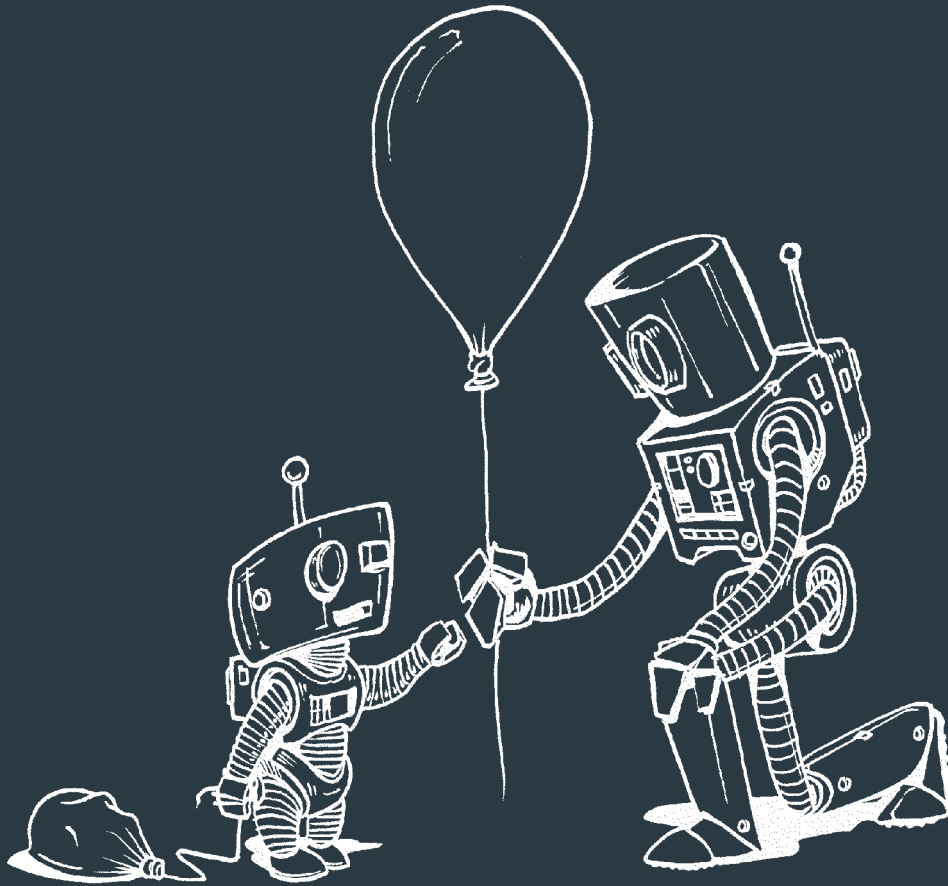


# HOW TO WRITE

## A Culture-First Employee Handbook



Blissbook

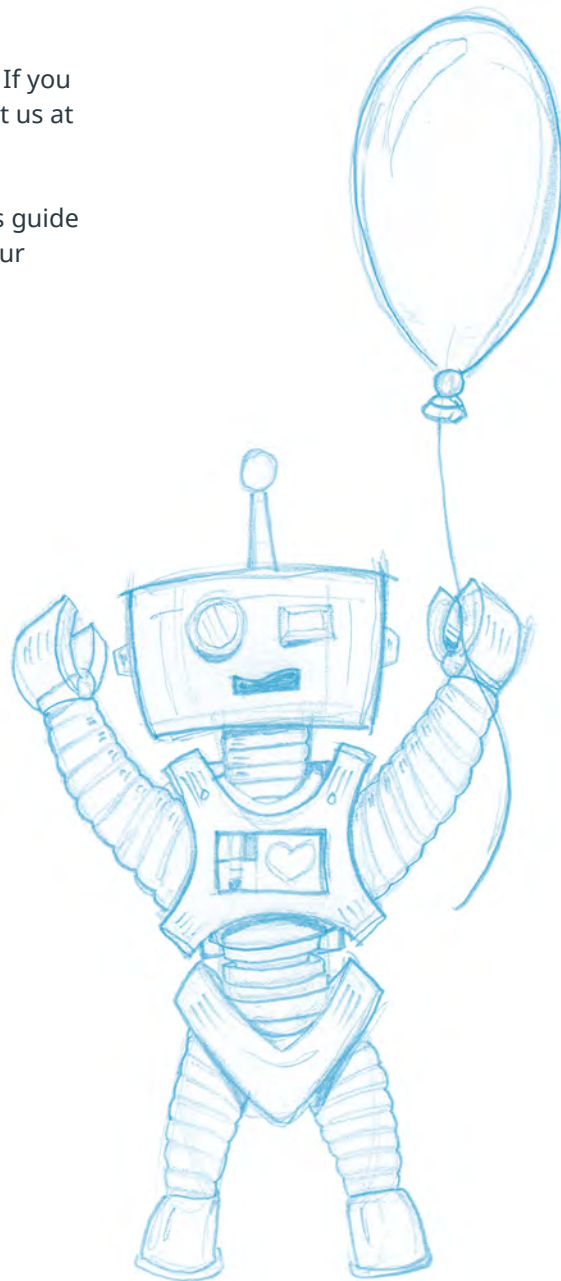
© 2017

## HELLO!

Thanks for downloading this eBook! We hope it inspires you to go beyond the printed, 60-page, black-text-on-white-paper employee handbook. If you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [hi@blissbook.com](mailto:hi@blissbook.com).

You already know this, but we have to say it: this guide is not meant to be legal advice. Please talk to your lawyer if you have any legal questions.

Tom O'Dea  
[tom@blissbook.com](mailto:tom@blissbook.com)



## SPONSORSHIP

This eBook is brought to you by Blissbook. Care about employees and keep your company safe at the same time with Blissbook's culture-first, digital policy management software. Try it at no cost at [blissbook.com](https://blissbook.com).

