



Be a Cultural Architect

Culture shapes human behavior and drives team performance

Tim Stevenson

EVERY GROUP HAS a culture. It's not *If?* It's *What kind?* Where cultures differ is whether they are:

- ***Designed or accidental*** — They can be intelligently and deliberately developed and maintained, like a building that grows from a blueprint. Or, they can be formed like a sand dune, shaped according to whatever winds are blowing.
- ***Based on principles or personalities*** — Cultures can be shaped according to unchanging values which apply to every person. Or cultures can take the shape of

their most dominant, strong-willed personalities, and then run according to the current moods of those persons.

“Great leaders build strong cultures. They get people to agree on a model of the world.”

— **Howard H. Stevenson**

- ***Healthy or unhealthy*** — A culture can be mature and honest in communication, affirming and respectful of individuals, and stimulating and motivating, resulting in positive performance. Or it can be immature and manipulative, even abusive. An unhealthy culture can be characterized by demotivating pressures in the effort to generate performance, proving in the long run to be counterproductive.

Defined, culture is “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize a group or organization.”



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In a business setting, culture applies on the very large scale, such as a company of thousands of employees, or on the very small scale, such as an office with only a handful of workers. Within the culture of the large company are also many subcultures. Each department, site, or office has its own version, which may or may not be in character with the whole, for better or worse.

The authority in each sphere is the one with the most direct ability to drive culture. But even if you're not the boss, you can influence the development and maintenance of your group's culture. We all have a part.

Leaders build cultures

You should be interested in your group's culture, no matter how large or small it is. **Cultures are the most reliable indicator of future performance.** Howard H. Stevenson of the Harvard School of Business said,

Great leaders build strong cultures. They get people to agree on a model of the world.

This is what Max De Pree meant in his statement I've quoted so often:

The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.

"Defining reality" in essence means *teaching people how to think*. It means teaching your people the answers to the most critical questions, including:

- Who are we?
- Why are we here?
- Who are our customers?
- How do we define "success"?
- What are our governing values?
- What are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors?

- What will be rewarded and how? What will be confronted and how?

Remember, **culture is a given**: It's not *If?* It's *What kind?* **If you as a leader do not "define reality" in these things, you are leaving the answers up for grabs.** The most strong-willed personalities in the group will drive the culture if you don't, and there's no guarantee that the results will be positive. Where you find a group that is immature, selfish, and run by bullies, it is likely the leader has abdicated this role. The vacuum has been filled by others.

The process for constructing a culture

The process for developing a healthy performance-based culture is simple to understand, though a genuine leadership challenge to pull off. Following this article is a diagram spelling out the process. There are three steps: *Define*, *Shape*, and *Align*.

1. Define

In previous articles I have examined how unity is developed within groups. We found that **you don't develop unity by talking about "unity."** **Unity is a by-product of people's common commitment to a standard.** Just as the dozens of instruments in an orchestra get in tune with one another by tuning to a common note (the "A" played by the oboe), people become unified when they individually buy in to a common set of values and principles.

Therefore, **Step 1 to deliberately sculpt a culture is to define those values around which you want people to unite.**

On the large scale, these would include a company's mission, vision, and values. The beginning of constructing a smaller subculture is exactly the same: your "managerial values."

Cynicism often rises up at this point, because almost every company has defined

their mission, vision, and values. After all, they're right up there on that plaque or poster where everybody can see it!

Right. So why is it that so few companies actually *follow* those stirring words up there in print? Simple. Because they really don't *believe* them or intend to practice them!

A reliable principle you can carve in stone is that **leaders must believe the values they want to promote**. They've got to come from the heart, or they're a waste of breath. Actually it's worse than that. Values that are talked about but never taken seriously are actually *damaging* to a group. Cynicism runs rampant.

So the first step is to look within and find those values you really do believe in. That's why on the diagram you have two cautionary questions before you go too fast:

- “Do you REALLY believe it?”
- “Would you hold to it even if it COST you to do so?” (the real acid test!)

When you have defined 3 or 4 core values (no more than 4), you are ready for Step 2.

2. Shape

To get into the minds of people, values need to be organized and shaped for clear and sharp communication. **They must be memorable.**

I have frequently cited one of my favorite examples, Southwest Airlines, with its “Warrior Spirit, Servant's Heart, & Fun-LUVing Attitude.” They have worked those values thoroughly for years and driven them into their corporate DNA.

