

LEADING SMART

CULTURE MATTERS

STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING
ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

TIM STEVENS

INTRODUCTION

LET'S TALK ABOUT CULTURE

It takes years to earn trust.

It takes a few minutes to lose it all.

In 2018, a church that had 43 years of stunning growth and worldwide impact was suddenly on the front page of the Chicago Tribune and in the New York Times for a leadership scandal that was decades in the making. The accusations were detailed and the accusers were numerous. The church board built a wall around the pastor and said he did no wrong, which resulted in all of them resigning a few months later when the evidence began to mount.

In the matter of a few weeks, trust was decimated for an organization that arguably had a greater impact on leaders around the world than any other church in history.

I began working with the leaders and staff at Willow Creek as a consultant in the summer of 2019. My life had, in many ways, been shaped by Willow, so it was an honor to come alongside them in a significant season of need. A new board had been formed, and their job was to find a leader to step in as senior pastor and help bring stability and growth. My job was to help them develop a profile for a senior pastor and conduct a global search to narrow down the candidates.

About nine months later and after hundreds of hours of work, the Board selected Dave Dummitt as the senior pastor of Willow Creek. One day later, in what may have been the most surprising phone call I've ever received, Dave asked me to consider joining him as the Executive Pastor to help rebuild Willow Creek.

It was the only time in my life where I've truly felt "called" to a role. It was clear and undeniable. Even though it was organizationally on fire, there were people on staff and in the congregation who loved Jesus and loved their church, and I had to say yes.

One of my first conversations was with one of the interim senior leaders who was leaving. “What can you tell me about the staff culture?”

He responded, “Which one?”

I thought he didn’t understand the question, so I rephrased it: “I’d love to know how healthy the staff culture is across Willow?”

He repeated himself, “Which one?”

And he was right. There were teams that were super healthy, and others that were incredibly toxic. As a result of a jarring leadership scandal and the ensuing media firestorm, many teams had siloed to protect themselves from the carnage, and some of those teams had healthy leaders who had kept their teams focused on the mission and moving forward.

Other staff members were broken and demoralized. They felt betrayed by leaders, and then abandoned. They were carrying the weight of continuing the ministry with nearly every senior leader having resigned. They were reading horrible things in blogs and news feeds every day—some true, some speculative, much of it complete fabrication—but it was difficult to know what was true about their own church.

I remember well the pain on the faces of so many leaders. They wanted to be optimistic about the future, but it hurt to hope. They were still there because they wanted to salvage and rebuild, but the way forward seemed impossible.

One day soon after I got there, Dave and I were talking to the leaders about the future, casting vision about a way forward. Following the group meeting, a long-tenured leader pulled me aside. This was a guy who had been around a long time, and we were hoping he would stay on the team.

He said to me, “Tim – you guys have fresh legs and you are asking me to run a marathon with you. But I just ran three marathons back-to-back without a break, and I can’t do it again.”

His sentiment would be repeated over and over, in different words, by those who were really great people, but were too exhausted for another run.

In addition to broken and tired leaders, there were others who can only be described as evil. They leaked confidential information to bloggers, they worked behind-the-scenes to take the church’s money and people and property to start other churches, and they were intent on seeing the church go down in flames. Some did this outwardly, many did this anonymously.

With necessary budget cuts, staffing restructures and systems changes – many well-meaning staff members left the team because of layoffs or by their own choice as they just couldn't manage the change. Those who stayed had to work through the grief of no longer having team members who were close friends serving by their side.

These were dark days where the culture was as toxic as I've ever seen anywhere. This was a new experience for me. I had worked in organizations that had decent or healthy cultures, and I was able to work with a team to make it even better. I spent twenty years as an Executive Pastor where the culture went from good to great to good and back again. It never got bad, although we always had to be intentional about it.

Whether your culture is off-the-charts amazing, a cesspool of burning toxicity, or somewhere in between – you can never take your eye off the ball.

Staff health is never neutral. It is either getting better or getting worse. It is always in motion going in a positive direction or a negative direction. If it's getting better, it is because someone is waking up every day thinking about it. Many teams are experiencing decline in their culture, and they don't even know it. They have people, systems, or environments that are tearing at the fabric of what they are trying to build.

My team works with organizations to assess cultural health, and then identify the people, implement the systems, and establish the rhythms to see that team thrive.

It is my prayer that you'll find ideas in the following pages to help your team culture thrive as well. If I can do anything to help you, don't hesitate to [reach out](#).



Staff health is never neutral. It is either getting better or getting worse.

Tim Stevens, CEO and Founder
[LeadingSmart](#)

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DEFINING A HEALTHY CULTURE

Many years ago I worked for a small organization that was effecting change on a national level. It was known for excellence, vision, and world-class leadership. It had a clear mission and strategy. With my acceptance into this organization came the respect of my friends and family for the achievement of such an honor.

But within a few months, I began to realize the department where I was placed did not represent the values of the overall organization. The leadership was more interested in saving face than making decisions based on integrity. Staff members talked about one another in highly negative terms. Complaining and whining were the most common modes of communication. There was little respect for the contribution of others on the team.

A friend and I tried to swing things back to a positive place, but we were sarcastically branded “Danny and Darla Do-Right” since we wouldn’t participate in the negativity. Efforts to make central leadership aware of the toxic nature of the culture were directed back to department leadership—which, of course, was where the problems began. The department completely fractured toward the end of our assignment, and most team members left the organization hurt and disillusioned.

Richard Dore, the director of Proteus Leadership Centres, explained it this way:

Having a great workplace culture can appear to be rare—and creating one is elusive and near impossible for some managers. People are often frustrated by their culture, with some describing their workplace as being dominated by negative and toxic personalities, with underhanded and manipulative infighting that stifles growth, innovation and results.

There is nothing worse than working in an organization that has a bad culture. It doesn't matter how much money you make or how many weeks of vacation you are given; when you work in a toxic environment, you still come home tense and stressed at the end of each day. And that isn't worth it.

On the other hand, there is nothing better than working at an organization with a great culture. You wake up every day looking forward to getting back to work on the mission with people you enjoy being around.