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The 3 Types of Employee Handbook Content</b>	<b>5</b>
Culture-First Content	5
Onboarding / General Information	6
Case-Specific	6
What Should My Handbook Have?	6
<b>Culture-First Content</b>	<b>7</b>
The Welcome Letter	7
Mission Statement	7
Creating Your Mission Statement	7
More “Why” - A Vision	8
A Noble Cause	8
Get Tactical with a Company Overview	9
A Guiding Goal	9
Company Values	9
Guiding Principles	10
A Quick Note on Naming...	10
Origin Story	10
Timeline	11
People Profiles	11
<b>Onboarding &amp; General Information Content</b>	<b>12</b>
Creating “How Things Work Around Here” Content	12
<b>Legal Content &amp; Official Policies</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Graphic Design</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Thank You!</b>	<b>14</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Since we launched Blissbook, we've heard from countless HR pros about how their company spends so much time, money, and effort on branding and marketing to make sure customers see them in a certain light. But when it comes to the branding and marketing targeted at current or prospective employees (aka employer brand, recruiting, and engagement), it just doesn't match up.

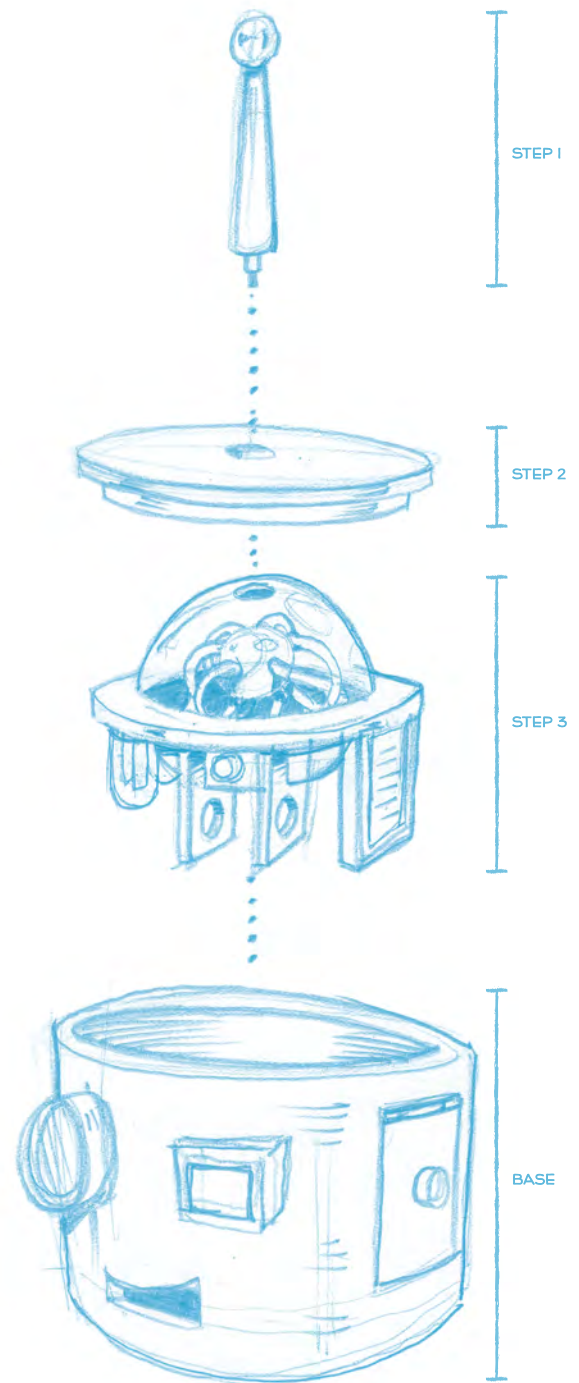
Not only does it feel disingenuous, it makes them feel like they're unable to make sure employees know that the company cares about them.

A culture-first employee handbook is a great first impression that shows employees the company actually *does* care. It replaces the negative onboarding experience that accompanies most existing paper handbooks with a positive one.

But this isn't an exercise of putting lipstick on a pig. Great design starts with great content.

If you're reading this, you've probably seen the handbooks that started the culture-first trend: the Netflix Culture slidedeck, Valve Software's *Handbook for New Employees*, and/or Zappo's *Culture Book*. If not, google them now! Although one of the best things about these handbooks is the honesty and leadership buy-in, it doesn't mean you need to change your company's entire culture to have one.

This guide walks you through what you need to put together culture-first handbook that fits *your* culture. Remember, **the best content is honest content**. You don't need to follow this script to a T. Use what fits *your* employer brand (or what you want it to be) and have fun with it! (see fig. 1)



ROBOT CRANIUM  
EXPLODED VIEW FIG. 1

# THE 3 TYPES OF EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK CONTENT

Employee handbook content can be divided into three categories:

- 1. culture
- 2. onboarding / general information
- 3. case-specific

Although no employee handbook is the same, they'll all contain content from one or more of these categories.

## Culture-First Content

Defining company culture is hard. Is it chemistry? Fun things people like to do together? How employees or customers are treated? It could include all of those things. But in reality, company culture boils down to the following:

### Why?

Why your company exists - your mission, vision and/or cause. (see fig.2)

### Who are you?

Who you collectively are deep down inside and what you believe in - your core values and guiding principles. (see fig.3)

### Are you authentic?

Whether or not you respect these things - does how you hire, reward and release people match who you are and why you exist? (see fig.4)

If your organization knows why it exists, knows who it is, and acts in a way that's authentic to those things, it's built for long-term success.

These are not shallow questions. They require deep thought. There should be collaboration between leadership and all employees within a company so that everyone is bought in and the culture reflects everyone's belief of what the company is, not just leadership's view of it.

Every employee should know and demonstrate your culture every day. Making this a reality is exponentially easier if you attract people who already believe what you believe. Recruit these people and repeat the message with culture-first content and your days of trust fall exercises will be long gone.

