

## Culture

CULTURE RULES, AND LEADERS play a huge role in creating, maintaining, and supporting it. Even when we know that culture is important, we still might question how to influence it. My best advice? Just start.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT SCORING:

- 1—I am struggling with or not yet skilled at this.
- 2—I am starting to work on improving at this, but I need more skill building.
- 3—I am making some consistent progress in improving at this.
- 4—I am doing very well in this area.

Determine your current level of skill on these culture competencies (score 1–4):

1. I am aware of my impact in shaping the workplace culture and use strategies to keep moving in the right direction.  
Score: \_\_\_\_\_

2. I have an employee retention strategy that is working to keep good people and prevent turnover. Score: \_\_\_\_
3. I am aware of the markers of good morale. I use multiple techniques to engage employees in improving and maintaining positive morale. Score: \_\_\_\_
4. I follow a communication plan when an employee departs from the organization that leads to a positive outcome. Score: \_\_\_\_
5. I avoid blaming myself or others when things go wrong, and I understand the high costs of blame in organizational life. Score: \_\_\_\_

Now explore the corresponding sections that follow to learn how to improve skills that need work or enhance your current skills.

## 1. CULTURE RULES

**Are you working on improving your workplace culture?** “Culture” can seem a bit mysterious. This section offers practical steps for instigating positive change in organizational culture.

The best leaders confirm that culture matters, and many even say that it overrides strategy. But how do you make an impact as an individual on this thing called “culture”? Start by considering these two points:

- **You already are making an impact.** Just by being in a leadership role, you influence your environment. Often, leaders underestimate their influence. Everything you say

and do—your words, your body language, your written communications—shape the organization’s culture more than you might realize. What kinds of messages are you already sending?

- **Culture is formed “one handshake at a time.”** You can’t shake hands with a culture, but you can shake hands (or bow or bump elbows) with individuals. Those individual connections, making “deposits” over time, can mobilize the team and help you avoid the pitfalls of low morale, undermining, and poor engagement.

The following ideas can make a big difference in creating a thriving, engaged, and desirable work culture:

**Eat lunch with different people.** Push yourself to eat lunch or take coffee breaks with different people from different departments on a regular basis. This is a simple way to break down silos. You might have to invite yourself to join a group of employees who always eat together, but when you do, you make yourself more approachable. Later, when a problem comes up, they will feel more comfortable coming to you to discuss it. That creates a much more desirable culture than one in which people grumble among themselves.

**Become known for a phrase that you can live by.** Your catchphrase will become a part of the organizational culture. One of my managers early in my career regularly used a phrase that still pops into my head when I face a difficult conversation. After coaching me on a sticky employee issue, he walked me to the door and said, “Remember, be courageous.” He was creating a courageous culture (as well as creating a lasting reminder in my brain). What is your phrase?

**Be the first to accept a challenge.** One healthcare system CEO supported both his employees and the local community by sponsoring health club memberships for all hospital employees as part of a wellness initiative. He was among the first to do the heavy lifting of exercising, losing weight, and getting fit. When you ask others to make a higher commitment, walking the talk speaks volumes.

**Interview new hires.** After their first few weeks on the job, ask them what they notice about the culture, both positive and negative. You might be surprised what new eyes see in the environment.

**Describe your ideal culture.** We might think we know what kind of culture we're striving for, but building an organizational culture is kind of like car shopping when your only criterion is that you need a new car. You may end up with something you don't want. Grab a flip chart and markers, meet with your team, ask and record their answers to the following questions:

- “How would you describe the ideal workplace culture?”
- “How would you describe our current workplace culture?” (Or use employee opinion survey results as a starting point)
- “As we look at the current and the ideal cultures we've described, what are your ideas for getting from where we are to where we want to be?”

Brainstorm ideas and facilitate a discussion to prioritize one or two ideas that will yield the most impact and produce some quick wins.

**Delegate, don't abdicate.** It's tempting to surrender your authority when a responsibility is uncomfortable (e.g., you hate scheduling conflicts). However, that vacuum creates

an opportunity for a negative subculture to develop and for others to usurp your authority, creating staff power struggles just off your radar. Delegating properly keeps the accountability with you while sharing the workload.

Here are some additional culture improvement strategies that I think are worth making explicit:

- Genuinely say “good morning” to everyone.
- Hold people accountable to a high standard while forgiving honest mistakes.
- Give short speeches.
- Demonstrate and speak about the importance of doing whatever it takes to serve the customer.
- Make a habit of speaking about what you are learning, and invite others to do so as well.
- Take an interest in people: “That sounds interesting—tell me more.”
- Never gossip. Period.
- Thank people, and create venues for people to thank each other or share what is going well.
- Explain *why* you are doing what you are doing.
- Address cultural underperformers, particularly leaders who report to you.
- Turn complaints about other departments into problem-solving discussions.
- Hire for the culture you want to create. Specifically, ask behavior-based questions in interviews to understand how the candidate has demonstrated in the past the behavior that fits your environment. Train your team and include them in team-based interviews and structured selection processes that prioritize cultural fit.