What a Great Culture Looks Like

Here are twelve signs of a great culture in your organization, company, or church:

1. **People are waiting in line to join your team.** It's not because you are offering more money than they could find somewhere else. Many times the pay is less. But people have heard about your team, and they would give anything to be a part of it.
2. **Turnover is low.** You should especially pay attention to this in entry-level and mid-level jobs. Often top leaders will stay forever because it's safe and the pay is good. But if you see people staying for an unexpectedly long time in facility care, accounting, or children's ministry, you are probably looking at a healthy culture.
3. **Top leaders are not insecure about other leaders succeeding.** In fact, they encourage it. I've often been told how shocked people were that Mark Beeson, my senior leader at Granger, allowed and encouraged multiple people on his staff to publish books years before he ever did. That's because he built a culture where successes were celebrated at all levels.
4. **Gossip isn't tolerated.** It isn't just the leaders calling for people to take the high road in their communication. At every level, gossip is shut down with an encouragement to speak directly to the individual.
5. **Lateral leadership is outstanding.** Leading people below you is easy. That is, it's easy compared to leading people next to you over whom you have no authority. A great culture sees people coming alongside their peers to encourage, or occasionally to correct and redirect.



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6. **Team members are energized by the mission.** You hear leaders at all levels of the organization talking about the mission. It gives them energy, and they are constantly thinking of ways to get it done.
7. **It's not just a job; people do life together.** They go to movies, hang out at one another's homes, and sometimes even vacation together. This doesn't mean they don't have other friends, but they really enjoy the company of the people they work with.
8. **The team believes they are more important than the task.** There is a sense that, as employees, they really matter. They aren't just people filling tasks; but the culture, systems, language, and structure communicate value. Even in tough times with salary freezes or benefit changes, the vibe is still, "You matter!"



Employees in an organization with a great culture can walk into the boss's office with a concern and walk out knowing they were heard.

9. **People are smiling.** Walk the hallways and you will see people smiling, enjoying conversations, and having a good time in the midst of high productivity and intense focus.

10. **Fear is absent.** People don't fret if they say the wrong thing in front of the wrong person. There aren't hushed conversations because of the fear of what will happen if they are overheard. Employees in an organization with a great culture can walk into the boss's office with a concern and walk out knowing they were heard.

11. **Communication is strong.** From the top to the bottom, people communicate. The staff isn't surprised with information they didn't hear until it was announced at a Sunday service or came out in a new product brochure. It is communicated well in advance, with leaders even asking the staff to help find solutions.
12. **Change is welcome.** People aren't afraid of change. It's not that everyone likes change, but most have been through it so many times and have seen the leaders manage change with care and dignity that they no longer dread it.

 NEXT STEPS

It is important to have a regular, objective way to assess your culture. And there are many great tools available. Some tips to follow:

- Use the same assessment tool multiple times. This gives you a benchmark and lets you know where you are improving or declining when it comes to culture.
- Some great assessment tools include Vanderbloemen Culture Tool, Gallup Q12, and the Insights tool built into Leadr.
- My team can work with any assessment you are already using to help your team. If you don't have a preferred tool, we use the [4Sight LeadCulture Framework](#) to help you strengthen your culture step-by-step.

TEAMS TRUMP PERSONALITY

It would be a crime to write about building a healthy culture without talking about teams. No organization, church, government, or company can have a healthy culture and be run by a dictator, monarch, or single personality.

John Maxwell said, “Teamwork is at the heart of great achievement. The question isn’t whether teams have value. The question is whether we acknowledge that fact and become better team players. That’s why I assert that one is too small a number to achieve greatness. You cannot do anything of real value alone.”

Most executive leaders would say they have a team. But *having a team* and *operating as a team* are two different things. Some would say they have a team because they have multiple people on their staff. But it’s quite possible, even normal, to have a multi-staff organization with one person in charge and everyone else helping out.

Managers or department heads: Before you start pointing fingers at your CEOs or lead pastors and calling them dictators, take a look at your own area. Do you operate as a team? Or are you a Mini-Me dictator barking orders and giving directions rather than leaning on your team to help define direction and strategy?

I think I could count on one hand the organizations I know that have a high-capacity, visionary, big-dog leader and also operate as a team. It usually isn’t the case.

Warning Signs of Poor Teamwork

If many of the following statements define your organization, you can be certain teams will not thrive:

- Strong personalities dominate every discussion.
- People agree on something as a team only to see it reversed later by senior leadership.
- No one dares to “speak truth to power” and disagree with the senior leader.
- Debate is not encouraged.
- The group meets, but the top-dog leader rarely comes.
- The senior leader can’t be in a meeting that he or she isn’t leading.
- There is a revolving door for high-capacity leaders who report to the chief executive. They never stay on the team for long.
- People feel as though the leaders don’t want input, or don’t listen when they get it. Their minds are already made up.
- Leaders take individual credit for the accomplishments of the team.
- Change is not welcome unless the top-dog leader initiates it.
- After decisions are made, you’ll hear comments such as, “I don’t agree with it, but here is what was decided.”
- When a decision or new direction is communicated, people walk away hearing the “what” but rarely understand the “why.” There isn’t broad ownership in the decision.
- When someone messes up, he or she is often left to hang on his or her own.
- There are lots of good discussions, but no one can remember what was decided at the last meeting, and people aren’t held accountable for tasks.