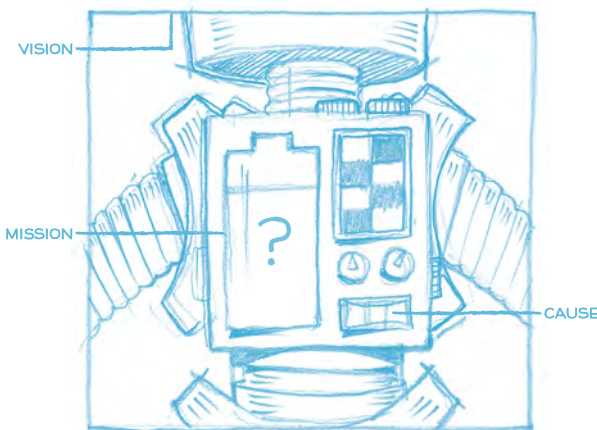


FIG. 2

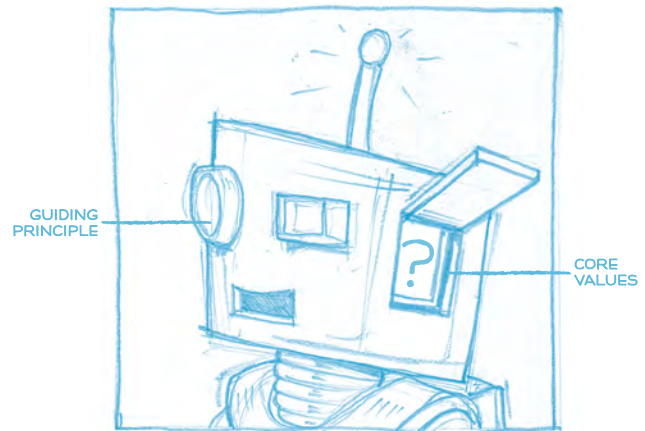


FIG. 3

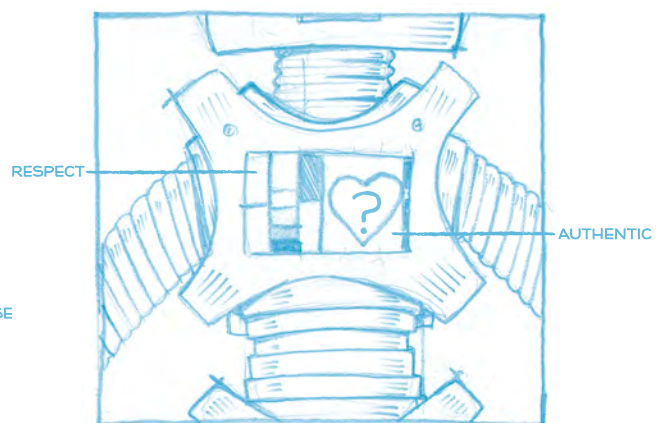


FIG. 4

## Onboarding / General Information

Different companies do things, well, differently - no matter how similar they may seem on the surface. This is your chance to let new employees know "how things work around here" and remind current employees of the same in case they forget. You can write about the way meetings are run, how people should communicate, where to park near the office, or what unique rituals you do or programs you have to reinforce the values that help define your culture.

For a more readable, engaging handbook, **write simple, to-the-point summaries using a conversational and human tone.** For some items, these summaries are sufficient. For many others, such as complicated legally-required policies, these summaries should serve as introductions to long-form, case-specific content.

## Case-Specific

Case-specific content is information that employees need to access on a case-by-case basis, usually because a specific event has occurred in the employee's life. It's also the content your lawyer really wants you to have in your employee handbook.

On an employee's first day (and for 98% of their working tenure), they could care less about this stuff. But at some time or another, something goes down where it's important for them to have access to it.

Occasions like:

- They feel like they've been discriminated against or harassed.
- They've been diagnosed with a serious illness and need information about disability benefits.
- They worked overtime and wonder if they were compensated properly.
- They're about to have a child and need information about the FMLA.

A lot of case-specific content is based on federal or state laws and is added to a handbook to protect both

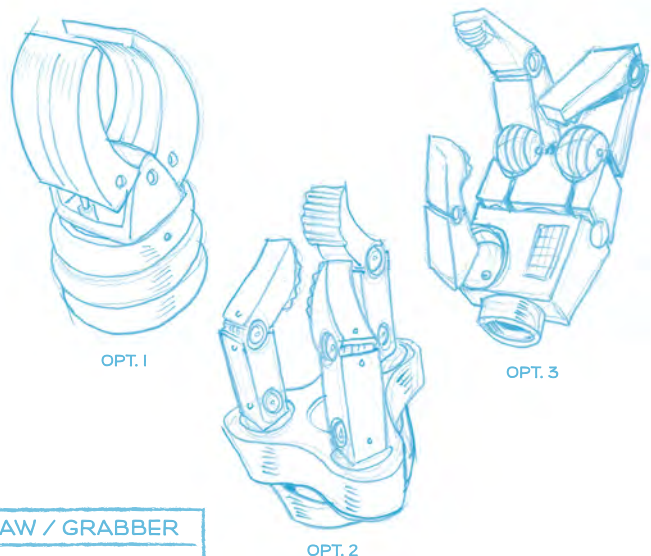
employer and employees from lawsuits and to protect employees' rights. In these cases, you should have a lawyer help craft this content so you can be sure you're in compliance with federal and state law.

That said, this is where the summaries we previously discussed come in handy. There's nothing wrong with writing a plain-language summary of your harassment policy (follow the golden rule) or your expenses policy (spend our money like you'd spend yours) as long as your summary doesn't contradict any of your detailed content.

## What Should My Handbook Have?

There's no single right answer. A great handbook has all three, but it depends on your company. The most important part of recording content is consistency. If your onboarding dress code says "use your best judgment," don't have a case-specific policy that forbids hats. This opens up a world of interpretation and if a court is ever doing that interpretation, they'll almost always side with the employee.

Another risk with recording an employee handbook is that now you have to live up to it. Most of the time, that's easy. Doing it when it's hard is what separates the good companies from the great ones. Dare to be great!



CLAW / GRABBER  
OPTIONS FIG. 6

## CULTURE-FIRST CONTENT

If you're going to consider your employee handbook a piece of marketing, it needs to be treated like any other good piece of marketing. That means starting with why. As Simon Sinek says, **people don't care about what you do, they care about why you do it.** And since employees are people too, here's how to make sure they know.

