

Building a Culture That Lives Its Values

The Leader's Role in Shaping How People Work and Relate

Every organization has a culture, but that culture is rarely entirely healthy or entirely unhealthy. One team may communicate openly while another avoids difficult conversations. An organization may care exceptionally well for its customers while relationships inside the workplace remain strained. Even within the same organization, people can have very different experiences.

Statements of purpose, vision, mission, and values can help. They give people shared language for why the organization exists, where it is going, what it does, and how those within it intend to work together. They are especially helpful when people participate in developing them and can remember what they say.

But words alone do not determine how an organization actually operates.

Culture is not formed once. It is continually shaped by what leaders model, encourage, reward, correct, and allow.

People discover the real culture by watching what happens around them. They notice how those in authority respond to bad news and whether it is safe to speak honestly. They see whose voices are heard, what gets rewarded, and what is allowed to continue. They learn whether stated convictions still matter when living by them becomes costly.

When Safety Became About People

I learned this during a safety intervention at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

At the time, I worked for a support-services subcontractor that provided utilities and other essential services to the laboratory. A worker in our company was severely injured and later died. The laboratory conducted an after-action review and identified several places where safety had become lax, both within our company and across the larger laboratory.

That began a serious journey for all of us.

We were not simply trying to improve our safety numbers or correct a few unsafe practices. We needed to change the way we understood safety itself. It had often been described as a priority, but priorities compete. When production, cost, and schedule pressures increase, one priority can quietly displace another.

We wanted safety to become a value rooted in how we regarded human life.

Processes, procedures, training, and measurement remained essential, but they had to serve the purpose of protecting people. A good safety record should be the result, not the reason for the work.

Early in that journey, one of my employees was injured. We had agreed that injuries would be reported up the chain of command, so I called my boss. His first question was whether the injury was recordable.

I understood why the measure mattered and the pressure he was under. Still, the question struck me. In that moment, the metric had moved ahead of the person. I remember thinking that I never wanted performance pressure to make someone I led feel that the number mattered more than the person.

As we encouraged more candid reporting, our incident numbers initially went up. On the surface, that looked like failure. In fact, we

were finally seeing more accurately what was happening. People were becoming more willing to tell the truth. Once we could see the truth, we could learn from it and address the underlying problems. The numbers eventually began to decline.

Years later, at Colorado Springs Utilities, we continued to strengthen safety with far less pressure surrounding how incidents were reported. Over several years, total incidents declined and, more importantly, severe incidents declined.

The lesson reaches far beyond safety. Culture is revealed in how people are treated, whether the truth can be told, and what happens when important commitments compete.

The first question asked after an injury may last only a few seconds, but it carries a message. Every response from a leader does.

Preparing Leaders to Shape the Culture

If leaders want to shape culture, one of the best places to begin is with the people who shape the daily experience of others.

At Colorado Springs Utilities, that conviction led me to create Leader2Leader. Senior leaders walked with small groups of emerging leaders, bringing them into real decisions and helping them learn through experience.

The program helped participants grow in confidence and leadership ability, and many were later promoted.

The senior executives grew as well. Teaching required them to examine what experience had taught them and make it useful to someone else.

In *Investing Your Life in Others*, I tell more of that story and consider the role of modeling, teaching, coaching, mentoring, and life-on-life development.

Building a Culture of Honor

Developing leaders was an important beginning, but we eventually wanted greater alignment across the entire utility. One of our most significant efforts was creating a culture of honor.

I have come to understand honor as recognizing the God-given worth of another person and treating that person accordingly, even when there are weaknesses, disagreements, or conduct that must be addressed.

Honor does not ignore what is wrong. It allows us to deal honestly with behavior without reducing someone to that behavior. It joins dignity with truth and accountability.

As CEO, I began the *Culture of Honor* effort with my direct reports. We then expanded the conversation to approximately seventy senior leaders.