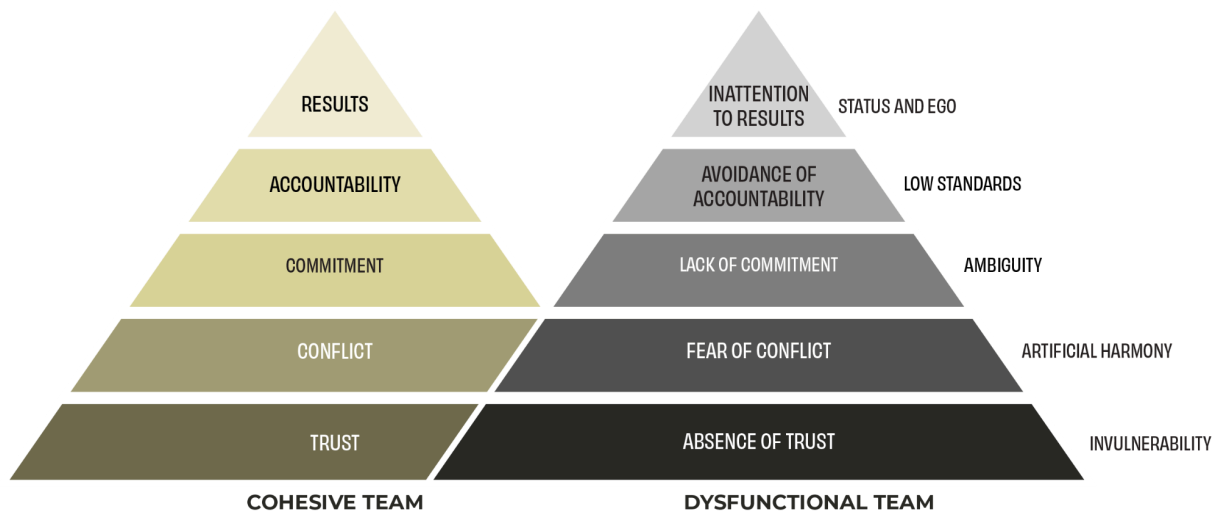
You can’t have a healthy culture without a solid team at the helm. It is impossible.

John Maxwell also said, “Think of any highly effective leader, and you will find someone who surrounded himself with a strong inner circle. You can see it in

business, ministry, sports, and even family relationships. Those closest to you determine your level of success.”

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NEXT STEPS



If you really want to work on building a healthy staff culture, you should start with building a cohesive, collaborative leadership team. I am a big fan of Patrick Lencioni's work through the Table Group, and I'd suggest you pick up a copy of [The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business](#). This book will give you a roadmap toward bringing health to your leadership team.

I've worked with dozens of teams to move them from dysfunctional to cohesive.

[Let's have a conversation about working together.](#)

THE THREE S'S

If I were only allowed to give one reason why the organization where I served for twenty years was often described as having a healthy culture, it would certainly be a decision we made many years ago to meet together on a weekly basis.

You might be saying, “Uh, you have a staff meeting? Congratulations. Every organization has staff meetings.” But this was different, and let me explain why.

This was a meeting we had every week that was for the distinct and single purpose of creating culture.

This wasn't a meeting to make decisions; it was not a meeting to share prayer requests or worship (I know you think church leaders do this at every gathering); and it was not a meeting to fix things that were going wrong. None of those are bad, and they all help create culture to some degree. But instead, we focused solely on three areas we believed were the most effective at creating a healthy culture.

I arrived at Willow in 2020 to find the entire staff only got together a few times a year. Because the culture was hurting, one of the first changes we made was to schedule a weekly all-staff meeting – for the primary purpose of creating a healthy culture.



This weekly meeting was for the distinct and single purpose of creating culture.

Three Important Components of a Weekly Staff Meeting

1. Stories

We spent the first fifteen to twenty minutes of every gathering sharing stories (at Willow we called these “wins”). We began the conversation by saying, “Where have you seen God at work in and through the church in the past seven days?” And then it was an open floor. We



You can't underestimate the power of a story.

heard about changed lives inside and outside our walls. We heard stories from student ministry, small groups, and children's ministry. We found out about the person in Canada who wrote in after watching an online service. We heard about the experiences of people who attended for the first time, and the baptism of someone who had been away from church for decades. We learned about the woman who walked into the building lonely and

afraid on a Monday afternoon, and who left having found encouragement and hope. We heard about the guy who was delivered a box of food in last year's food drive, and who came to help others receive food this year.

You can't underestimate the power of a story. It is so easy for people to get caught up in the micro-purpose of what they do: cleaning floors, organizing small groups, rehearsing lyrics, or preparing to teach kids. And sometimes you can work week after week and never see any tangible results from your work. But when you have an opportunity to gather every week and hear stories from your area and others, it does three things:

1. It keeps you from a silo mentality, or thinking you are the only one getting anything done.
2. It gives you a reason to celebrate what is happening all across the organization.
3. It gives you hope and re-energizes your vision when your team may be going through a tough season.

If you are running a company, I would do exactly the same thing. I would orient the story-telling segment of the meeting to share reports of great customer interactions or feedback. What are our customers saying? Where is our product helping better people's lives?

2. Spotlight

This is when you humanize your staff. Instead of talking heads who are from the C-Suite, you take time to get to know real people who are carrying the weight of the ministry at all levels of the organization.

At Granger, each week we would put one individual in the spotlight. With no warning ahead of time, we asked someone to sit up front and field questions from the rest of the team. We found out about his or her childhood, likes and dislikes, faith journey, spouse, hobbies, and history. This gave us an opportunity to get to know someone on a level we never did before. It took us out of the subculture of our individual departments, and it communicated that we were all on the same team, caring for one another as individuals.

Following the Q&A, we stopped and said, “Now let’s tell [Jill] why we are so glad to have her on the team.” And one after another we told her how her life added joy and meaning to the rest of us. People who were very close to her got to voice in front of others how significant she was to the team. The executive leaders got to communicate the value she brought to the entire organization. People who barely knew Jill got to tell her how they had been encouraged by her presence, smile, or attitude.

3. Stuff

The final segment in your culture-building meeting can be used for sharing inside information. It added value to the team when they knew stuff ahead of time. Sometimes we talked about upcoming events; other times we were throwing concepts out that hadn’t been decided on but that needed input from the team. They had ownership when they knew stuff before others, and it equipped them to answer questions and carry the vision.

Occasionally our “stuff” section consisted of one of the leaders talking about vision, teaching values, or sharing a spiritual lesson. These tended to be unprocessed thoughts. They felt more as if the leader was sharing off the top of his or her heart rather than delivering a prepared talk. Sometimes it was a bit raw, as it hadn’t been written for a larger audience, but the staff really appreciated the authentic nature of being able to hear from their leaders as they were learning—not when it was all finished and packaged.

These weekly gatherings kept everyone on the team energized and focused. We realized, It’s not just about me or my department; I’m part of something bigger. Even if we were having a tough week, for a few minutes we were pulled above that and realized again why it mattered. By the way, I would do this even if I have no paid staff. You can do this even with a room full of volunteers.