### The Welcome Letter

This is your chance to start off with some warm fuzzies. Your welcome letter can be from your CEO, CHRO, from your entire company, or from the team who onboards them.

Things you can include in your welcome letter:

- A description about what the handbook is for
- Sentiment about the new person joining the team
- A speech to get them fired up about their new adventure

### Mission Statement

Your mission statement is the core of why your business exists. It's a goal-oriented way for you to lay out your vision of what your company is trying to accomplish together. (see fig. 7)

Note: Some companies have a mission, some have a purpose, some have a vision, and some have a combination of those. Call it what you like!

## Creating Your Mission Statement

Start with why and help people understand why your company exists. Your mission is a short statement of what you aspire to accomplish together.

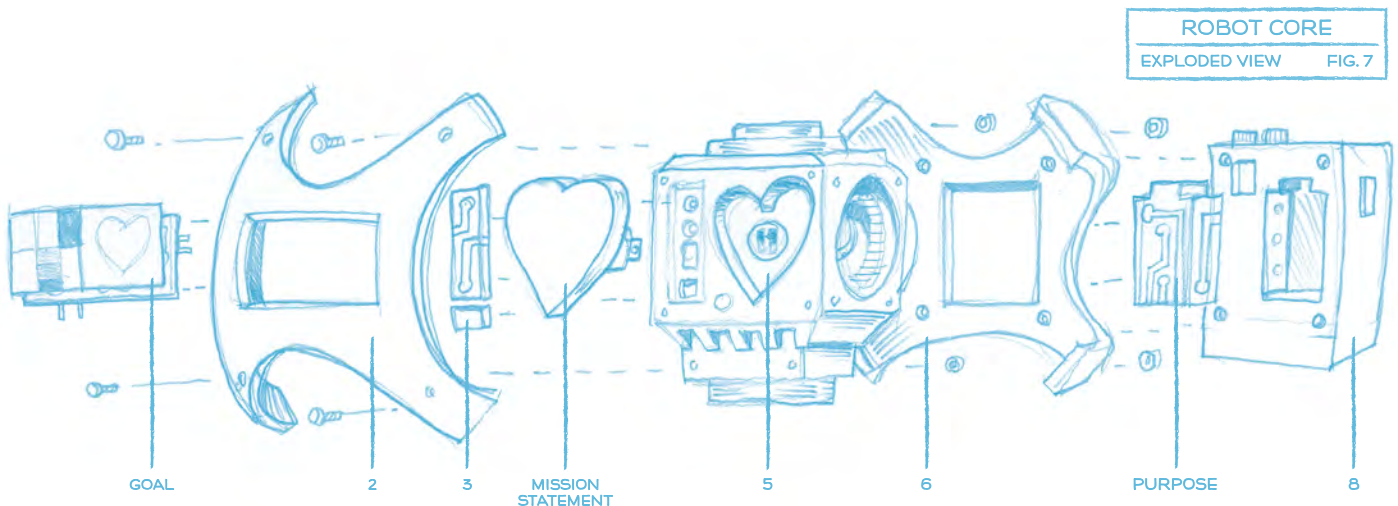
The perfect words for your mission might be difficult to obtain and your mission will shift over time.

Answering these questions may help:

- Why does your organization exist?
- What's your purpose?
- What's your vision for a better world?
- What's special about your company that would make the world want to see and actually engage in helping your company succeed?
- Why do you get out of bed in the morning and why should anyone care?

#### Examples:

- Google: Organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.
- SpaceX: Help make humanity a multi-planet civilization.
- Amazon: We strive to offer our customers the lowest possible prices, the best available selection, and the utmost convenience.
- Our mission with Blissbook is to accelerate the movement towards employment based on purpose.



## More “Why” - A Vision

Why why why... human beings never really get past their 3-year-old selves - your employees included! It's important you address this curiosity immediately after you state your mission. (see fig.8)

Oftentimes, a mission is tactical - it ties an employee's day-to-day tasks back to a greater meaning or goal. In these cases, the meaning or goal is still a “what”. You want to keep going down the “why” hole until you can describe a future world that's different (and hopefully better) than today's world.

An easy way to go to a deeper “why” is through visioning. With visioning, you're trying to **get employees to envision a future they want to help create**. You can do this in two ways:

1. Describe a future that's inherently and obviously better than today's world. This works best if the problem is obvious, or if your solution solves any number of problems and you'd like your audience to decide what the solution means to them.
2. Describe today's world in a way where a better future seems obvious. This works best if your solution is any number of different things all related to solving one main problem.

Try formatting this sentence as:

- We want to... change / transform / help / give / ensure / etc. ... or;
- We envision a world where...

Your vision doesn't have to be original or a big change-the-world vision. Following an existing vision is just as inspiring. Remember, it's the followers who bring a vision to life.

### Examples:

- Google: We want to live in a world where unlimited information is easily accessible to all humans.
- SpaceX: *SpaceX doesn't need a separate Vision because their Mission is already “big” enough.*
- Amazon: To be Earth's most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online.
- Blissbook: We envision a world where people

wake up each day inspired to make the world a better place through their job - no matter what that job is.

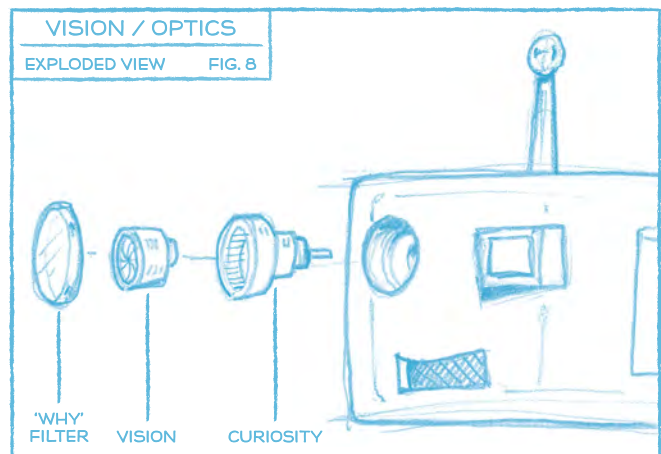
## A Noble Cause

So you've laid out your mission and your employees can envision how your company helps bring about a future world they want to be a part of. Time to bring it home with one final “why”. Employees want to know why they should care about your mission and why they should care about this future world you describe. Why is this mission worthy of pursuit? Why should people partake in this quest? Why is it a noble cause?

