

THE KEY TO SUCCESS

ALIGNING LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

Mike Myatt

“Leadership not accountable *to* its people, will eventually be held accountable *by* its people.”

Few things are more critical to leadership success than building a healthy, aligned culture. As obvious as this should be to anyone, far too many leaders still don't get it. I never cease to be amazed at how many leaders talk about culture without actually doing anything to improve culture. Understanding how to align cultural gaps can make the difference between success and failure for any leader. In the text that follows I address five areas critical to the design of any sustainable culture.

Let me be as clear as I can: the phrase “toxic work environment” is code for bad leadership. Toxic work environments can only exist when a lack of trust and respect are present, and this can only occur in the absence of sound leadership. The reality is that

a toxic culture simply cannot coexist in the presence of great leadership.

A toxic work environment thrives off of everything great leadership stands in opposition to. The fuel for toxicity is conflict not resolution, ego not humility, self-interest not service above self, gossip and innuendo not truth, social and corporate climbing not team building, and the list could go on. Toxic cultures occur when arrogance, ignorance, ambivalence, and apathy are present, but again, not when steady leadership stands at the helm.

Great corporate cultures are intentional—they are built by design. Although I suppose that a great culture could somehow evolve by default or osmosis, I have yet to observe it. Creating a healthy culture is a matter of making it a focus point within the corporate values, purpose, vision, mission, and strategy. Put simply, a corporation's strategy that ignores, or only pays lip service to, culture will be the beneficiary of the unhealthy environment it deserves.

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Even if an organization *lucks* its way into a good culture, I suggest it would not be sustainable without being part of the core business strategy. Culture formed by the moment will also change by the moment, and ultimately it will disappear in a moment.

Stop the Madness—The Strategy Versus Culture Debate

So, where does culture fit into the corporate landscape and how important is it? Culture is a construct that must be embedded into the very fabric of the corporate identity. It must be part of the ethos that describes *why* the enterprise exists, *what* and *who* it values, and *how* it will behave. But it must also be much more than that—it must embody the pulse of the business—it must be a living, breathing heartbeat that leaders, employees, customers, and other stakeholders can visibly feel. More important, culture must be something they want to identify with and be a part of. Culture is the sum of all organizational parts.

A healthy culture can be a competitive advantage or the thing that can bring ruin upon a business. Leaders have clearly awakened to the fact that culture matters. And it's about time. Culture is critically important to the success of any enterprise. That said, like any trend, too much of a good thing can spin out of control and become destructive.

This is why culture must be created from a design perspective—it must be intentional and purposed. It must be part of an implied and understood honor code that guides talent acquisition, development, compensation, and deployment. It must be part of the strategy that dictates acceptable behaviors, how decisions will be made, and what will drive operational focus.

Culture becomes dangerous when it remains in the ethereal. When culture is not understood, not integrated, not led, and allowed to be amorphous, it can spin out of control. Culture can become distracting, or worse, destructive. Where the world stands today reminds me quite a bit of the early days of the dot-com era.

Great corporate cultures are intentional.

Back in the dot-com days I watched many a young enterprise suffer from placing culture ahead of strategy, or worse, even focusing on culture in lieu of strategy. When the marketplace began to see through the spin and the vapor, all the Ping-Pong tables and funky offices in the world couldn't save a flawed business model. . . . The fun was over, and the culture ceased to exist.

The sad reality is culture run amok can kill a company. Many a company has put so much emphasis on culture that culture simply *became* their business, as opposed to strengthening and guiding their business. All the perks and benefits in the world won't cause a company to thrive if it is not guided by purpose, governed by sound core values, and wrapped into a vision that can be strategically and tactically implemented.

Business should be fun. The workplace should be comfortable and secure, and time spent on the job should add value to a person's life. Culture is important—it is very important. But if culture is developed outside of strategy, if it's not driven by strategy, then said culture will likely become little more than a very dangerous intoxicant.

Every vibrant, healthy, inspiring, innovative, and positive corporate culture I've witnessed has occurred not because culture has been placed ahead of strategy, but because it has been a key driver of the corporate strategy. Why does everything in today's world have to be framed within an exclusionary either/or proposition? I've consistently found that the best scenarios are the ones that allow you to have your cake and eat it too. Why separate culture from strategy to their mutual demise, when culture is secured, enhanced, and sustained by sound strategy? It's not really strategy

versus culture but an aligned strategy *and* culture that matter.