NEXT STEPS

1. Move toward a weekly gathering with your entire staff. Yes, it's a very expensive hour. But it pays huge dividends in keeping your team pulling in the same direction.
2. Don't allow this meeting to become the place of boring announcements. If something can be included in an email, it should not be part of your all-staff meeting. Information should be vision-infused and future-focused.
3. The person running point should be someone who wakes up every day thinking about team culture.

LET YOUR LEADERS LEAD

Have you ever been in a job where it felt like no one wanted you to think or contribute, where you were just supposed to get your work done? You were wired to change the world, to make a difference, to influence the people around you—but you were stuck in a position where you were assembling widgets. You had ideas to contribute and solutions to propose, but you were never asked.

Now some of you are in a different position--you are higher on the ladder. You are in a job where you are making decisions and creating a culture for others. You now have the ability to create a different environment than the one that so frustrated you--or to find a different way where leaders are discovered and raw talent is developed.

And you do that by considering the “loose/tight principle.”

Loose and tight aren't just labels on the shelf at your favorite Gap store. They aren't just descriptors you use to define your daughter's clothing as she sneaks out of the house.

Whatever your profession, if you lead a team or influence an entire organization, you have to decide what you are going to hold onto loosely and what you are going to hold onto tightly.

Even if you are a brand new leader, you know the importance of holding on to your mission tightly. For most organizations, the mission or purpose is not up for debate. When you define



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your mission and communicate it over and over in many ways, it gives clarity to your direction. You likely also have some major values and beliefs that are tightly held.

On the other hand, there are a lot of things (or should be) in the loose category. In my career, I've always loved bringing great leaders on a team and then finding ways to free them up to lead. They can make decisions, spend money, set direction, and develop initiatives—all without a huge approval process, a bunch of hoops to jump through to get permission, or the fear that I will later reverse their decision.

In many organizations, problems emerge like this:

- Bad hiring decisions are made.
- So executive leaders jump in and start running things.
- Then the organization starts to get bottlenecked, and people get frustrated.
- As a result, high-capacity leaders begin to leave the organization.
- The executives are so busy running things, they don't properly interview potential replacements.
- So more bad hiring decisions are made.
- And the cycle continues.

If you want to develop a healthy culture, decide the non-negotiables, bring great leaders onto your team, then get out of the way and watch them do great things.



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But even when you hire great people, there is another cycle that can take you down—and it also relates to running things with too heavy a hand. Perhaps you hire a great person. You take the time to ramp her up on values, vision, and the DNA of the organization. (So far, so good.) But then you give that leader responsibility without authority. (If this has happened to you, you know it sucks).

You let her make all the micro-decisions, but hang on to the big decisions such as setting direction, approving expenditures, or making hiring decisions for her area. You stay in the weeds of the decisions that you have strong opinions about. The amazing leader gets fed up and leaves your team. You might categorize her as disloyal or not a great fit, but the truth might be that she is wired as a leader and a developer. And you won't let her do either! So now you have to start over looking for

another great leader. You spend all your time looking for new staff and restating the values because really good leaders won't stay if you won't let them lead.

Authority is the ability to make decisions without asking someone else's permission. So often we give a leader responsibility without also giving him the authority. Their job is clear--but for just about every decision, they must get approval from their boss, or accounting for every expense, or HR for simple personnel approvals. Or, they actually have the authority to make all those decisions, at least on paper. But in reality, they know you are going to swoop in and make changes. So they eventually realize they don't really have authority. Perhaps the only thing that frustrates a true leader more than not being able to make decisions, is to make decisions that are later reversed.

If you want a great culture in which leaders are excited, then do six simple things:

1. Train them so their blood pulses with the mission, vision, and values of the organization.
2. Set them up to succeed. Lend them your credibility by telling everyone he or she is an amazing leader, and they have your full confidence.
3. Give them the authority to make decisions including spending money, hiring and firing staff, and setting direction for their areas of responsibility.
4. Then, get the heck out of the way and let them lead!
5. Connect with them continually for evaluation, values review, and rare course corrections. Be available as a sounding board to process decisions. A good leader doesn't need you to tell them the answer. Rather, they need you to ask questions and help them process the right course of action.
6. Celebrate their wins publicly, and reward them with greater responsibility as appropriate.

This is easy to put on a list, but much harder to practice. Find a leader you know who is great at empowering and releasing other leaders—and watch him or her closely. Within that leader you will likely find someone who is great at developing talent.

 NEXT STEPS

- Make a list of the things that are “tight” (not open for discussion), and the things that are loose. Are there enough substantive items on the “loose” list that will give leaders space to dream, innovate and lead?
- Think through recent great leaders your team has lost. Is it because they had responsibility without authority?
- If you are really brave, ask your team to tell you how the organization is doing in this area.

HAVE FUN

A friend told me recently he overheard a coworker saying, “Just because we work together doesn’t mean I have to like you.” Really? How can we be pulling together, working for the same vision, and attempting to achieve the same goals if we are only tolerating one another’s presence? And do we think our customers or church members are automatons and won’t pick up on the tension?

When you work at a church, it isn’t just a job. It’s not just about fulfilling a responsibility. It is also about doing life together. It is about being the church while you are leading the church. It is about having fun, working through conflict, accomplishing ministry, and yes, being highly effective in your job.

When you are a Christian leader working in business, it also isn’t just about a job. Your life is the only Jesus some people will ever see. It’s important that you model God’s love for those around you, whether they recognize it as such or not. You are in a unique position to help people find meaning in their work, and creating opportunities for fun can do just that.

I have a high value for chemistry and affinity as much as—if not more than education, skills, experience, and passion. And that is why I intentionally plan time to have fun in organizations where I have led. If your team is small, it might look like going to a movie in the middle of the day, or out to eat, or miniature golfing. As the staff size increases, you can plan some all-staff fun, as well as decentralized by team.

A couple years ago at Willow we began a Pickleball Staff tournament. There were two brackets – one competitive and one “for fun.” We planned the final during an all-staff meeting. Other times we did a golf cart race through the parking lot, brought in ice cream, hired a comedian, and more.

The affinity doesn't grow on its own. It must be nurtured with intentionality. It is worth an investment of time and money on "fun" to build a culture where your staff is energized and committed to one another for the long term.

