



Creating the Desired Culture in Corporate America

~ Keith Jones, Security Consultant

The following is a summary of how a multi-million-dollar company's culture was unwittingly created – over many cups of quality tea!

I became a tea enthusiast 20 years ago. Since the tea available at the time came from large chain stores which carried good but not, in my view, great-tasting tea, it did not take me long to start my search for and ultimately find quality teas at The Cozy Tea Cart, owned and operated by Danielle Beaudette. When I learned that Danielle travels the world in search of tea, we instantly became friends. The quality and variety of tea Danielle procured are remarkable.

I must mention that at the time, I was a Director of Corporate Security for a company that employed about 2,000 people focused on the National Security arena. I did not set out to create the desired culture by using tea as the vehicle: However, I will take you through the journey from the beginning, and you will see just how this evolved.

My office was modern for the times. I had a stand-up desk and a stand-up table for when visitors met in my office. Of course, I also had tea - I prefer 'first flush' (premium) teas, and all the paraphernalia; my fancy water heater (with varying temperatures at the push of a button – a key to avoid scorching tea), teacups, and my tea steeper.

Throughout the day, many people would visit my office. Since I always had water warming, it was natural to offer each visitor a cup while making mine. Most employees were engineers; they were fascinated with the process of selecting a particular loose-leaf tea, making sure the temperature of the water was proper for 'that' tea: no one ever turned down my offer for a cup of tea!

When hosting visitors, discussion topics would range from writing proposals with National Security implications, discussing contractual requirements, foreign travel briefings and debriefings (required for National Security purposes), conducting investigations, or creating new training initiatives aligned with the company's strategic objectives.

After introducing tea to several hundred people a year, people started bringing me tea from their travels locally and internationally. I was always picking up a new tea Danielle told me about that I thought would interest a fellow tea drinker. I frequently gave tea to employees who were also 'enthusiasts.' We would often leave a bag of loose-leaf tea with a note in each other's office.

One day, while talking to Danielle, I learned that she presented on tea's health effects; I organized with the activities committee at work to have Danielle visit and present while tasting various cups of tea. Typically, guest lecturers would speak on topics such as quantum physics, thermodynamics, or continuum mechanics. The activities committee told me that most lecturers talk to groups of about 25 people. At the tea lecture - over 100 people attended – but we also had to turn many people away!

When you perform on National Security initiatives, you are inspected annually. Our inspections lasted for two full weeks and consisted of a team of twelve U.S. Government Special Agents. Their goal is to evaluate the security program to ensure we comply with a plethora of security requirements. These inspections always result in interviews with dozens of employees to ascertain their understanding of many security requirements: inspection results weigh heavily on our ability to continue to perform on National Security - a failing grade can be disastrous for a company. At the end of one inspection, all inspection team members were amazed that "a few thousand employees have security in their DNA." Yes, this is what they said. They could not believe that during every interview - employees knew exactly what their security responsibilities were. They knew my name and all other security team members (yes, they also had tea and tea paraphernalia in their offices, having been willingly converted).

For the past 30 years, I had never been asked how we created the culture of security awareness (which, I must add, led to us being nominated - and recipient of a national award bestowed on the 'best-of-the-best' companies performing on National Security). However, when I took time to think about how we accomplished this - tea was the common bond! You did not have to look far for a cup of tea in Security, and yes, tea, unwittingly, but definitely, created the desired culture that brought people together and helped us win a national award! Tea provided a venue where relationships formed, friendships followed, and mutual respect for one another resulted in developing a security awareness culture!

I am now a Security Consultant for companies performing on National Security initiatives. I have all my tea and paraphernalia with me at the office for the company I am currently supporting. I share my tea and knowledge, and tea (and sometimes knowledge) is shared with me. Danielle even presented (at my current client's office) on tea's health effects, and we, too, had a tea tasting! Perhaps the code has been cracked for creating the desired culture in Corporate America!