were not going according to plan at work, or when a cancelled connecting flight forced her to miss an important event, or when she was eaten up by bed bugs in Ethiopia…even when she ripped a leg tendon in a snow-skiing accident that required surgery and months of physical therapy. Yet I have never seen her lose her cool or fall into a negative slump. She is the embodiment of the power of positive thinking. Kat Cole inspires everyone around her, especially her employees.

One of the proudest moments of Kat's career was when she was featured on the U.S. television show *Undercover Boss*. That show allowed her, even as President of a well-known brand, to go "undercover" in her own company to better understand the inner workings of the organization. Because of the show's format, the leader is able to get to the hearts of employees and discover their very personal hidden needs and desires. During the course of the Cinnabon episode, we saw Kat's interactions with four employees, all of whom were very competent, passionate and committed in their own roles, but who each revealed personal strife or grandiose dreams while they worked beside their president in disguise. Kat admits that she was emotionally moved by how her brand ambassadors were making a positive difference in people's lives, yet struggled in some way on their own.

When Kat divulged her identity in the "big reveal" at the end of the show, she showed the world what type of leader she was by taking the unique opportunity to affect these four employees—providing both the opportunities and financial support necessary for each to fulfill their dreams. She completely rocked their world and, in the process, became a rock star herself.

Kat was already one of our industry's emerging leaders before *Undercover Boss*, and I can tell you with confidence that she lives her life like this with everyone, every day. All the television show did was spotlight the type of leader she has always been. Cinnabon's product is fantastic, but the leadership of Kat Cole is what amplified a "culture that rocks."

Nick Sarillo – Nick's Pizza & Pub

A newfound cultural hero of mine is Nick Sarillo, Founder & CEO of Nick's Pizza & Pub, a 2-unit pizza brand in Illinois. Although Nick's has enjoyed wide notoriety in the pizza world and among Chicago's growing community of experiential brand-seekers, I was oblivious to this company's story and culture until recently. As soon as I was exposed to the brand, however, I knew that Nick and I were members of the same tribe.

I was "virtually" introduced to Nick by email, via a mutual friend at a networking conference who thought we shared some similar business ideas around culture and insisted we should know each other. I studied up on the

company and eventually joined Nick at his Crystal Lake, Illinois restaurant location. What I discovered blew my mind. But it wasn't the monster-sized, multi-floored, custom-designed and built, 350-person capacity restaurant that drew me in, nor was it the stellar quality of the menu itself. The mind-searing brand differentiator in this company was the pervasive culture of the employees and their leader.

Founded with the purpose-driven mission of "providing the community an unforgettable place where families could relax and have fun," the cultural nuances and results are blatantly clear…validated by every employee discussion and customer interaction I observed. It was so refreshing to see a top executive go "all in" when it came to making his organization's culture the lynchpin of its success.

Check out some of the processes Nick has put into place:

- **Purpose & Values** – well-defined, understood, discussed daily and fully embodied by all employees
- **Self-Managed Job Duties** – a wall-mounted, color card-based task list of all opening, closing and running duties, utilizing peer-to-peer accountability, for each position
- **Learning Environment** – a detailed certification process for every team member to determine pay increases, plus a clear, identified path of personal and career development that team members complete at their own pace and desire
- **Open Book Finance** – ongoing education on financial acumen and the health of the business for team members at all levels
- **Trust-and-Track Leadership** – manager education on how to be a coach instead of a cop
- **3-step Feedback Process** – non-threatening, structured communication to provide all employees with clarity on their performance
- **Community Involvement** – authentic, community-based philanthropic initiatives, including the donation of five percent of all sales to charitable causes
- **Nick's University** – an instructor-led seminar allowing the outside world to "look under the hood" and experience the brand's proven best practices

Remember, this is a pizza joint.

The processes Nick Sarillo put into place are the same types of organizational initiatives you might find in a big, hierarchal enterprise. There's a reason this brand enjoys less than 20 percent annual team member turnover—unprecedented in the restaurant industry. There's a reason servers have been known to receive a $1,000 tip on a $25 check—not once, but several times. There's a reason a customer paid

in full for one employee to go back to Ireland and visit family, knowing the team member could not have afforded it otherwise. There's a reason the parents of some of Nick's employees have singled out the brand as the catalyst for positive behavior changes and improved communication skills in their kids.