Strategic Fun

To make this a reality, several things have to be true:

- **Priority.** Although fun doesn't require much money, you have to make fun a priority in your budget. It won't just happen.
- **Accessibility.** This can't be something that just senior leadership does. If so, it's an executive perk rather than a strategic part of shaping culture.
- **Modeling.** At the same time, you have to demonstrate fun. One of my leaders thanked me for valuing fun and downtime during our senior team gatherings because it gave her permission and encouragement to do the same in her department.
- **Inclusiveness.** Even with a large staff, do a couple of things each year with the entire team, such as the Pickleball tournament referenced earlier. My wife and I hosted a summer picnic in our backyard for our entire staff for years.
- **Just do it.** You can't wait for the work to get done to experience fun. For some of your staff, you'll need to tell them this is "required fun." Otherwise they will never participate either because (a) they don't have a felt need for fun, or (b) they think they have too much to do.

I believe the little bit of money you invest in creating a great culture now will save you a hundredfold later.

NEXT STEPS

- Find someone on your team who is creative and wired to plan a party, and put them in charge of staff fun.
- Give them some parameters (time, budget, team) and let them run with it. If someone isn't thinking about this, it won't happen on its own.

LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM

Dan Wieden is an advertising legend and cofounder of Wieden + Kennedy. His leadership style is unpacked in the book [Mavericks at Work](#) by authors William C. Taylor and Polly LaBarre. I find his example refreshing and uncharacteristically humble for a leader of a huge organization with more than six hundred staff.

Wieden argued that his job is to “walk in stupid every day”—to keep challenging the organization, and himself, to seek out unexpected ideas, outside influences, and new perspectives on old problems.

“It’s the hardest thing to do as a leader,” said Wieden, “but it’s the most important thing. Whatever day it is, something in the world has changed overnight, and you better figure out what it is and what it means. You have to forget what you did and what you just learned. You have to walk in stupid every day.”

Unfortunately, too many leaders walk in every day as if they are the experts. Either because of their positions, tenures, or influences, they act as if they no longer have anything to learn from others (and especially not from the people they hired). They don’t attend conferences, they never ask questions in an effort to learn, and they only read books or listen to podcasts when they are preparing for their next talks.

Authors Taylor and LaBarre continued, “It’s hard to find an executive who doesn’t appreciate the power of the experience curve—the idea that the more you do something . . . the more productive you become. Dan Wieden and his colleagues also appreciate the power of the inexperience curve—the idea that the more you do something, the more important it is to challenge the assumptions and habits that built your success so as to generate a wave of innovations to build the future.”

Interpretation: Just because your church or company is growing, don't get cocky. Don't stop listening. Don't stop asking questions. Don't keep doing what you did yesterday just because it worked. Don't surround yourself with a bunch of people who check their brains at the door. Don't ignore people who challenge your insecurities as a leader—yes, we all have them. Walk in stupid, and you might learn something.

It is all about listening. There is nothing that will empower and encourage your team more than to know you listen to them. John Maxwell said, "The greatest enemy of learning is knowing."⁴

Authors Chip Heath and Dan Heath put it this way: "Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has 'cursed' us." Those who know stuff walk around as if they know stuff rather than walking around wanting to learn. And no one wants to work for a know-it-all. It pulls down the culture you are trying to lift.



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asking questions.**

Are You a Learner?

A secure leader, one who listens to learn, creates a culture that is attractive and collaborative. John Maxwell offered these ten questions to self-assess whether you are a learner:

1. Am I open to other people's ideas?
2. Do I listen more than I talk?
3. Am I open to changing my opinion based on new information?
4. Do I readily admit when I am wrong?
5. Do I observe before acting on a situation?
6. Do I ask questions?
7. Am I willing to ask a question that will expose my ignorance?
8. Am I open to doing things in a way I haven't done before?
9. Am I willing to ask for directions?
10. Do I act defensive when criticized, or do I listen openly for truth?

This is one area of building a healthy culture that might require a dose of humility and some new skills. If you think you might need help learning how to listen, I guarantee your team knows you do.



NEXT STEPS

- If you are a talker, and find yourself constantly answering every question, put some notes on your laptop or in your office with this word: “WAIST.” No one else will know what it means, but you will know it as a reminder: “Why Am I Still Talking?”
- Get some close friends and coworkers to answer John Maxwell’s ten questions about you. It will be eye-opening for sure!

CELEBRATE FAILURE

What do you do when someone makes a mistake? I was talking with a coworker about a decision he made as he wondered, “Did I just cost the church three hundred dollars by giving the wrong answer?”

No, he didn't, but it reminded me of mistakes I've made over the years. Some haven't cost anything; others have been very expensive. At one of my first jobs, I was responsible for mowing a large property. Laverne, the maintenance supervisor, showed me how to use the tractor. “Does everything make sense?” he asked as he finished his training.

“Yep, I've got it.” As he walked away, I put the tractor in gear and proceeded to drive it directly into the side of the building and through a closed garage door.

Sometimes mistakes aren't really mistakes. They are just decisions that are made with the best information available, but later the information is proven to be faulty. For example, in 1995 I made the decision to accept a design from an architect for an artistic pattern on the side of a brick wall. We were certain it would be a temporary wall. However, it was ugly the day it went up, and we had to look at it for sixteen long years before it was removed. Every day for sixteen years I was reminded of this bad decision.

What do you do when someone who reports to you makes a mistake? You could say to yourself, “He made a mistake. It cost the company money. He is going to pay for it.” Perhaps you would make him or her financially reimburse the company. Or you might try the humiliation route.

A couple of years ago, when I went to our local Taco Bell, I noticed everyone had matching uniforms and hats, except one guy who was wearing a fluorescent pink

hat. When he turned around, I saw the words on the front: “I forgot my hat today.” I’m sure his boss thought he was teaching him a lesson (yeah, find a different boss).

Another option is to consider the failure part of your training budget. Tom Watson, the founder of IBM, understood the value of mistakes. Once, one of his employees made a huge mistake that cost the company millions of dollars. The employee, upon being called into his office, said, “I suppose you want my resignation.”