A few years ago, a medical company I served revisited their values. They previously had *seven* values no one could remember. I checked with several employees and physicians. Many didn't even know they had them! Those who did know they existed could not name them.

After some hard work we came up with “**to HEAL**” (**Heart, Excellence, Accountability & Leadership**). That's a good start.

To create a culture, however, this is where you have to ask some more pointed questions:

- “Do you really WANT to continue?”
- “Do you really MEAN to continue?”

Why? Because here is where the hard work really begins: You have to live them out yourself (modeling), and you must commit yourself to the never-ending task of aligning your team's activities and behaviors according to them.

3. Align

To get from ideals to reality, you must:

- **Align organization objectives and processes with the core values.** You must critically examine all your activities and efforts by lining them up with what you say you believe. Challenge anything that's off-line.
- **Communicate relentlessly those core values.** One speech won't do it. A nice-looking plaque won't do it. It takes consistent, drip-drip-drip communication over time to get those values you believe into people's minds.
- **Identify and correct misalignments.** This task never ends. It is the relentless pursuit of living out your core values individually and as a team.

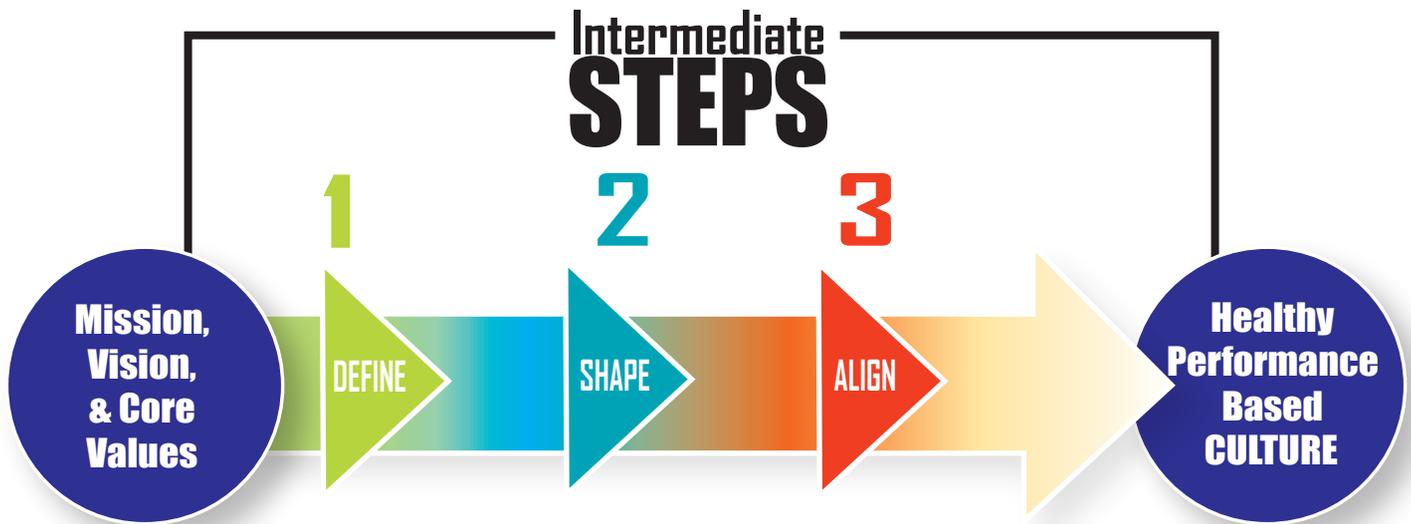
Here's the good news: If you persevere, people will see that you really believe your values, and that you fully intend to put them into practice over the long haul. You can develop a team that thinks and works together toward meaningful objectives according to core values. The culture will take shape as you do.

Whether yours is a large or small sphere, the process is the same. Check out the diagram that follows, and think through what you want to do.



FROM CONVICTIONS TO CULTURE

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1. DEFINE

- Spell out implications and applications of mission, vision and values
- “What does that look like?”
- “What is MISSING?”



Pause - Self Examination

- Ask - “Do you REALLY believe it?”
- Ask: “Would you hold to it even if it COST you to do so?”

2. SHAPE

- Organize and sharpen
- Prepare to communicate
- Must be MEMORABLE



Pause - Reality Test

- Ask: “Do you really WANT to continue?”
- Ask: “Do you really MEAN to continue?”

3. ALIGN

- Align organization objectives and processes with core values
- Communicate relentlessly core values
- Realize and correct misalignments



Pause - Commitment Check

- This is a continuous never - ending task
- Using all available means