Adobe Culture
An Essay by Chuck Geschke

In 1998, Quark attempted to acquire Adobe and the company underwent a massive reorganization. During this time of turmoil, Adobe co-founder Chuck Geschke sent out the following memo about what type of business culture he wanted to create. He also used the opportunity to reiterate Adobe's "Core Values and Beliefs," which he first authored in 1988.

Adobe Culture – The principles that define us as an organization

The word culture is defined as the "refinement of thought, emotion, manners, taste, etc." I've written this short essay to describe Adobe's culture and to capture some of the characteristics that should guide us as we represent this corporation. The last section of the piece is a document first published nearly ten years ago describing the core values of Adobe. I think it applies as well today as it did a decade ago.

Many fine books have been written about how organizations can grow and operate effectively. This essay makes no pretense of replacing those excellent materials, nor does it attempt to define all the principles and attributes that should underlie Adobe's business culture. The topics discussed herein are primarily those that are most important for us to focus on today.

A business built with intellectual capital

The raw materials from which our business is formed are the inventive ideas and creative talent of our employees. Adobe's strong financial balance sheet is not based on assets such as factories, warehouses, storefronts, or mining and mineral rights. The capital assets of our corporation are our people who are skilled in sales, marketing, engineering, and administration. Therefore, the way we behave and operate our culture directly affects the financial success of our business.

The following paragraphs discuss specific activities as well as some of the business characteristics that critically affect our ability to perform well as an organization.

Meetings

The person who calls a meeting should clearly understand the necessity for convening it and be able to clearly articulate the purpose of the meeting to all those invited. Meetings generally fall into two classes: communication meetings and decision-making meetings. Meetings can easily be nonproductive when it is not clear to the convener and attendees exactly in which kind of meeting they are participating. Whenever possible, presentation materials should be distributed to attendees 24 hours before the meeting is held.

Decision-making meetings: These meetings should typically have no more than ten participants (preferably fewer). Someone should be appointed to take summary notes of the meeting and clearly record the decisions made and the follow-up actions that result from the meeting. These notes should be distributed to all attendees as soon after the meeting as possible. The convener (or a designee) is responsible for (1) communicating all decisions to those who need to know them (and did not attend), and (2) ensuring that follow-up actions are assigned to individuals and checking that those actions are completed.

Communication meetings: These meetings should be convened only when written communication cannot effectively convey the required information or when the opportunity to provide a forum for interactive communication and discussion of ideas is the primary purpose of the meeting.

As a global company, we constantly need to make and communicate decisions that involve participants from several locations around the world. Clearly, travel expenses for face-to-face meetings contribute significantly to our expense budget. But there are other hidden costs, including absence of the traveling participants from their local offices as well as the negative impact on the quality of home and family life that result from extensive travel. Conveners should consider these factors carefully before deciding that face-to-face interaction is critical. We will continue to invest in infrastructure (broad-band networks, teleconferencing, etc.) to provide alternatives to face-to-face meetings.

Decisions

If we clearly define who has the authority for making a decision after gathering input, then that decision should not be reopened for consideration except in extraordinary circumstances. As an organization, we have a habit of frequently reconsidering decisions. This creates confusion and delays effective implementation of decisions that many members of the organization believe have already been made. The Pathfinder project provided a framework (the RAID matrix) for eliminating this indecisiveness. If this framework does not work, then let's work to find an alternative. However, the habit of continuously re-evaluating decisions makes us an inefficient organization.

Expenses

Going forward, we must adjust our spending levels to match our expectations for revenue growth. While the current economic crisis in Asia accentuates the issue, it is not the sole cause of our drop in profitability. Effective control of spending requires constant vigilance. Failure to control expenses has a direct impact on our earnings, growth, stock price, and profit sharing. Each employee has a role to play in controlling our costs. We must apply the same careful thought to each dollar we spend from Adobe's budget as we do to our personal finances.