## 2. PREVENTING THE HIGH COST OF TURNOVER

**Are you experiencing more staff turnover than you'd like? Are you thinking about how to retain the team you have?** This section focuses on how you engage employees to commit to the organization and stay with it. It offers actions that you can take right away and others that you can use to build a long-term retention strategy.

No one wants to come to work and feel as if they don't know what they are doing or where they belong. It's easy to forget how difficult the first few months on the job are. Nurses make up a large part of the healthcare workforce, and we have learned a lot about retention by studying them. Their longevity has been shown to be strongly linked to feelings of competence, support, and sense of belonging. Nurse residency programs (yearlong workshops, coaching, structured mentoring) that offer nurses a supportive learning course for their first year of practice demonstrate amazing results in improving retention. In a pilot project conducted with Marquette University, Wisconsin hospitals that fully supported new nurses in this residency program nearly doubled the retention rate for new hires in the first two years of practice. Some went from 50% to more than 90% retention (Bratt 2009).

Residency programs come with a cost, but what does it cost to replace an employee who leaves the organization? Estimates in the nursing literature suggest that the cost of losing an employee is nearly as high as that employee's annual salary! (Bratt 2009). Consider these costs:

- Downtime in functions when a position is not filled
- Time needed for a new hire to become competent and lost productivity during that time
- Specialty training when you lose a highly skilled employee

- Temp pay (typically at premium rates) for coverage while you are filling a position
- Overtime pay for others who are covering the open position
- Poor morale among those who are left to do the work (and the risk that they, too, will leave)
- Pileup of management and leadership duties, and the accompanying cost of stress to you, as you cover frontline work

It pays to invest in strong onboarding, which more than offsets the costs of losing employees. Efforts to increase retention are worth every penny.

How do you get people to stay? Retention starts before you even place an ad. But once you have selected the best candidate:

**Build belonging.** Attend to this right away. Belonging creates fertile ground for learning: We learn best when we know where we fit. Here are some of the best ideas for building belonging from those who have succeeded at it:

- Meet with new hires before they start work.
- Plan a social activity with the team outside of work.
- Greet new hires at the door on their first day.
- Give new hires a questionnaire about their favorite foods and offer some of them on day one.
- Have different staff members take the new hire to lunch or coffee each day for a week.
- Conduct a team icebreaker before tackling a project.

**Build quarterly connections.** Put quarterly discussions on your calendar and your new employee's. Make these discussions intentional, beyond "How are things going?" Here are some starters:

- "You've been here for three months. What is the most surprising thing you have learned so far?"

- “If you were starting today, what would you suggest that we tell you that we neglected to tell you on day one?”
- “You have been here for six months. Is there anyone who has been particularly helpful to you or made you feel comfortable here?” (Learn about the employee’s sense of belonging and be sure to recognize those who are named)
- “What would make you want to stay in this job a year from now? What would make you not want to stay?”

**Build engagement** rather than “complete orientation.”

Checklists have a place, but engagement is not something you can cross off a list. It is about building and maintaining relationships. Critical employee engagement factors have a direct link back to the manager:

- Giving regular actionable feedback and recognition. It must be more specific than “Great job!”
- Providing materials and tools to get the job done. Don’t assume that people have what they need or know where to find it.
- Being clear about expectations. Maybe you think you have been, but you might be surprised.
- Fostering a caring environment.

**Build team accountability for engagement.** Make engagement a part of everyone’s job, not just the manager’s. Understandably, everyone wants the new person to be up to speed immediately. They’ve been working extra while waiting for the position to be filled. Explain to the team that if the new person is forced to sink or swim, they might sink and you’ll be interviewing again. It is in everyone’s best interest to take the time to teach and mentor the new team member as they build up to a reasonable workload. If you hear, “No one did that for me when I was new,” learn to address this problem—which is actually a form of bullying—in the

moment. Here is one possible response: “You want this person to cover for you when you need to take time off and to have your back when you are working together, so you need them to be fully competent. They need your help to get there.”

**Build a success plan.** Clearly identify and discuss what new hires should know right away, then build in a plan so that they don’t get overwhelmed by all there is to learn. Identify milestones for the job: “At three months you should be able to . . .” Repeat these milestones quarterly or even weekly, depending on the job. Make it clear that it takes time to learn how to do a job, that a learning curve is normal, and that no one can learn everything at once—things that are easy for new hires to forget.

### 3. WORKPLACE MORALE

**Are rumblings about low morale leaving you frustrated and stressed?** Read this section to explore who “owns” morale and what high morale looks and sounds like. Learn specific behaviors that leaders need to coach out of a team to support a high-morale environment.