“Are you kidding?” replied Watson. “I just spent ten million dollars educating you.”¹

In the church world, our mistakes are not typically that large. But it isn’t too uncommon for leaders to get bent out of shape when a mistake is made that costs the church money. It comes from a well-intentioned place of wanting to be wise stewards of the church resources. But it diminishes people and discourages innovation and appropriate risk.

If you want a healthy culture with leaders who bring their best ideas and work to bear, then you must have a culture where it is okay to make mistakes.

When Laverne looked at me after I drove the tractor through the side of the building and said, “I’m guessing you won’t do that again,” he was right—although I did drive it through a glass window a couple of days later. But what I remember most about that day was his graceful posture in helping me grow through my mistakes. Now, if someone keeps making the same mistake over and over, then it is obvious the education process isn’t working. Release him or her to spend someone else’s money making mistakes.

I’ve worked for four employers over the past four decades since I graduated high school, and I’m grateful that in each of those places I have been encouraged to take risks, inspired to innovate, and given room to fail. It has cost those organizations a few bucks, but it has made me a much better leader—which ultimately made the organizations better.



If you want a healthy culture with leaders who bring their best ideas and work to bear, then you must have a culture where it is okay to make mistakes.



NEXT STEPS

- Take an anonymous survey from your staff and ask them whether you have an environment where it is okay to try new things, and also to fail.
- Celebrate some failures at your next staff meeting. Let the team know how proud you are of someone who creatively tried something new, even though it didn't work.

IDENTIFY SILOS

Very little will tear at the healthy culture you are trying to build more than departmental silos. These exist in just about every corporation and organization. If you have more than one department in your church, you are susceptible to silos. Even small businesses experience silos, between servers and busboys or between product development and marketing.

Silos are the walls that are between departments in an organization. Business author Patrick Lencioni wrote about the concept of silos, or unhealthy divisions: “Silos rise up not because of what executives are doing purposefully but rather because of what they are failing to do: provide themselves and their employees with a compelling context for working together.”

Silos turn colleagues into competitors. Forbes contributor John Kotter said, “A siloed organization cannot act quickly on opportunities that arise in a fast-paced business landscape, nor is it able to make productive decisions about how to change in order to seize these opportunities.”

For a church, the stakes are even higher. Silos will tear apart a church faster than just about anything. From a silo-built church come jealousy, slander, gossip, bitterness, conflict, and competition.

Your attendees are smart, and they can sniff this stuff out pretty quickly. They experience jealous competition in their homes and in their workplaces—if they find it at church, they either won't sign up or won't stay.

But here is the problem: the natural order of the universe in your organization is for silos to be built and turf-guarding to happen. It just happens. You have to try extremely hard to destroy the silos. It is rare to find churches or businesses that don't

have silos, and it's not because they are lucky or fortunate. They have worked like crazy to keep silos from developing. It requires difficult communication, strong leadership, and people who are more concerned about the overall mission than their departmental goals.

Kotter listed three grave consequences from allowing silos to exist:

1. **Silos destroy trust.** The loyalty grows stronger to your department head and weaker to the senior leadership or the overall vision.
2. **Silos cut off communication.** People do great at communicating within their departments, but they do everything they can to work around other teams, only communicating as a last resort to accomplish their own objectives.
3. **Silos foster complacency.** Kotter said, "In an organization where people in different divisions have little contact with one another, it's easy to become inwardly focused and complacent with the status quo."

I've seen this happen time and time again in churches. We develop "silo ministries." The youth ministry has its own purposes, goals, and plans that have absolutely nothing to do with the overall church. The women's ministry is a separate entity. The missions committee has its own projects that have nothing to do with the mission of the church. And everyone knows not to mess with the choir!

The church ends up with a "federation of sub-ministries." They are all good ministries, but the strength of the whole is decreased because they lack a common vision and purpose. The church crawls along and makes incremental progress without really being able to have a turbocharged impact on the community.

I'm pretty sure this is not what our early church leaders had in mind in Philippians 2:2: "Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose."

It is no less detrimental in a business environment. A good friend recently shared with me about the silos that exist in his small construction business, which has fewer than fifteen employees, between his sales team and the guys in the field who have to install what's been sold. He relayed the frustration that he senses between the teams and the amount of time he spends trying to help the two teams communicate. Silos have to go, but first they must be identified.



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How to Spot a Silo

Here is some evidence that silos exist in your organization:

In A Church

- Ministries are competing for the same dollars through fund-raising or pitching their ideas.
- Ministries are arguing over calendar space. Instead of deciding based on priorities, there is a competitive culture.
- Leaders are complaining for reasons such as, “My room got messed up by the students,” or “My supplies in the kitchen were used by the women’s group.”

In A Business

- You deal with customers who are unhappy that what was promised wasn’t delivered.
- The profitability of the company is going in the wrong direction, and good employees are beginning to leave.

In Both Businesses and Churches

- You begin to hear a lot of “us” and “them” language.
- Every department has its own mission statement, its own purpose, its own vision—without a very clear connection to the overall vision of the organization.
- You walk on eggshells around certain staff members or departments.
- Attitudes begin to go sour.
- You hear statements such as, “That’s not my area,” or “We didn’t have anything to do with that decision.”

This happens faster than you would think in a new church or start up business. You think you are incredibly clear about your mission and vision and how this new venture is going to be a different experience from any they’ve ever known. You launch and begin growing, and you start adding people to your team. And these folks come with years of silo-laden experiences from businesses and families. People do what people know. And silos begin to rise.



NEXT STEPS

- Pay attention. If you start to sense a disconnect, it's probably worse than you think. If you have a leader who isn't a team player, you should have a conversation with them about what is expected in the culture you are trying to build.
- Seek to understand. The leader may be trying to protect the team from a real or perceived danger. Getting behind the reasons will help you find a way forward.
- If you haven't clearly defined your values and behaviors, then it's hard to hold team members accountable. My team would be glad to [help you develop a robust plan](#) to discover your values and embed them into your culture.

WHY CULTURE BEATS PERFORMANCE

We've all been on a team with this teammate: He or she is crushing it. They are a rockstar. They are hitting all their targets, smashing their KPIs, and generally making everyone else look like they're moving at a snail's pace. They might be a salesperson who is bringing in the highest numbers month after month. They might be a student pastor where the student ministry is blowing up, far out-pacing the growth of the church. Perhaps they are a staff member who is really popular because they are winning at their job. They are extremely gifted. And their high performance is undeniable.

