lands' End you must know my grandma. And remember, there's 5000 people that work here. And I'm like, what's her name? Because I might yeah, it's families. It's families that work here, generation after generation. And like, right now, we're going through, like every other company in the nation, we're looking for people to help us during peak.

And it's a tough economy. It is a employers, employees, excuse me, market. But still, we're looking for people that want to come and get a good wage, are hard workers and dependable. We can teach them how to do things, no doubt. But that 'thing' that's here that we're lucky to have that Wisconsin hard working farm thing. It's been a huge benefit to our company.

**Penny:** Yeah, absolutely. There's I think you kind of hit on a key point there that makes culture so valuable to any organizations. The fact that when you hire likeminded people to work within an organization, it doesn't matter what their skill set or their experience is really because you can teach them the fundamentals of 'how to' but teaching them the values and the ethics and so forth that build an organization - that's what we call culture - you can't teach that.

And kind of going back to Lands' End - working at Lands' End and Gary Comer's vision for not just the company, but for the people that worked for Lands' End - he was always giving back. And a huge example of that, of course, is the activity center and the Olympic size pool and all that's involved in the activity center. It was his way of giving back. It was accessible and still is accessible to all of everyone who works or even part time or whatever seasonal can take advantage of that.

**Lynette:** Retirees. Everybody.

**Penny:** Yes, yes.

**Lynette:** A very, very giving man. And even the idea of giving back to community, that's what we focus on here, too. As you can imagine, we have organizations or businesses that come to us and say, will you support our golf outing that we're doing, or will you support this particular event that's happening? And what we really try to focus on is if our community, if our employees are involved with it, we're all in it. And it's a beautiful thing. So we have individuals - I have a couple of things throughout the year that Lands'



End says 'yes' to in donations. And I bet most employees do. And it's big organizations. It's the Heart Association. It's the breast cancer research. It runs and walks and all the things that you'd think of, but it's really focused on if our employees are vested in it, Lands' End needs to be vested in. Right. It's pretty dang cool.

**Penny:** Yes, it is. Yes, it is So, a twofold question for you. How important would you say culture is? We've talked quite a bit about as I've touched on that. But how difficult is it for a company to maintain a culture?

**Lynette:** Yeah. You know, I think my experience and you and I lived through some of those same times, Penny, when a vision of a Vice President or higher comes in, and you were talking about how things didn't fit. On the other hand, when we stay tried and true to what Mr Comer built here and with the concepts of what he knew worked and what have worked for this many years. And that is, it sounds so simple - it is be fair, be kind, be responsible, be respectful, have fun with each other, have like and enjoy each other.

And that is not only how employees interact, but that's what we want with our customers, too. It's the same things. And here in Business Outfitters, we are really fortunate to have relationships with our clients. That's what makes this tick is that there's a retention of them. But we actually just had someone retire. And she had been with us 37 years. And she told the clients that she worked with, that she was leaving and here's who they should contact. And the responses she got back, everything from can I still share Christmas and birthday cards with you?

Can I still do that? Because I'll miss you. And I'll miss talking to you every month. And that's a pretty common thing. And the idea of those relationships, yes, we sell product. Yes. We sell services, and they are wonderful quality. And the value of them is wonderful. How we do that is through relationships and that's culture. That is our culture. And like, for example, my boss. So I just celebrated 25 years. I'm a youngin' compared to her. She just celebrated 42 years. And I'm surrounded within my peer group by individuals like one I can think of. Steve is at 35 years. Laura is at 27 years. Patty is at 19 years, only 19. Margaret is at 23 years. It's pretty common, right. And even with our consultants, that's what we call our folks on the phones that work with customers and Business Outfitters. Our average tenure is ten years. I know that's unusual. And clients are wowed by that. And what we just try to do is not take that for granted. Like, of course, people stick around here. It's not a that one's not simple because there's a lot of places people could go. But we have friends here. And it would be hard to leave here because of the relationships that have been built and because we're all, you know, marching towards the same things. And that is what can we do to help businesses grow? That's pretty cool.

**Penny:** That's cool. And you're right. That's just such a fundamental thing is why I wanted to interview to and why I'm really focusing on culture in my business, because I work and speak with and work with businesses all throughout the country who are struggling to attract and retain employees. And having spent all those years at Lands' End, and I understand how it's not easy, but as you said, it's really simple. At the same time, it really isn't. So, I guess one final question then for those who may be listening, Lands' End is a sizable organization - you said there are 5000 employees. So, for all of our listeners who are owners of small to medium sized businesses or perhaps

entrepreneurs who are thinking about starting businesses, would you say that they should also give thought to developing their culture?

**Lynette:** There's no doubt. And that culture starts with, you know, role modeling and being what you want your employees to be with the customers.

**Penny:** Right.

**Lynette:** And again, it is building trust. Rapport, you know, promoting the company, the respectful relationships. When something goes wrong, do the right thing and be fair. And, you know, oftentimes the question that we ask customers if something goes wrong is what would make this better? What do you think is fair? And 99% the time, what is suggested as a resolution, we can completely do that. Sometimes there's extremes, but it's unusual. So again, the idea of be what how you want your employees to be with your customers. And the word engaged has to be in there someplace. Be very present. Be very engaged in the process. And you started with this Penny, let employees make decisions. And don't get me wrong. You have to have policies. You have to have processes, but give them the autonomy, like how far they can go and then give them that. And then don't question them on it because you said it was okay. No, 'I probably would have handled it...' Be quiet. You told him it was okay, so it's really important.

**Penny:** Excellent input, excellent insights, really appreciate your time, Lynette. And sad to say our time has run out. I could talk to you forever, but then I could talk on the topic for hours. So, I really appreciate your time. And being able to share your insights it's so valuable for those in our audience listening to hear

from someone, not just me, but someone else who has really lived a culture that has proved successful for many, many years.

And I have to add to my audience because I'm still a huge fan that if any of you listening are not familiar with the wonderful products of Lands' End you have to check out their website today - [landsend.com](http://landsend.com). It's no accident that a company with the history and culture of Lands' End also produces phenomenal line of apparel and home products. And the business division, the Business Outfitters division that Lynette spoke of produces very high quality logo'd apparel and custom products to make sure your team really feels like a team that is so crucial now more than ever.

So, thank you again, Lynette. I really appreciate it.

**Lynette:** Thank you, Penny, so much. Have a great day.

**Penny:** Thank you. And for everyone else, please tune in next time we're going to have another timely topic on supply risk management. It's again in this crazy world there are supply chain issues and disruptions everywhere. So, we're going to talk to an expert on that topic and hopefully find some good insights for you then. So, until next time - thanks and have a great day!

**Lynette:** Thank you.

END



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