State how pursuing your mission and your vision for the future enables you all to make a difference in other people's lives.

### Examples

- Google: Information and knowledge is how humanity moves forward. Pursuing our mission advances the human race.
- SpaceX: Being multi-planetary provides the human species with “life insurance” should something happen to our planet. It'd also be the greatest adventure in history and its important for humanity to have things to inspire them.
- Amazon: Humans will always buy things and they will always want lower prices, faster delivery, and more selection.
- Blissbook: People spend over a third of their life on the job during their working years. We are helping people find purpose in a part of their lives where purpose can sometimes be hard to find.





## Get Tactical with a Company Overview

Now that your “whys” are nailed down, you can move on to your how and what. Educate employees on what you do and how it helps make progress towards your mission and vision for the future. Essentially, how do you deliver value to your customers?

Talk about the products and services you provide, how they serve your mission/vision/purpose, and possibly even how you make money.

If your company has specific value propositions written down somewhere, this is a great place to use them.

## A Guiding Goal

Conflicts may arise when employees pursue your mission due to differing viewpoints on how best to carry it out. Sometimes your different “hows” and “whats” can compete with each other. Also, people aren't always working on projects that have a perfectly clear and direct correlation with the mission. What's the one goal they should remember, above all else, that should guide their decision making and actions?

### Examples:

- Google: Don't be evil.
- Blissbook: Make people smile. (see fig.9)

## Company Values

Every company has core values, whether they're written down or not, and whether they're called “core values” or not. To make them more than just nice-sounding words, everyone at your company must live them unconditionally every day.

Before any decision is final, employees should ask, “Is it in line with our values?”

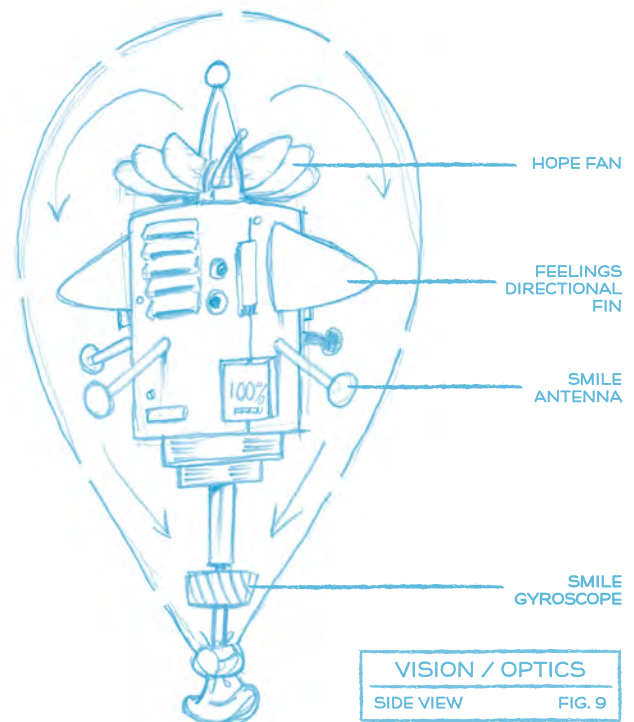
Core values are the behaviors, skills and attributes that employees value in all people. They define who you and your employees are deep down inside. Each value must be universally beneficial: something you think everyone should hold in high regard; not just those within your company (yes, even competitors).

### Tips:

The format of your values should be an adjective for a person. You can think of values as virtues. Most companies have 3 to 10 core values.

You may want to go into detail about each value to make sure employees know what you mean. If you're having trouble thinking of some good details, try answering some of these questions:

- What actions demonstrate this value, in general?
- You can write these out as: You do / make / think / identify / recognize / know, etc. ...
- Why is this a value? What is its intent?
- What are some specific examples of how someone can demonstrate this value?
- If someone asked what the value means, is there an easy answer? Why is it a good answer?
- What other adjectives would you use to describe a person with this value?
- Is this value a new idea of how to live your life?
- What's the old way and why is this way better?
- Are there any exceptions to this value?
- Are there any famous quotes that express this value?



## Guiding Principles

Guiding principles are beliefs that permeate through every decision and activity within the company. They can be:

- A philosophy for how to do things
- A reason why something happens a certain way
- A belief that should be held by all employees
- An office rule or a general rule of thumb to follow
- A general way that employees should act
- A description of an aspect of your work environment

Some companies only have values, some only have guiding principles, some have both, and some have something similar but call it something totally different. It's up to you!

### Tips:

Mix in some action-based titles by stating things like "We are..." or "We believe..." or "Be..." or "Change..." Most companies have 3 to 10 guiding principles. If you're having trouble thinking of some good details, try answering some of these questions:

- What actions demonstrate this guiding principle, in general? You can write these out as: You do / make / think / identify / recognize / know, etc...
- Why is this a guiding principle? What is its intent?
- What are some specific examples of how someone can demonstrate this guiding principle?
- Is there a question someone could ask about what the guiding principle means and an easy answer to it? Why is it a good answer?
- Is this guiding principle a new idea of how to work? What's the old way and why is this way better?
- Are there any exceptions to this guiding principle?
- Are there any famous quotes that express this guiding principle?

## A Quick Note on Naming...

Mission, vision, purpose, noble cause, manifesto, values, virtues, guiding principles, beliefs, behaviors, credo... they all sound like different things, right? How do you know what to use? At the end of the day, each one is just a name given to an idea or a piece of content. You don't have to explicitly list each of these items. What's important is to communicate 2 things:

1. Why does your company exist?
2. Who you are, collectively?

If you can describe these 2 things in one sentence, that's wonderful. If you're not into the whole brevity thing and you need some titles for your content, mix and match as needed. There is no right answer. OK, back to your originally scheduled programming.