Teamwork

A successful business organization must operate as a team, not as a loosely knit federation of individuals. Our corporate goal is to attract and hire the highest-quality employees. While each employee's individual expertise and experience are critical criteria in the hiring decision, the overall effectiveness of Adobe can be maximized only when these individuals come together as a cohesive unit. This can occur only when each individual contributes to the overall objectives of the company by (1) understanding his/her role, (2) applying maximum effort to excel in performing his/her job functions, and (3) believing that each of his/her colleagues is performing at the same effort. Managers must (1) set clear direction and define each individual's role, (2) monitor team performance, and (3) provide constructive feedback when individuals do not perform up to expected levels.

Leadership

A successful manager must first be a leader. Leadership requires communicating a compelling vision, engaging the group in pursuing that vision, and providing the resources and support necessary for success. Our goal should be to hire employees who are energetic, independent, and highly motivated. A manager should focus primarily on leading and not directing. A manager should work with his/her employees to set goals and objectives, measure progress, and evaluate performance. A manager is responsible for ensuring that his/her group operates in synch with the rest of the organization. The manager is therefore responsible for communicating the group's direction and progress both horizontally and vertically within the organization. I ran across a quote from Ralph Nader: "The function of leadership

is to produce more leaders, not more followers." This quote parallels an Adobe principle often stated but not always followed that each manager hire his/her replacement. The implication is that to succeed in management, you should mentor your employees so that they can do your job as well as you can. Effectively replacing yourself is the most direct career path to a more senior management position in the company.

Global Markets

Adobe is a global company with an expectation that the majority of its revenue comes from outside the United States. While we operate locally, we must think globally. Business decisions that make sense in one geography may be completely inappropriate in another region of the world. Each functional unit in the company must understand its relationship with these global markets and take care to keep a worldwide perspective while pursuing its specific responsibilities. The global nature of our business places an even higher premium on effective horizontal communication throughout the organization.

Trust

Without trust, teamwork and leadership are worthless. To trust someone, you must know them. I have observed an insidious habit recently where groups or individuals are criticized by others who have not taken the care to investigate the underlying facts. This behavior erodes trust, which in turn disables teamwork. Unless we improve company-wide communication to provide the necessary information upon which accurate assessments can be made, we will not be able to build the level of trust required to effectively operate our business.

Honesty

The most important virtue of Adobe's corporate culture is honesty. The only sure-fire way to be asked to leave this organization is to knowingly fail to tell the truth.

On more than one occasion, an Adobe employee has remarked to me that our company stands out from the ordinary because its culture transcends the purely economic engines that characterize many other businesses. But, let us be perfectly clear — Adobe is a business. Maintaining a warm, supportive, caring culture is not the primary mission of this organization. To maintain the important components of our culture, we must commit to excellent, predictable financial performance. Over the past sixteen years, we have demonstrated a unique ability to achieve both goals. Although our financial performance has weakened in recent quarters, with your help and commitment, we can and will correct our course while maintaining the cultural heritage that defines Adobe.

Adobe Core Values and Beliefs

Adobe was founded on a set of core values and beliefs. As we grow, maintaining these values is critical to our continued success. When we were a small company, it was possible to communicate these values in person. The time has come to write them down for all of us to share.

- Thrive on innovation — invent new technologies, define new markets, and build products that dominate.
- Treat each individual with whom you interact as you would like to be treated. This fundamental principle applies to customers, vendors, and fellow employees.
- For our customers: Deliver the best and most innovative products. License technology fairly and impartially. Maintain total confidentiality about each customer's business. Provide the highest possible level of service.

- For our employees: Hire the best. Treat them well. Provide a first class environment in which to work. Offer the opportunity to participate in the ownership and economic success of the company.
- For our shareholders: Provide a fair return through predictable growth and careful husbanding of our resources.
- For our community: Support charitable causes and public-benefit programs. Provide a good example of progressive employment and business practices.

The following pages illustrate these core beliefs as they apply to Adobe's customers, vendors, managers, and employees. I encourage you to discuss them with one another and give me your thoughts on how to better communicate these ideals in the future.

Customers

- Treat the customer as you would like to be treated.
- Make the customer an ally, not an adversary.
- Evaluate issues from the customer's point of view.
- Remember: your performance may have a major impact on the survival of the customer's business.
- Make the customer feel that we need his or her business.
- Thank the customer frequently for his or her business.
- "Reserve the right to be reasonable."