Culture isn't an accident. It's created either by design or default. Let's examine a company universally known for its strength of culture—Apple. The simple truth of the matter is that Apple works at culture. The Apple culture didn't happen by osmosis; it was and is engineered by design. Steve Jobs was nothing if not a cultural zealot. His vision, values, passions, and pursuits were not only clearly articulated, they were seamlessly interwoven into the business model, and strictly adhered to. Apple employees who didn't buy off on the Apple cultural ethos were simply weeded out.

It's important to remember that while culture exists from day one, it takes time to gel. Apple was not an overnight success, nor was its culture. It took decades of purposed, intentional, and unyielding focus to create the Apple culture that exists today. Culture must be fought for on a daily basis, and it must continue to evolve in order to become better, stronger, and healthier. If you lose the culture battle you'll lose the talent battle, the brand battle, and eventually the sustainability battle.

I challenge you to name a single category-dominant brand, or even a hot up-and-coming brand whose culture doesn't flow through its strategy, to its business model, and eventually to the consumer or end user.

The Right Foundation— Choosing the Right Cultural Construct

I'm confident anyone reading this article understands the value of culture—it's not too hard to reach consensus on this point. But when agreeing on the best construct for building a healthy, thriving, and sustainable culture, the opinions are varied and the discussions are nothing short of spirited.

I've had the opportunity to witness a myriad of what I'll refer to as *cultural engineering experiments*—some

more successful than others. While everyone seems to have an opinion on how to build a successful culture, most leaders overcomplicate the matter, and they often miss some of the most basic steps.

When you think about culture, it's less about complex frameworks and more about people. Healthy cultures can't be built by setting boundaries, through the enforcement of arbitrary rules or bureaucratic mandates, and you certainly can't manage culture by instituting intricate processes. Culture shouldn't be imposed upon people—as co-creators of the culture, people are the culture.

What I want you to take away from this article is that culture is not something to be managed, but rather something to be led. All attempts to manage culture are doomed from the start; eventually requiring triage and reengineering. Efforts at leading culture have a huge upside and the best chance of sustainability over the long haul. As Table 1 shows, managing culture (old paradigm) is not nearly as effective as leading culture (new paradigm).

Understanding the Management Dilemma

I'm probably just as tired as you are of the management versus leadership debate. Most rational people understand that leadership and management are at their respective bests when they coexist and work in collaboration. I think it's also fair to say that recent history reflects that most organizations have operated in an environment far too heavily weighted toward the management side of the equation.

*Culture run amok can kill
a company.*

As Table 1 shows, businesses have created a culture of management when what they really need is a culture of leadership. When culture is led, and a culture of leadership is embraced, the benefits of sound management are not lost; they are simply enhanced by a broader perspective. I've always said, "A great leader can accomplish much, but a culture of leadership can accomplish much more."

A culture of leadership replaces rigid frameworks with loose communities of collaborative networks. Complex decisions are not reserved for someone sitting atop a

hierarchical structure, but are driven down and across the organization. Think open source not proprietary, adaptive not static, actionable not theoretical, and progressive not regressive.

The best way to create a culture of leadership is to value and reward authentic and effective leadership. Create a culture based on an ethos that empowers, attracts, differentiates, and sustains. Remember this: The only culture that flourishes over the long haul is a culture of leadership.

Old Paradigm — Managing Culture	New Paradigm — Leading Culture
Have a leader	Create a culture of leadership
Invest in tools	Invest in people
Follow "best practices"	Develop "next practices"
Punish failure	Encourage risk
Play the game	Change the game
Compete	Collaborate
Are driven by profit agenda	Are driven to create value
Discourage independent thinking	Embrace dissenting opinion
Start with "What?"	Start with "Why?"
Place people in boxes	Free people from boxes
Protect the status quo	Challenge everything
Trivialize youth	Give youth a seat at the table
Reward potential	Reward contribution
Ideate	Innovate
Control complex decisions at the top	Drive complex decisions to the edges
Message	Engage
Have a plan	Have a purpose
Leverage their people	Create leverage for their people
Are quick to say "No"	Find a way to get to a "Yes"
Focus on optics	Focus on ethics
Manage risk	Manage opportunity
Set boundaries	Close gaps
Train	Develop
Operate from destination mentality	Operate on continuum mentality
Assign blame	Accept responsibility
Manage expectations	Align expectations
Think span of control	Think span of influence
Are driven by goals	Are motivated by discovery
Focus on "who" is right	Focus on "what" is right
Observe	Understand

TABLE 1. OLD PARADIGM VERSUS NEW PARADIGM

If Leadership Is a Scarce Commodity Your Organization Is in Peril

Do you work in an environment that fosters leadership at every level, or just at the top of the org chart? You can either chasten people for attempting to lead or encourage them to take risks, to explore opportunities, and to make decisions. If you want to create a culture of leadership, you must succeed in creating leadership ubiquity.