## Origin Story

Sometimes it's nice to know how a company started. Your founder might have a unique story or a company may have some historical significance. Backstory is always interesting!

Tips for things you can talk about:

- Set the scene. What was going on in the founder's life when he or she decided to start the company?
- What was the initial pain they experienced?
- How'd they obtain their first customer?
- How'd they recruit any co-founders?
- How'd the company grow over time? What are some products or services that were created?
- What's the company like today?

If you're stumped, you can always come back to this!

## Timeline

Just like the Origin Story, the timeline gives you a way to create backstory for the company in an engaging way.

Things you can talk about:

- When the company started
- When new products or services were released
- Key hires, sales, investments or acquisitions
- Milestone metrics like total sales or # of customers served
- New office openings or moves
- Marketing campaigns
- Attendance at a tradeshow
- Changes in branding
- Other things going on in the world at those times - this one is great because it breaks up the monotony of company facts!

If you're still stumped, browse through your company's blog, look through your press release archive for noteworthy events, or ask some employees who have been there a long time.

## People Profiles

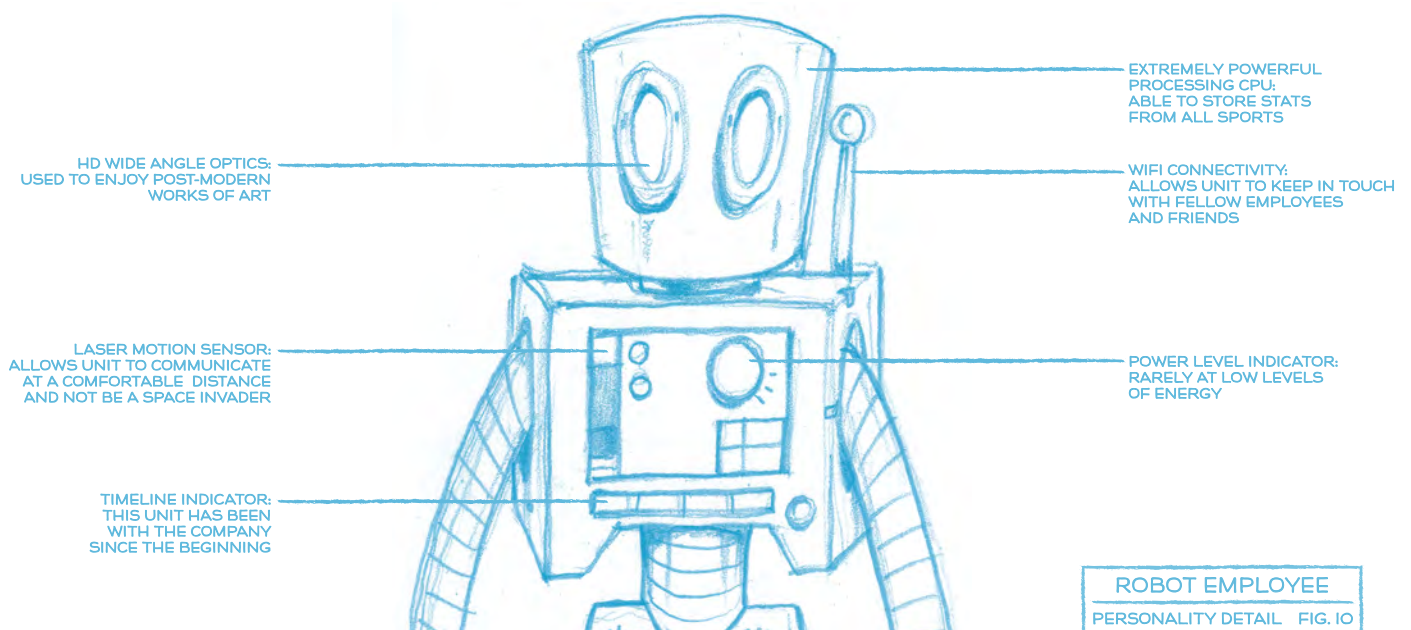
Give a human touch to your company by giving employees a way to meet some of the people behind the magic. (see fig. 10)

Make the profiles as personal as possible and use short names or nicknames. Good leaders build trust by setting an example of openness and vulnerability. Leave the executive bio on the cutting room floor – this is a place to be casual and approachable.

Profiles don't have to be only for C-level employees! Other creative examples include:

- Founders
- Board members or investors
- Employee(s) of the month
- HR team
- New employee "sponsors"
- Company mascots or pets
- A fictional "you", i.e. the person reading the handbook

And that's a wrap on your culture-first content!



## ONBOARDING & GENERAL INFORMATION CONTENT

At this point, there's a chance you're thinking, "Wait, what about all the fun things we do in the office? The ping pong tournaments? The employee of the week totem that gets passed around? The gong we ring for new sales? Pizza Friday? Aren't those culture?! **WHAT ABOUT PIZZA FRIDAY??!!!"**

First, chill. Let's keep it together and we'll get through this.

Second, you're right. These things can and do influence the culture of your organization. But they're symptoms of your culture, not the causes. If "generosity" is a company value, Pizza Friday is just a way that value manifests itself.

It doesn't mean they're unimportant and you shouldn't mention them. Call them atmosphere, rituals, members-only secrets, or whatever you want.