But there's a catch. They do not play well in the sandbox with others. They consider themselves the exception to...well, everything. They know no one is going to call them on it if they don't turn in their receipts, or follow all the staff guidelines, or show up for the "required" staff events. No one will care because they are crushing it. They are a top performer. And performers gain an audience.

"They can't do this without me."

"I'm untouchable."

I've seen this person on staff at businesses, churches, nonprofits and other organizations. And typically they are absolutely right -- they are untouchable. They are building their own silo that contains different values and behavior expectations. Senior leaders typically look the other way -- not realizing the significant damage that is being done. Many times they even elevate and celebrate this person based on their performance, not realizing the unintended message they are sending about what really matters (performance) and what doesn't (culture, values, behaviors).

Yet the staff who are closest to this silo leader see the damage that is being caused. They know about the lapses in the persons' integrity. They have a front row seat to the chaos this out-of-control leader is causing.

This person gets to build their own walled-off kingdom for years because there is a real (and maybe valid) fear for what happens if they are gone. In the church context we believe "we will lose so many people" if we take corrective action.



When we elevate performance over cultural values -- we undermine our very mission.

When we elevate performance over cultural values -- we undermine our very mission.

Culture is not just one aspect of the game, it is the game. In the end, an organization is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value.

- Lou Gerstner

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying performance doesn't matter. Far from it! What I'm saying is, if you've got a superstar that's making life miserable for everyone else, you're going to have a problem on your hands. And it is eating away at the very soul of your organization. One negative employee can disrupt an entire team, leading to a 30-40% decrease in team performance.

Allowing this behavior to go unchecked is killing your organization from the inside out. There are four things you need to know:

- **You are losing your best people.** They won't tell you why they are leaving because they are too nice. But they have watched and waited and they have realized you are not going to make the difficult decision to address the culture problem in front of you. Many years ago I left an organization where I had served for nearly a decade because the senior leader would not make the difficult decision to fire a toxic leader. Your smartest, highest-capacity leaders are watching.
- **You are losing respect as a leader.** In fact, some will conclude you are clueless about the gravity of the problem, or you lack the spine to make a difficult decision. Letting this staff person go unchecked is chipping away at the trust and confidence that has taken you years to build.
- **You are showing the rest of your staff the type of behavior that is acceptable.** "As long as you perform, you don't have to be a team player. As long as your numbers are good, you can have a crappy attitude. Performance trumps everything. As long as you are a high performer, you can do whatever you want." It isn't what is taught -- it is what is caught. And your lack of action is contagious.

- **You are letting a toxic staff person set the agenda.** Information flows downhill. If you are the leader, you are the last to know everything. So whatever the level of toxicity you sense has surfaced -- it's probably three times worse. However big the problem you believe this person is creating, it's much bigger. This high-performing, low-culture leader is likely saying things about you and your leadership to anyone who will listen. They are super smart, so it's not overt, but they often are building a coalition around their ideas and vision and focus.

What is the solution? You need to have some very serious conversations. The rockstar performer needs to know...in order to stay on the team, it's not just about performance. They have to be a team player. They have to live out the values. They need to know they are not untouchable. Tell them exactly what you need to see for them to continue to work at the organization. Describe the behaviors that cannot continue. Give them a fixed period of time (30-days? 60-days?) to cease the behaviors that are contrary to your values.

And what might happen? They might leave. You might lose some ground for a season in the area they lead. You might have some people criticize you for driving away one of your top performers.

But you know what else might happen? You might regain the respect of your team. You might save some top talent who couldn't stay if you let toxicity and negativity persist. You might be able to build an organization that is stronger than the sum of its parts. You might reinforce your values which will draw great people to your team. Many times these things are hard to diagnose without some objective trained eyes. I've helped many teams root out the toxic behavior in their organization through anonymous culture surveys, setting up interviews where people actually tell me the truth, and working with the senior team to establish values and behaviors.

If I can come alongside you or your team to diagnose culture or structure or help locate the toxicity on your team, let's [set up a time to talk](#).



It isn't what is taught -- it is what is caught. And your lack of action is contagious.



NEXT STEPS

- Do an exercise at least once a year to evaluate everyone on the team on their level of performance AND the level to which they embody and live out your culture.
- Determine an action plan for every staff member who isn't crushing both categories.

SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY CULTURE

I had heard three disturbing reports all in the same month. One guy resigned because he didn't agree with part of the vision. When we asked, "Why didn't you say anything?" he said he was afraid. Another report came from an employee who was feeling sexually harassed by her boss but didn't know who to tell. And the third report was about a leader who had been saying less-than-supportive things to her team about our senior team.

Alarm bells started going off. Red lights flashed. We had a culture problem. If you had asked me in the previous month, I would have given our culture an A grade. But now, with three conversations, we were at best a C minus.

You never get to spike the ball on culture. You can never stop focusing on it. Culture is either getting better or worse. It is never steady or neutral. Even in the best situations, you will find seasons where you need to intentionally work to bring health back to your team.

Signs of an Unhealthy Culture

Insecurity and Nervousness

- Staff members are afraid they might lose their jobs if they entertain a potential offer from somewhere else. In a healthy culture, leaders come alongside their teams to help them think or pray through and consider the offers.
- Traveling to conferences or visiting other organizations is discouraged. Insecure leaders are threatened by the new perspectives that might reveal their own inadequacies.
- The only new ideas the leader likes are his or her own.

- In brainstorming sessions, people don't attend or are afraid to share. This could mean the leader is looking for affirmation about his or her own ideas rather than looking for new ones.
- Defensiveness is more of a norm than an exception. This points to people feeling as if they have to prove themselves.
- There is little freedom to try new things without fear of reprisal. In an unhealthy culture, you either (a) never try anything new or (b) say, "Let's try it and ask forgiveness later if it doesn't work." In a healthy culture, you initiate new ideas and propose new directions without fear because the typical response by leadership is to ask clarifying questions and then bless the effort.



Culture is either getting better or worse. It is never neutral.