I write and speak often on the value of creating a culture of leadership, yet I continue to see that many organizations fail to understand the impossibility of creating such a culture when people are consistently told they're not leaders. Organizations built on the backs of weak, dependent followers aren't nearly as vibrant or sustainable as those designed through the collaborative efforts of strong, independent leaders.

Leadership that isn't transferrable, repeatable, scalable, and sustainable isn't really leadership at all. Not everyone can be the CEO, but everyone can lead. Ponder this next statement for a moment: If you believe you're not a leader, don't be surprised when others begin to agree with you.

When in doubt, think ubiquity not scarcity. Leadership isn't, or at least shouldn't be, a scarce commodity. Far too many companies wrongly treat leadership as an esoteric role reserved for a privileged few. Healthy organizations realize leadership must be a ubiquitous quality that pervades every aspect of day-to-day operations. They understand every person must lead; even if people are only responsible for leading themselves, they must lead.

Think ubiquity not scarcity.

Any individual who holds responsibility for any person, aspect, function, or task within an organization is a leader. You may not be in charge, but if your direct or indirect efforts influence others, you are leading. The higher up the org chart you reside, the more dependent you are on the leadership ability of those you lead. Anyone who offers advice, creative thought, input, or feedback is helping to shape the perceptions of senior leaders—they thereby function as leaders themselves.

When we fail to accept our responsibility as coworkers and citizens, when we so easily cede our authority to others, we not only fail to lead—we sentence ourselves to a life of squandered potential. Keep in mind; the people with the greatest formal authority do not necessarily possess or exert the greatest influence.

The only person who can strip you of leadership is you. The best leaders not only lead themselves well, they also develop others to become highly skilled leaders. They're not threatened by the success of others; they take great satisfaction in it.

Although there are always exceptions to any rule, you'll find it difficult to point to more than a small handful of successful leaders who don't understand what I've just espoused. The best leaders don't view what they do as a job; they see it as a calling. Their passion is to help others to grow, develop, and to become better. Think of the best leader you know, and I guarantee you they spend the bulk of their time building into others. I encourage you to do the same.

The Importance of Selfless Courage

Creating a culture of leadership is not for the faint of heart—it takes great courage. It takes great courage to break from the norm, challenge the status quo, seek new opportunities, cut your losses, make the tough decision, listen rather than speak, admit your faults, forgive the faults of others, not allow failure to dampen your spirit, stand for those not capable of standing for themselves, and to remain true to your core values. You can do none of these things without courage. Courage is having the strength of conviction

to do the right thing when it would just be easier to do things right.

Courage is a trait possessed by all great leaders. So much so that leadership absent courage is nothing short of a farce. Let me be very clear—I'm not advocating for bravado, arrogance, or an overabundance of hubris, but the courage necessary to stay the course and to do the right things. Standing behind decisions that everyone supports doesn't require a lot of chutzpah. But standing behind what one believes is the right decision in the face of tremendous controversy is the stuff great leaders are made of. Aristotle referred to courage as the *first virtue* because it makes all of the other virtues possible.

The best thing about courage is that a lack thereof can be overcome. Courage is teachable and therefore it is learnable—proof of this can be found in every instance of overcoming a fear. Courage should not be defined as the absence of fear—that's ignorance. Courage is finding the strength to move ahead in the presence of fear. In short, courage isn't a skill, it is a decision. Think of courage as a muscle that needs to be developed and exercised. Strong muscles atrophy without use, and so will your courage.

Here's the thing—we'll all be remembered for the decisions we make or don't make and the courage we display or we fail to exercise. Leaders who consistently demonstrate courage will stand apart from the masses, and earn the trust and loyalty of those they lead.

Whether you look back on your personal experience or a greater historical reference, you'll find it is always better to stand for courage than regret failing to do so. Do you have the courage to build a culture of leadership?



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