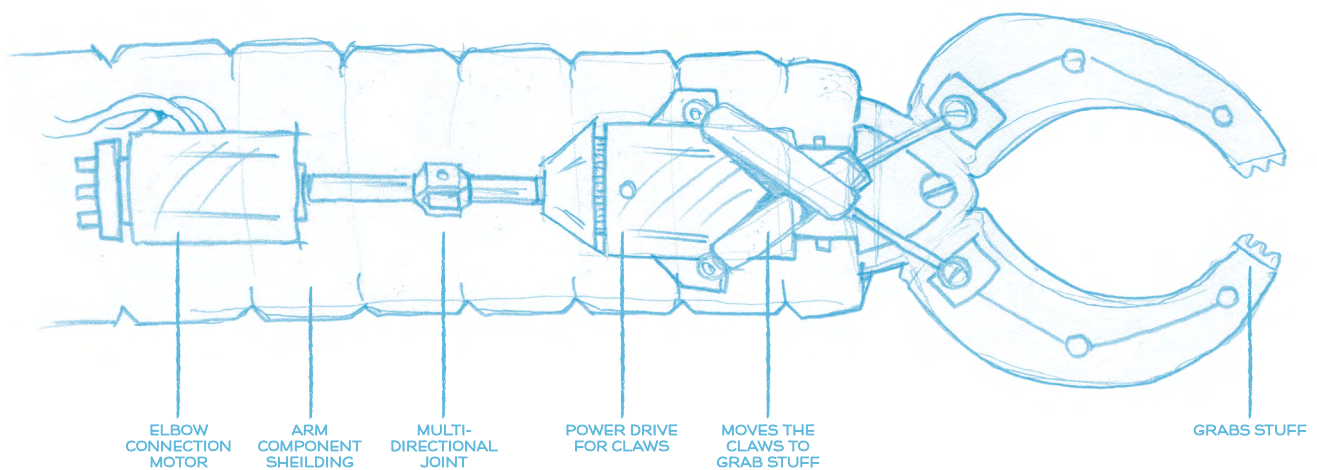
What a great way to transition to your "how things work around here" content!

## Creating "How Things Work Around Here" Content (see fig. 11)

What unique policies, procedures, programs, events, or rituals does your company follow to build and maintain a great place to work? How do your values manifest themselves in the daily life of your employees? For example, you might:

- Have a special way to support learning such as
  - Giving free books to all employees
  - Tuition reimbursement or other educational funding
  - Scholarship programs
- Participate in volunteering, charities, or other ways to give back to a community
- Do something special for veterans or another group of people
- Go somewhere or do an activity together on a regular basis
- Host or attend special events
- Have a social mission in addition to your work
- Organize teams in a unique way
- Do performance management a specific way
- Pay people to quit if the job isn't for them
- Pass around a unique award or trophy

Basically, what's important for everyone in the company to know about?



ROBOT ARMATURE  
INTERNAL VIEW FIG. 11

## LEGAL CONTENT & OFFICIAL POLICIES

Some of the topics you thought of in the previous section have a legal component. There are also some topics that your legal counsel needs you to include purely for legal reasons. That's fine!

We can't tell you what to write for the legal content because we aren't lawyers, but we *can* suggest a way to make it more user-friendly: use a summary.

If "difficult-to-read for non-lawyers" (or "TL;DR" for those in the know) content had a concise, plain-language summary that preceded it, people would actually read it. And isn't that the goal with all of this?

Two Tips For Using Summaries:

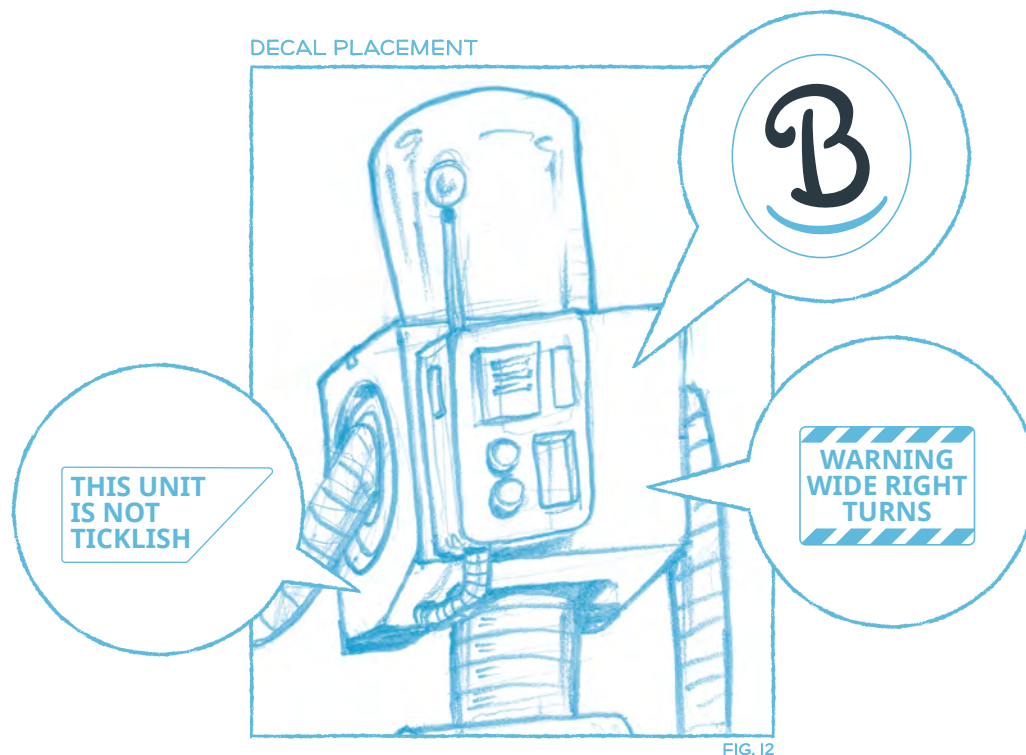
1. Make sure a section's summary has some type of design element to separate it from the rest of the section's content. If it looks like another paragraph amongst the rest, readers will just skip it.
2. It's extremely important, for liability purposes, that your summary content does not contradict your legal content.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN (see fig. 12)

Even though this guide is about content, let's briefly touch on design. If your handbook content represents a person's character, then your handbook's design is their clothes. And like they say, **the clothes maketh the man (or woman)**.

If your CEO showed up in sweatpants and a dirty t-shirt every day, would you listen to them? Unless you're an athlete, the answer to that is "no". So why would an employee be interested in a 60-page, black-text-on-white-paper handbook? Marketing would never send something like that to their customers. Why should HR send that to *their* customers (employees and recruits)?

