

THE CULTURE ADVANTAGE

— What's Actually **Running** Your Business —



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The Gap Nobody Measures

I've read a lot of culture surveys over the years. Most of them ask the same handful of questions, dressed up differently: is communication open here, do you trust management, is this one of the best places you've worked. People answer honestly. And the results tell you almost nothing about the business, because they're not measuring the culture, they're measuring how people feel this week.

That gap is what this book is about. Not the culture written on your wall, or in your induction pack, or read out at the Monday meeting. The one actually running the business the one that decides what happens when a customer complains at 4:45 on a Friday, or when someone quietly misses a deadline for the third time, or when a new starter is left to figure out, without being told, what actually gets someone in trouble around here.

Nobody writes that culture down, but everyone in your business knows it.

This book won't give you a values poster. There are enough of those already, and I've yet to meet a business that changed because of one. What I want to give you instead is a way of seeing what is actually true, not what you'd like to be true, and a practical way to build the culture you really want.



Why Most Culture Advice Doesn't Help

Most of what's written about culture falls into one of two camps.

The first is the poster camp. Six to ten words, usually starting with 'integrity' and ending with 'excellence,' agreed on in a workshop and printed somewhere near the front door. The trouble starts with the words themselves. They're stated as abstract positives nobody could ever disagree with. No company has ever put up a poster saying 'we're all about corruption,' which means naming integrity resolves nothing; everyone in the building was already in favour of it before you spent a cent on the signage

Even if the words are sharper, nobody learns culture by reading them. They learn it by watching. A new person reads the poster once, on day one, and then spends their next three months watching what actually gets praised, what gets waved through, and what gets someone quietly pulled aside and that's what they copy, because that's how people work out where they stand in any group. The poster is competing against real behaviour happening in front of them every day, and it loses every time.

The second is the survey camp, and it's more dangerous because it looks rigorous. Forty statements, five-point scale, strongly agree to strongly disagree. I trust my manager. My department values me. This is one of the best companies I know of. People fill these in based on how their week has gone a bad Tuesday and a good Thursday will give you two different results from the same person describing the same culture. What you get back is a mood, dressed up as data.

Neither tells you what's actually happening. And that's the only thing worth knowing, because as one of the more useful lines I've come across on this subject puts it your real values are shown by who gets rewarded, who gets promoted, and who gets let go. Not by what's written down.

The values on the wall describe what you'd like to be true. What gets let go, and what gets rewarded, describes what's actually true.

That's the standard I'd hold any culture work to from here not what people say they believe, but what's actually happening around them, every day, whether anyone's watching or not.

The **Personality** of a Business

A business has a personality, the same way a person does. How people talk to each other. What gets a laugh. What's normal here that wouldn't be normal somewhere else.

That personality is made of norms, things everyone in the group has quietly agreed to, without ever holding the meeting where they agreed to it. Some of those norms are about standards and effort. Just as many are about warmth, humour, generosity, how included people feel, how much people actually enjoy being around each other. Culture isn't only the serious half of that list. The norms of a group cover everything about how its people show up.

These norms aren't neutral. They have consequences for the business.

A very warm, caring culture can create extraordinary loyalty and a team that pulls together when things get tough. It can also become a place where nobody wants to have the difficult conversation with someone who isn't performing.

A highly competitive culture can produce enormous energy and great sales results. It can also create people who protect their own patch, hoard opportunities and care more about winning individually than whether the business wins.

A business that prides itself on getting things right can build a reputation for exceptional quality. Take that same norm too far and every decision needs another meeting, another check and another person's approval.

The entrepreneurial business that says, 'Let's try it,' can be brilliant at spotting and moving on opportunities. It can also have twenty initiatives running, very few finished and an exhausted team trying to keep up with the owner's latest idea.

The point is not to manufacture a universally 'good' culture, but to understand what yours encourages people to do and whether that helps the business perform.

The important question isn't whether you like that personality. It's what that personality is producing, who it attracts to your organisation and its impact on your business results.

Self, Team, Organisation

A group's personality shows up differently depending on where you look, which is why it's worth checking three levels separately rather than asking one vague question like, 'How's our culture?'