The “beatings will continue until morale improves” method probably only works if you are a pirate. Keeping up morale can be a challenge, especially when times are tough. It is possible, but first you must assign responsibility.

Imagine securing this agreement with every staff member: “I am putting *you* in charge of our team’s morale.” Add it to every employee’s job description and hold them accountable for it in performance reviews and employee opinion surveys. No more “It’s someone else’s fault.”

It starts with you. Leaders ignite high morale with clear communication, reward and recognition practices, flexible work arrangements, autonomy in work styles, and fair pay and benefits. But everyone must be assigned 100 percent of the responsibility for morale for your organization to be a great place to work. What does high morale look like, and how can you nurture it?

- **Stuff gets done.** When accountability is high, morale is high. Do you set and meet important goals?
- **Employees can articulate how their work contributes to the big picture.** Are you connecting the dots between daily tasks and organizational success? Are you telling stories that highlight how important their work is to reaching the organization's goals?
- **You hear laughter.** How can you have a little more fun?
- **Colleagues volunteer and help each other.** How can you focus on building relationships between employees?
- **People freely give others credit.** Are you leading the way by recognizing others so that credit doesn't feel like a scarcity?
- **You hear people disagree respectfully.** Do you model nondefensive listening when others disagree with you? Do you foster open discussion and thoughtfully seek out and consider different views?
- **Staff show excitement about their work.** How are *you* talking about what is happening at work? Are you working on anything interesting and sharing it with others?

“People inspire you, or they drain you—pick them wisely.” This statement by Hans F. Hansen, from a *Forbes* article (Bradberry 2015) on toxic people, reminds us to pay attention to the way others' energy affects us. Who are your outliers? Thank those who contribute to a welcoming workplace and manage themselves

through the ups and downs of life and work. Coach those who exhibit these behaviors:

- **Don't want to come to work.** “Tell me about the last time you were excited to come to work. What kinds of things were you doing? How might you recapture some of that enthusiasm?”
- **Sigh, grumble, mutter under their breath, or don't talk at all.** “I notice heavy sighs/silence during our discussion. What is keeping you from getting more actively involved? How can you express your concerns more effectively? What impact do you think you are having on the team?”
- **Show no outward sign of disagreement.** “You don't disagree with our decisions, but I don't see you carrying them out. I need to hear the good and the bad from you; otherwise, the team's efforts suffer.”
- **Spread rumors.** “The rumor mill is not to be considered a news source. If you have an issue, bring it up openly, ask me questions, and trust me to be honest with you.” Earn that trustworthy reputation and then maintain it. Rumors thrive in a communication vacuum.
- **Declare themselves the spokesperson to tell you that morale sucks.** “What are you personally doing to contribute to solutions?” If they are not part of the solution, they are part of the problem. Reinforce that morale is everyone's responsibility and ask for their individual commitment to action.

One more morale destroyer that might surprise you is inconsistency among managers. When employees see other departments not being held accountable for an organization-wide standard, it undermines confidence that leadership knows what it is doing. Address inconsistencies with your leadership team and make sure all leaders are committed to remedying them before heading back to your departments.

## 4. DEPARTING EMPLOYEES

**Have you had an employee surprise you with a resignation? If not, have you given any thought to how you would conduct yourself if that happened?** It may eventually happen, and it matters how you respond in the moment and after their departure. This section will help you to prepare for this and avoid blunders that can come back to haunt you.

Employees leave the organization, whether for retirement, better opportunities for themselves or a partner elsewhere, or other reasons. The way you manage an employee's voluntary departure matters. This is not something we give a lot of thought to until it happens. Be ready to lead intentionally when employees leave and you will build trust and respect among those who stay.

**Prepare yourself for conflicting feelings.** Too often, leaders turn sour on a well-liked employee who has the gall to leave. It is unfortunate for everyone:

- **The departing employee**—who is hurt and feeling unappreciated for all they have contributed. Your high regard for them in the past appears false, and it is a kick right in the self-esteem.
- **The remaining employees**—who empathize with the departing employee. They are asking themselves, “Can I trust that my manager really appreciates me, or is that fake, too? Do my contributions matter?”
- **You**—when you take a departure personally, you may resent the employee for leaving you with work they won't be able to do and having to fill a position. Your employees pick up on your reactions, and it can diminish your professionalism.

**Start by accepting the situation.** It's OK to say that you are surprised if that is the case, but quickly move to empathy. Put yourself in the employee's shoes and congratulate them if appropriate. One way to avoid saying or asking something you'll regret is to do a lot of genuine listening. Keep the announcement brief and positive, and set a time to discuss the details of the departure. This will give you the opportunity to . . .