Vendors

- Treat the vendor as you would like to be treated.
- Make the vendor an ally, not an adversary.
- Evaluate issues from the vendor's point of view.
- Do not exploit Adobe's power to force the vendor into an untenable position.
- Thank the vendor frequently for his or her support.

Managers

- Treat your reports as you would like to be treated.
- Criticize in private; praise in public.
- Hire people smarter than you.
- Facilitate effective, efficient communication.
- Decision-making meetings should be small.
- Devote time to mentoring your employees.
- Answer your phone in person whenever possible.
- Keep your door and your mind open.
- It is better to "coordinate" than to "direct."
- "A manager is responsible for working herself out of her job."

Employees

- Treat your fellow employees as you would like to be treated.
- Remember that the major barrier to your career growth is you, not your colleagues.
- Be a self-starter.
- Whenever possible, work smart, not long.
- Answer your phone in person whenever possible.
- "At Adobe, everyone sweeps the floor."
- Keep your door open.
- "People need to be reminded more frequently than informed."

In Memory of Dr. Charles M. Geschke (1939-2021)

Dr. Geschke co-founded Adobe in 1982 with Dr. John Warnock, a colleague from Xerox. Their first product was Adobe PostScript, a pivotal technology that sparked the desktop publishing revolution. Dr. Geschke was chief operating officer of Adobe from December 1986 to July 1994 and president from April 1989 until his retirement in April 2000. He served as chairman of the board with Dr. Warnock from September 1997 to January 2017 and a member of the board until April 2020, when he transitioned to become emeritus board member. In recognition of his technical achievements, Dr. Geschke was awarded the prestigious National Medal of Technology and Innovation, the Computer Entrepreneur Award from the IEEE Computer Society, and the American Electronics Association Medal of Honor.

Dr. Warnock, Adobe co-founder, former CEO and Chairman of the Board, shared the following: "I could never have imagined having a better, more likable, or more capable business partner. Not having Chuck in our lives will leave a huge hole and those who knew him will all agree."

Adobe CEO Shantanu Narayen sent the following email to all Adobe employees:

It is with profound sadness that I share that our beloved co-founder Dr. Chuck Geschke, has passed away at the age of 81, leaving an indelible mark on our company and the world.

This is a huge loss for the entire Adobe community and the technology industry, for whom he has been a guide and hero for decades.

As co-founders of Adobe, Chuck and John Warnock developed groundbreaking software that has revolutionized how people create and communicate. Their first product was Adobe PostScript, an innovative technology that provided a radical new way to print text and images on paper and sparked the desktop publishing revolution. Chuck instilled a relentless drive for innovation in the company, resulting in some of the most transformative software inventions, including the ubiquitous PDF, Acrobat, Illustrator, Premiere Pro and Photoshop.

In recognition of his technical achievements, Chuck was awarded the prestigious National Medal of Technology and Innovation, the Computer Entrepreneur Award from the IEEE Computer Society, and the American Electronics Association Medal of Honor. After 18 years sharing the helm of Adobe, Chuck retired in 2000 and continued to serve on the Board of Directors until last year, when he transitioned to become emeritus board member.

As much as his inventions changed the world, it is his focus on people, purpose and culture that has profoundly impacted each of us at Adobe. As he always said, Chuck wanted to create a company where he would want to work. He believed that good ideas come from everywhere in the company and that it's not only what we do but how we do it that matters most. He dedicated much of his time and talent to various philanthropies and community organizations throughout his lifetime.

I spoke to John earlier today and he had this to share about their five-decade partnership: "In 1982, Chuck and I agreed that we should leave Xerox and start our own company. That was the beginning of Adobe. I could never have imagined having a better, more likable, or more capable business partner. Not having Chuck in our lives will leave a huge hole and those who knew him will all agree."

I admired his brilliance, kindness and values that defined his character and am grateful that I had the privilege to know and work with him. His absence will certainly leave a huge hole in my heart.

As I grieve the loss of my long-time role model, mentor and friend, I am comforted knowing that Adobe's best days are ahead – exactly as Chuck would want them to be.