The individual level is about how people show up themselves — the energy, honesty, care and standards they bring to their work. People don't leave their personalities at the door when they come to work, but the culture around them also affects which parts of those personalities get expressed.

The team level is about what happens between people. Trust, humour, how they deal with pressure, whether they help each other, whether people are genuinely glad to see one another on a Monday. This is where culture is probably felt most strongly. You can put capable individuals together and still end up with a flat, guarded or dysfunctional team. Equally, an ordinary group of people can become an exceptional team because of what develops between them.

The organisation level is the character that becomes recognisable beyond any one person or team. What the business is known for. What customers experience. What a new employee starts to notice. What continues to feel distinctly like this business even as different people come and go.

Looking at all three matters because strength at one level doesn't guarantee strength at another. You can have great individuals who don't work particularly well together. A close-knit team can be wonderful for the people inside it while being difficult for everyone else to work with. And an organisation can have a very clear identity while individual teams experience it quite differently.

So rather than asking whether you have a good culture, look at the three levels separately.

Who are we
bringing into the
business?

What happens
when we put them
together?

What are we
collectively
becoming known
for?

Where the Personality Shows Up

If culture is the norms of the group and how people show up, you find it by watching ordinary moments, not by asking abstract questions. Here's where I'd look.

What people talk about when there's no reason to

The chat before a meeting starts, the conversation over tea. This is culture without an audience, closer to the truth than anything said in a formal setting.

How people treat each other on a hard day

Everyone is pleasant when things are going well. The personality of a group shows up in the version of itself it becomes under pressure — short-tempered, or still kind; every person for themselves, or still a team.

What's said out loud, and what everyone just knows not to say

Every group has both. The gap between them is one of the clearest windows into its real norms.

How disagreement gets handled

Two people see something differently — a decision, a mistake, a way of doing the work. What happens next says as much about a group's personality as anything on this list. Is disagreement worked through openly, even if it's uncomfortable, or does it get smoothed over, avoided, or quietly held against whoever raised it? Groups with a genuinely strong personality can disagree and still like each other afterward. Groups that can't tend to go quiet instead of honest, and are worse off for it, even though it feels more comfortable in the moment.

How a newcomer is brought in

Warmly, and quickly made to feel part of things — or left to find their own way, and quietly graded on how well they manage it. This is one of the fastest tells there is, because it happens before anyone's had time to perform for the new person.

What the group actually finds funny

Humour reveals more about a culture's real character than almost anything else — what's teased, what's off-limits, who the jokes tend to land on.

What people would genuinely miss if it disappeared

Not the free lunches. The thing that, if it vanished, would make people say the place isn't the same anymore. That's usually the clearest description of the personality itself.



What Happens to Culture as You Grow

In a small business, the owner has an enormous influence on the culture simply because they are visible. People see how they make decisions, what they pay attention to and how they react when things go wrong.

Growth changes that.

At twenty, fifty or a hundred people, that direct line disappears. Most employees are taking their cues from somebody else — a manager, a long-serving employee, the top salesperson, the operations person everybody respects, or the colleague everyone turns to after the meeting to ask, ‘What do you think?’

This is where culture can start to travel — and where it can start to fragment.

What was once picked up directly from the owner now gets interpreted and passed on by other people. Some of it survives intact; some of it gets amplified, softened or distorted. The owner’s impatience can become a manager’s aggression. A harmless habit of working around a weak system can become the standard way an entire department operates. An old joke about ‘head office’ can harden into a genuine us-and-them divide.

Growth doesn’t simply multiply culture. It tests whether the culture is strong enough to travel.

Damian Hughes, writing about FC Barcelona, uses the term ‘cultural architects’ for people who carry and reinforce the identity of a group. Who are the people others watch? What do they do with their influence? One may quietly dismiss a new process with, ‘Don’t worry about that, nobody actually does it.’ Another may stay behind to help a different team get something over the line because ‘we don’t leave each other hanging here.’ Both are shaping what becomes normal, and their influence can travel much further than a message from the owner.

This is why culture can’t remain the owner’s job as the business grows. If the owner is the only person maintaining the energy, telling the stories, correcting the behaviour and reminding everybody what matters, the culture is just as owner-dependent as every other part of the business they’re trying to get out of.