**Take some time alone to reflect.** It's alright to be angry, worried, frustrated, or whatever you feel. Deal with your emotions on your own or with your own manager or mentor. Unaddressed feelings express themselves in your tone of voice, body language, sarcasm, and so on, even if you say all the right things.

**Celebrate and thank consistently.** Nothing says "I'm not important" like having a going-away party for some people but not others. Obvious favoritism shows when departing employees with higher status positions, personal friendships with the boss, or long tenure get a party but employees who don't fit those descriptions do not. Talk with your team to create a way to say goodbye when someone leaves and apply it equitably. Keep in mind, too, that so many baby boomers, who were willing to wait for recognition on their way out the door, have retired. Others won't wait, and the competition is fierce for employees. When it comes to arrival and departure parties in general, focus on celebration and recognition all year around.

**Stay above board on all comments about the departing employee.** Continue to give credit and manage up even after the person is gone when the good work they contributed is obvious. Keep any other feelings you might have to yourself. Assume that the departing employee will stay in touch with other team members and that what you share will get back to them. This is one reason to . . .

**Think of the departing employee as an advertisement for your organization.** A best practice for hiring is to conduct interviews in such a way that you leave the candidate with a great feeling about your organization even if they don't get the job. They will say great things about you, and that's the best kind of marketing. When a great employee departs, treat them in a way that would make them want to come back if the opportunity presented itself. Even if they don't come back, you can influence the image they present to others about you in their new circle.

**When it comes to exit interviews,** it's a little too late to find out what you could have done to make a good employee stay. Make sure you are attending to employees' reasons for staying *while* they are working for you.

## 5. REVERSING THE HIGH COST OF BLAME

**Do you tend to look for someone to blame when something goes wrong?** It may seem natural to want to place blame, but most often doing so is unhelpful. This section explores the damage that blame can cause and shows how you can look for authentic accountability instead.

It's tough to admit that we are still bound by playground norms. "She started it, it's her fault!" We learn early in life to look for someone to blame to avoid punishment, and that thought process is hardwired. Some of the things we learned in kindergarten we need to unlearn—and blaming is one of them.

We might naturally outgrow blaming if it wasn't so self-reinforcing, quickly getting us off the hook and feeding our ego. It comes at a cost, though, manifesting in these ways:

- **Rework and workarounds.** Work takes longer, becomes more complicated, and is often duplicated unnecessarily when we waste time assigning blame instead of creating solutions.
- **Drama drain.** We spend hours away from our work while defending our version of a situation to get support and justify that someone else is wrong. Hours of every workday can be wasted on this drama—which means nothing else is getting done.
- **Disengaged or departing workforce.** An environment of blame reflects and breeds fear. People don't take risks in a fear-based culture. Healthcare and every other industry needs innovators. Your best and brightest will go elsewhere if the culture doesn't support trying new things even if they fail.
- **Death!** It's more permanent than getting in trouble. Problems go unreported because of the fear of blaming the messenger. Extend this to a patient who has a very bad outcome—even death—when a problem goes unreported because it was unsafe to speak up.

The flip side of blame is personal accountability. Your leadership credibility relies on accepting accountability. It is worth your time to assess your own blaming tendencies and work on letting them go. There is no sense walking through life with an unconscious fear of getting into trouble when all of us make mistakes. You are welcome to join my support group: “Hi, I am Jo Anne and I make colossal mistakes.”

**Today, notice your blaming thoughts.** Pay careful attention to your thinking, because blaming is so ingrained that you may not even know you're doing it. Tune in the split second someone asks you for work that you haven't done, that

you're unable to do, or that you've forgotten, or when things aren't turning out right. Pay attention to the temptation to blame during moments of frustration. Listen for thoughts that sound like an excuse or a "reason" for any of your circumstances.

**Decide what part you own.** Maybe someone else truly didn't deliver, and you need their input to move something forward. You still have something to own. What is it? Decide what you *do* have control over. The other person is accountable for their failure, but you own a piece, too.

**Don't flip from blaming others to blaming yourself.** That's not an improvement! Owning up to a mistake may result in guilt, but when guilt is excessive, it is more likely a reflection of low self-esteem or manipulation. Accountability is about acknowledging, apologizing, and amending—the triple-A approach. Own the mistake, express genuine regret for your part in it, and then work on fixing it. Doing all three actions consistently and appropriately will boost your self-esteem.

Compare these two perspectives on power:

- Blaming conveys power *in the moment*, but that power is fragile; it relies on continued blaming and keeps problems from being resolved.
- Authenticity builds *power over the long view* and results in credibility, respect, and solutions.

How can you build your power and credibility over time through authentic accountability?

**Be courageously accountable.** The righteousness we feel when we blame someone else is the easy way out. Powerful leaders own up to their mistakes. Doing so paves the way for others and helps you shift from a costly blaming culture to a just and accountable one.