Empty Desks, Quiet Hallways

- You have a revolving door of staff. A high turnover is a symptom of deeper troubles and wastes precious resources on downtime and continual retraining.
- You publish a notice regarding a new staff position, and hardly anyone expresses interest. The word is out: your business or church isn't a fun place to work.
- People come late and leave early, and you don't see your staff hanging out after hours or during their discretionary time.
- Very few former staff members talk positively about their experiences.
- There are lots of hushed hallway conversations.

Lack of Communication and Trust

- Your leaders and core staff can't quickly, easily, and authentically tell you the mission of the organization and why it matters. Likewise, if the vision lacks clarity, your culture needs work.
- You never (or rarely) meet together with your entire team.
- Everything has to go to the top for approval. Other leaders on the team have not been empowered to make decisions.
- Everyone knows of people on staff who lack competence or character, yet the leaders are unwilling to make the tough decisions to let them go.

Dirty Tricks

- There is a lot of backbiting, bickering, or complaining between team members.
- You get reports of harassment, discrimination, or leaders abusing their power or positions.
- There is an acceptance of pranks on the team that embarrass people or highlight their weaknesses.

Unhappy Families

- People have to choose between job and family. You probably don't say that out loud, but your team regularly is making that choice.
- Spouses of your staff feel as if they are competing with a mistress called "ministry" or "job."
- It is common for staff to attempt to negotiate better salaries or benefits. This often points to a lack of feeling valued.

I'll say it again, you never get to claim "finished" when working toward a healthy culture. You can never proclaim your culture a success or stop working on it. If you have human beings working with and for you, then this will be something you work on ad infinitum.

NEXT STEPS

- If you do only one thing, assign a culture champion on your team. Whether it is yourself or someone else at the senior leadership level, someone should be thinking about assessing and improving the culture every step of the way.
- Have that person put together a culture team.

THE VALUE OF VALUES

Imagine you're part of a basketball team. Each player has unique skills, some are good at dribbling, some at shooting, while others might excel at defense. Sounds great, right? But even with such a talented mix, the team might still flounder. Why? Because without shared values, there is no unity, no shared purpose, and as a result, no success. The same concept rings true of every team--whether church, nonprofit, or business. The role of shared values in unifying a team and ensuring consistent productivity cannot be overstated.

To realize the full potential of your team, you need to define, develop and promote a solid set of values that every member identifies and aligns with. These values not only clarify expected behavior but also foster unity and improve performance. A good set of values will become your filter for hiring, textbook for onboarding, measuring stick for performance reviews and salary increases, and magnet for team unity.

8 Things To Know When Writing Staff Values

1. **Build a Culture Team.** Pull together a cross-section of people from across your organization who each embody the culture you are hoping to create, and ask them to help you identify your values. This is especially important as you will need this group to help you get broad ownership of the values.
2. **Start with Assessing.** You need to know what is true of your culture today, even if it isn't pretty. Knowing this, and having a shared agreement about it, will give you a benchmark for what needs to be preserved and what needs to change.
3. **Values Should Be Memorable.** This means choose no more than five values. No one can remember more than five things on any list. Keep it short and keep it sticky.

4. **Some Values Can Be Aspirational.** This is especially true if you are trying to turn around a toxic team or you are going through significant change. Pick some values that define who you want to become as a team.
5. **Each Value Should Be Connected to Behaviors.** Many times, values statements are hard to measure. For example, I worked with a church that had this value: *Choose Unity -- Diversity is Our Strength*. That's pretty hard to measure whether someone on your team is living out the value, right? So two of the behaviors connected to this value were, "We always ask whose voice is missing at the table" and "We build teams across racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and generational lines." Both of those are very easy to measure.
6. **Look for Shared Stories.** I learned this from Jenni Catron at 4Sight Group. She encouraged us to mine for stories that would help our team connect to the value. If you have a shared story that exemplifies the value, this greatly increases the possibility of that value becoming part of the air your team breathes. And when that happens, it's part of your DNA.
7. **Never Stop Over-Communicating the Values.** Seriously, talk about them until you are sick of hearing about them. Then do it some more. These shouldn't just be plastered on a wall. Celebrate people who are living out the values. Focus on a value every month in your staff meeting and internal newsletter. Bake them into your team agendas at every level. Give awards for people who are living out your values.
8. **Embed the Values into Everything.** Build questions and exercises around your values when hiring. Create a system for teaching your values when onboarding. Include them in every meeting you are leading. Write questions around your values for performance reviews. Give your biggest raises to those who most embody the values.



Talk about values until you are sick of hearing about them. Then do it some more.

In essence, having a well-defined set of staff values is an irreplaceable connector across your organization. These values shape your team's culture, help preserve what's working, and revise what is not. They promote unity and diversity, encourage consistent behavior and communication, and define the criteria for measuring performance. Moreover, integrating your chosen values into your everyday business elements, from hiring to evaluations and rewards, guarantees a unified front for your organization. Ultimately, well-defined staff values serve as the cornerstone for building a competent and unified team.

SMART CULTURE

IMPROVE THE CULTURE OF YOUR TEAM FROM THE TOP DOWN

Let's create a healthy team with an irresistible culture together.

**Your plan will be customized
to your organization needs.**

We will look at:

- Your team's engagement
- Concerns with culture and how it relates to staff demographics
- Hiring, onboarding and training practices
- Overall team health

Outcomes you will see:

- Discovering your team values
- A plan designed to embed your values in every step of the employee journey
- Short-term and long-range goals around your culture
- Coaching of a leader to continue building your culture well into the future.

"The change in our staff culture has been nothing short of remarkable. Tim Stevens led our team through a process to discover our values and behaviors, recruit and build a culture team, and then set up systems to infuse these values deep into our DNA. Our team is not only much healthier, they love working and laughing together. I would highly recommend any organization that is concerned about the health of their team to engage the services of Tim and his team."



DAVE DUMMITT

Senior Pastor
Willow Creek Community Church



LET'S WORK TOGETHER

I wake up every day thinking about culture. How do we make our workplace a better experience for all? How do we ensure our team is engaged, thriving, leaning in, and excited about being a part of the mission?

[READY TO LEARN MORE? CLICK HERE TO CONTACT ME](#)