We did not introduce a finished program and ask everyone else to implement it. Together, we considered what honor should look like in the way we listened, communicated, made decisions, handled disagreement, gave feedback, and treated one another.

That involvement mattered. If I had simply presented my definition and instructed others to follow it, they might have complied, but they would not necessarily have owned it. They needed to help translate the idea into the day-to-day relationships and responsibilities of the utility.

The work could not stop with those seventy leaders. They needed to continue the conversations within their own groups, where most employees experienced the culture every day. Honor had to become part of team discussions, leadership expectations, feedback, and the way conflict was handled.

Over time, we began to see honor taking root at the team level. We heard it in everyday conversations and observed it in the way people worked together. Our employee surveys remained consistently strong, but we did not rely on a single score to tell us whether real

change was occurring. We considered the surveys alongside the stories we heard and the conduct we observed.

Honor also had to include accountability. If someone repeatedly demeaned others, ignored safety expectations, or behaved in ways that violated our commitments, allowing the behavior to continue would have weakened everything we were trying to build. What leaders allow to continue eventually becomes part of the culture.

A mistake may call for learning. A lack of skill may call for development. Repeated misconduct may require firm consequences. Honor does not respond to every situation in the same way, but it refuses to treat anyone as disposable.

Culture of Honor carried us beyond developing individual leaders. Together, we were creating a shared expectation for how people throughout the utility would work and relate.

Principles, Not a Pattern

These experiences took place in different settings and unfolded over different lengths of time. They do not add up to a formula.

Every organization has its own history, relationships, pressures, and pace. What follows are principles I return to, not a pattern every leader must copy. The work may overlap, repeat, or move in a different order. Leaders have to remain attentive and adapt as circumstances change so the culture can continue to grow.

Face What Is

Years later, I was invited to help the leadership team of another organization examine its culture. This time, I was not the senior leader with authority to set expectations or align systems. I was serving as a facilitator, and that distinction mattered.

Before bringing the team together, I reviewed the organization's existing documents, the concerns that had surfaced, and the other information available to me. From that work, I prepared a common set of specific questions.

I then met one-on-one, in confidence, with every member of the leadership team. Asking the same core questions gave everyone a common point of reference. Meeting privately gave people room to say things they might not have said with the senior leader or their peers in the room.

After the interviews, I looked for recurring themes, points of agreement, different experiences, and areas of concern. I removed identifying details and consolidated what I had heard into an anonymous statement of the as-is condition. It described the culture as people were actually experiencing it.

The purpose was not to build a case against anyone. It was to give the team a fair account of its present reality, including what was healthy and worth preserving as well as what needed attention.

At the retreat, we devoted the entire morning to walking through that as-is statement together. The natural impulse was to explain the findings, defend intentions, or move quickly toward solutions. I kept bringing us back to the present reality. Before we could decide where to go, we needed to acknowledge where we were.

Describe What Should Be

Only after the team had heard, tested, and acknowledged the as-is did we begin to work on the should-be.

We described the kind of leadership people should experience, developed a leadership declaration, and identified the areas in which the team most needed to grow.

That order mattered. If we had begun with the future, we could have placed hopeful language over unresolved realities. Because the team first faced what was true, its description of what should be could become a genuine commitment rather than an aspiration detached from experience.

What made the process work was not simply the declaration at the end. People could recognize their experience in the as-is and their contribution in the should-be. They were not being handed someone else's answer.

A facilitator can help people listen, recognize patterns, stay with difficult questions, and describe the culture they want. A facilitator cannot create that culture for them. Only the leaders and members of the organization can change the way they work and relate. They also have to keep making those choices after the meeting is over.

Building a Shared Foundation for Purpose and Direction offers a fuller process for developing shared purpose, vision, mission, values, and a leadership declaration with the people who will carry them.

Form and Align Leaders

Culture is carried into the everyday life of an organization through its leaders.