These things do not happen by accident. They are a result of leadership.

The results are undeniable. The metrics are quantifiable.

In his book, *A Slice of the Pie: How to Build a Big Little Business*, Nick Sarillo shares many of his beliefs and management practices revolving around organizational culture. He openly discusses his own personal culture shifts during his previously life in construction, his early-in-life authoritative and harsh leadership style and the many mistakes he made before he got it right. But he *did* ultimately get it right, and now he clearly believes in, embodies and teaches the relevance and power of a great culture in business.

At Nick's Pizza & Pub, culture is everything. It strengthens the entire organization, even in tough times. Especially in tough times.

One of the book's more compelling stories shared in the book, is about a situation that landed Nick on the cover of *Inc. Magazine* and in an *NBC Nightly News* interview with Brian Williams. In 2001, in the wake of a global economic crisis, it was revealed that Nick's Pizza & Pub could no longer financially sustain itself and the business was literally within days of total financial collapse. Nick disregarded traditional marketing and investor advice; instead, he engaged the community in an honest, risky, completely unorthodox plea to rally around him—and it worked. The culture of this brand was so strong that its loyal fans could not fathom their lives without it. The 105 percent sales increase that week didn't just rescue the company; it became the springboard for the year-on-year increased sales results that Nick's has enjoyed ever since.

Culture matters.

In an August 2012 article titled "Culture Drives Every Decision, Every Action," posted on www.talentminded.com, Nick Sarillo put it this way:

"What we've proven at Nick's is that you don't need to be a large, sexy, headline-grabbing company to have a great culture. You can reap all the benefits of a world class culture—including more enthusiastic teams, lower attrition, more innovation, better customer service and, ultimately, better financial performance—by disciplining yourself and your organization to make the company's culture a high-priority consideration in every decision you make and every action you take. It may be counterintuitive, but I know that unique, inspiring, transformative cultures are latent within even the smallest, most ordinary, most commoditized and most poorly performing of organizations. Even the humble pizza parlor or corner grocery has the potential to change the world. What's required is for leaders to define the desired culture and work single-mindedly to nurture it and make it real."

With only 2 locations in the far-flung suburbs of Chicago, is there any doubt as to why Nick's Pizza & Pub is one of the nation's Top 10 busiest independent pizza companies in terms of per-store sales?

Kat Cole and Nick Sarillo are cultural trailblazers. And they rock my world.

THE QUEST FOR CHANGE

Knowing that organizational cultures can only be affected by people and their behaviors, it should be clear the change process starts with a leader.

A single person, regardless of position, can make a difference in enhancing a company's culture, but that impact will be limited and relative to your level within the organization—at least until a cultural change movement can gain momentum. When it comes down to it, executive leadership has the biggest influence, both positive and negative, on a brand's culture. Movements are powerful and there is great value in making your voice heard, so never stop playing your part to drive the culture. However, the reality is that culture catalysts are often the ones up top.

The beauty of an executive's quest to change a company's culture and ensure a sustainable future is the speed of change that's possible. An individual in a leadership position can make big things happen quickly.

The flip side of that scenario occurs when a company's leader demands results at the expense of the culture. This person is either dismissive of the value of culture or just doesn't understand the concept in the first place. Company results can still be achieved in these organizations, but the culture will take a hit, many times an unrecoverable one. A leader's influence is swift and broad and can be monumentally rewarding or damaging to the overall health of the brand's culture.

CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION

The reason you should *define* culture before you begin to discuss *changing* it is that some leaders still see the overall notion of company culture as a nebulous, touchy-feely concept. To them, culture is the "softer side" of the business and warrants little attention or respect. These executives have either not worked in an environment in which the culture was nurtured or they simply do not acknowledge those things that cannot be easily seen or measured. They may even relegate management of the company's "personality" to the Human Resources department and never fully get their own arms around the concept.

For some, culture is actually considered non-essential and even a hindrance to achieving top-notch business results. I'm not sure how that belief exists in the face of contrary examples like Nick Sarillo's, which prove culture's critical role in sustained success, but it does. And most often, this belief stems from