Do whatever it takes to add some design to your handbook. Can the marketing department help? Can you use an outside firm? Can you use a tool that has design baked in? Whatever it takes, it's worth it!

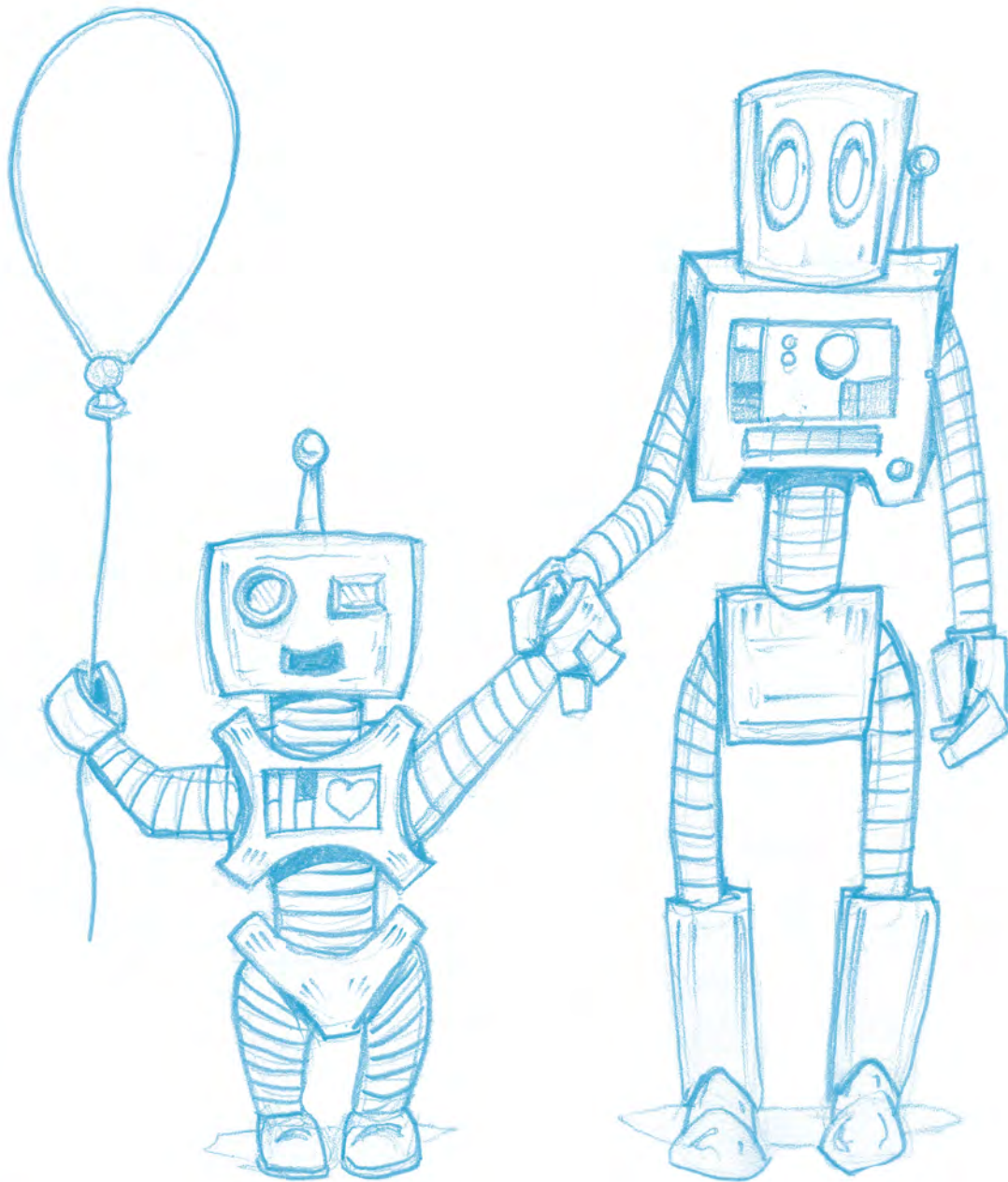


---

## THANK YOU!

We hope you've found this guide useful. If you have any suggestions, questions, or feedback of any kind, please reach out - we love hearing new ideas. Email us at [hi@blissbook.com](mailto:hi@blissbook.com) or send a tweet our way via [@blissbookapp](https://twitter.com/blissbookapp).

Want more content like this? Sign up for the Blissbook newsletter at [blissbook.com/newsletter](https://blissbook.com/newsletter)



---

## REFERENCES

Blissbook Customer Employee Handbooks. 2013-2017.  
<https://blissbook.com>

Fishkin, Rand. 2013. "What Company Culture IS and IS NOT".  
<https://moz.com/rand/what-company-culture-is-and-is-not/>

Hastings, Reed. 2009. "Netflix Culture: Freedom & Responsibility".  
<https://www.slideshare.net/reed2001/culture-1798664>

Hsieh, Tony. 2013. "Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose".

Lencioni, Patrick. 2006. "Silos, Politics and Turf Wars: A Leadership Fable About Destroying the Barriers That Turn Colleagues Into Competitors".

Lencioni, Patrick. 2015. "The Truth About Employee Engagement: A Fable About Addressing the Three Root Causes of Job Misery".

Logan, Dave, King, John, and Fischer-Wright, Halee. 2011. "Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization".

Rasmussen, Michael. "GRC 20/20". <http://grc2020.com>

Shah, Dharmesh. 2013. "The HubSpot Culture Code: Creating a Company We Love".  
<https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/34234/the-hubspot-culture-code-creating-a-company-we-love.aspx>

Sinek, Simon. 2011. "Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action".  
<https://www.startwithwhy.com>

Sinek, Simon. 2016. "Together Is Better: A Little Book of Inspiration".

OutSystems. "The Small Book of The Few Big Rules".  
<https://www.outsystems.com/the-small-book/>

Valve. "Handbook for New Employees".  
<http://www.valvesoftware.com/jobs/index.html>

Zappos. "Culture Book".  
<https://www.zapposinsights.com/culture-book>