A strong culture has to be carried by other people.

So as your business grows, I’d pay attention to two things. Where is the culture changing as it moves further away from you? And who are the people shaping what it becomes?

You may find some of the most important leaders in your business don’t have leadership in their job title.

How to Actually Build One

Most culture advice fails for a specific, avoidable reason: it tries to change everything at once, through a value statement nobody can act on. Here's a more useful way in.

Find the real dilemmas, not the nice words

Every business has a handful of recurring moments where people have to choose between two defensible options — push back on the boss, or keep quiet. Flag a mistake immediately, or wait and hope it resolves itself. Bend a rule for a good customer, or hold the line. Write down three or four of these, specific to your business. That list is worth more than any values workshop, because it's built from real decisions your people are actually facing.

Resolve each one, plainly

For each dilemma, decide which way you actually want it to go, and say so in language a person could use in the moment. Not 'we value honesty' — something closer to 'if you disagree with a decision, say so before it's made, not after.' A resolved dilemma tells someone exactly what to do the next time they're standing in it. A value word doesn't.

Pick one to work on first

Not all four at once. Choose whichever dilemma, if resolved consistently, would change the most about how your business runs — and put your attention there before spreading it thin across everything

Build it into the actual moment, not a training session

A culture change doesn't take root in a workshop. It takes root at the exact point someone's making the decision — the moment before they speak up in a meeting, the moment they're deciding whether to flag their own mistake. Think about what's happening right at that point in your business, and change something there, not in a slide deck three weeks earlier.

Reinforce the thing you said you wanted

This is where leaders can undo culture work remarkably quickly.

Suppose you've told your team you want people to challenge ideas more openly. Somebody finally does it. They disagree with you in a meeting and you become defensive, shut the conversation down or spend the next ten minutes explaining why they're wrong.

You probably won't need to tell the team not to challenge you again. They were watching.

The opposite is equally powerful. If somebody raises a mistake early and your first response is, 'Good, I'm glad you've told us. What do we need to do about it?' people notice that too.

The behaviour that follows your words is what tells people whether you meant them.

This doesn't need an incentive programme or a monthly award. It needs consistency. Notice the behaviour when you see it. Refer back to examples. Let people see that the new way of doing things holds even when it is inconvenient, particularly when it is inconvenient.

That's when a new norm starts replacing the old one.

Check whether it actually changed

After a few weeks, look honestly at whether the behaviour is different — not whether people can recite the new value, whether they're actually doing it. If it hasn't moved, the resolution wasn't clear enough, the old behaviour is still being rewarded somewhere, or the new one hasn't been reinforced when it mattered. Work out which, rather than adding a second initiative on top of one that hasn't landed yet.

Only then, write it down

Once a dilemma has been resolved consistently enough that people can point to real examples, that's worth capturing — not as a poster, but as a plain description people already recognise as true. Values written before the behaviour exists are a wish list. Written after, they're a description.

What's Your Business Way?

By now the point should be clear: your business already has a way of doing things. Some of it will be worth protecting. Some of it may have made sense once and no longer does. And some of it may be shaping results in ways you haven't connected back to culture before.

The useful question is what that way of operating is making easier — and what it is making harder. Does it help good people do their best work, make sound decisions and solve problems without waiting for you? Does it create the kind of loyalty and energy you want to keep?

And where is it costing you? Look for the things nobody says, the behaviours everybody works around, the dependence on certain people and the old habits the business may simply have outgrown.

You don't need a culture programme simply because culture matters. You need to understand the one you have well enough to know what to protect, what to change and what the business now needs from it.

Talent gets you a team that plays well when you're watching. The right culture makes it almost certain they'll play exactly the same way when you're not.

So it's worth asking, plainly: what is your business's personality right now? And what would you want people to say about it, if you weren't in the room to hear them say it?

Want to see what your own culture actually looks like?

Take the 3-minute Culture Scorecard below to find out.

Culture Scorecard

Every business already has a culture. The only question is whether you designed it.

Culture is not a soft idea sitting apart from performance. It shapes accountability, standards, trust, adaptability, and results. In three minutes, see the culture your people actually experience and perform within.

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