That is why Leader2Leader came before our broader cultural work and why the *Culture of Honor* conversation began with senior leaders before moving into teams. Leaders needed time to understand what we were asking, examine their own behavior, and help put the desired culture into language that made sense within their responsibilities.

Teaching alone is seldom enough. People need opportunities to ask questions, practice a different way of responding, receive honest feedback, and work through real situations. Leaders also need to understand that they are not simply responsible for completing tasks. They are shaping the experience of the people around them.

Reinforce Through Daily Practice

Culture is strengthened or weakened through ordinary decisions.

Hiring, promotions, recognition, meetings, coaching, and performance discussions all communicate what matters. So do the decisions leaders make when deadlines are tight or results fall short.

If an organization says it values honor but promotes leaders who mistreat people, the promotion tells the stronger story. If it says safety matters but allows schedule pressure to override safe practices, employees understand what takes precedence.

The systems of an organization should support the culture its leaders say they want. When they do not, leaders have to be willing to address the contradiction.

Stay with the Process

I have never seen lasting cultural change completed in a single meeting, retreat, or program. Those moments can be important, but they begin or strengthen a process. They do not finish it.

People are often cautious because they have seen earlier initiatives come and go. Some respond quickly. Others wait to see whether leaders will remain committed when the effort becomes difficult or inconvenient. Longstanding habits and familiar ways of operating do not disappear because a new expectation has been announced.

The work takes time, intentionality, and persistence. Leaders have to remain engaged after the initial energy fades. They need to pay attention to what is taking root and what is not, then adapt as people and circumstances change.

Sometimes the next faithful step is to clarify the desired culture. At other times it may be to develop a leader, change a system, address conduct that is pulling the culture backward, or listen again.

No fixed pattern can tell a leader exactly when to do each of these things. The principles remain, but the path will differ by organization and season.

Recognizing When Change Is Taking Root

Culture is always being formed. Even after a healthier way of working has begun to take root, new leaders, new pressures, and changing circumstances can test it. There is no single finish line and no single measure that proves the work is complete.

At Los Alamos, the initial rise in reported incidents showed that employees were becoming more candid, not necessarily that the workplace had become less safe. In our *Culture of Honor* work, surveys were useful, but so were the stories we heard and the behavior we observed within teams.

Organization-wide averages can also hide important differences. One division, shift, or team may be making real progress while another remains unchanged. Leaders need to look beyond averages and pay attention to what people experience in different parts of the organization.

Change is taking root when people speak honestly and address problems closer to where they occur. It is evident when someone intervenes after seeing something unsafe, when people treat one another honorably during disagreement, and when they accept responsibility for what has gone wrong.

The clearest evidence is ownership. People no longer act a certain way only because a senior leader expects it. They have come to believe in the culture, protect it, and pass it on. Ownership does not mean the work is finished. It means more people have begun to carry it.

Culture is built in moments that can easily be missed: the first question asked after an injury, the response to an uncomfortable truth, the way a difficult conversation is handled, or the time an experienced leader invests in an emerging one. No single moment creates a culture, but every moment contributes to one.

The culture a leader leaves behind is the accumulated result of what that leader consistently modeled, encouraged, corrected, and made possible in others.

That is how stated aspirations become everyday behavior.

That is how culture begins to live.

Companion Resources

[*Building a Shared Foundation for Purpose and Direction*](#) offers a practical process for developing purpose, vision, mission, values, and a leadership declaration with the people who will carry them.

[*Watch Culture of Honor*](#) to hear the original presentation that became the basis for our two-year Honor in Action effort at Colorado Springs Utilities.

[*Watch Culture of Honor 2*](#) to see how we returned to the subject two years later and considered how honor becomes part of an organization's everyday life.

[*Watch Safety Culture at Colorado Springs Utilities*](#) to hear the conversation I shared with the utility's top seventy leaders about moving safety from compliance toward personal commitment.

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