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International Collaborative Leadership Institute

WHITE PAPER

#8. How Leaders Use Culture to Get High Performance *What the Leader must know about “Designing Culture”*

By Robert Porter Lynch

Just mention to world “culture,” and watch most managers roll their eyes, muttering under their breath, “oh no, not that mushy soft stuff again.”

Usually these responses come from managers, engineers, and administrators who have never understood the levers used by the best leaders that produce exceptional performance.

Culture is the Game

What great leaders come to understand is that culture (not personality) determines the large part of human behavior. (Many experts estimate it may be anywhere from 2/3 to 3/4 of all behavior is culturally determined).

As Lou Gerstner, the CEO responsible for pulling IBM out of a death-spiral in the 1990s stated:

I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn't 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.

Gerstner went on to state that what's needed is to embed the elements of vision, strategy, marketing, finance, -- all the elements of running a successful business -- into the DNA of the business – the organization's culture.

How Leaders Use Culture to Get High Performance

Culture is the Organization's Internal Software

Think of culture as the “software” program that processes inputs and produces outputs; it’s the brain of each person where this “software” resides.

The human brain is one of the most complex and fascinating computers. One of its main purposes is to act as a massive pattern recognition and prediction machine.

It picks off cues from its environment and calculates/predicts in advance, what will be needed, what will happen, what is safest, what is dangerous, and what will have no effect.



Culture is the method by which an organization sends cues to the brains of its members. Those signals can be either clear and aligned, or ambiguous, or conflicted.

A central job of a leader is to make the culture clear and aligned, so that all members of the organization know with reasonable predictability, how the organization will function in a wide variety of situations and circumstances. In that way people can trust the organization to perform reliably.

Targeting the Four Drives

There are 4 primary frameworks the brain will receive these signals, known as the 4-Drives of human behavior – *Acquire, Bond, Create, and Defend* (A,B,C,D)

The leader actually “drives” culture by connecting messages to each of the drives.

- Drive to *Acquire*: This drive responds to clarity about goals, mission, targets, direction, priorities, authority, greed, fair share, & hierarchy.
- Drive to *Bond*: Focuses messages about teamwork, silos, trust, values, insiders versus outsiders, and sharing.
- Drive to *Create*: Responds to messages about learning, innovation, adaptation, creativity, inquiry, and ideas.
- Drive to *Defend*: Sensitive to messages about rewards, punishments, safety, security, aggression, fear, criticism, betrayal, openness, and protection.



The objective for any leaders is to create a culture where the four drives are well *aligned, balanced, and integrated* -- which produces a climate of powerful and channelled signals that communicate the performance expectations of leaders. (for more information on the 4-Drives see [White Paper #4: Culture as a Force Field](#) & [#5 Great Speeches](#))



One way to understand and test this approach is to look at the best teams in professional sports. Invariably the teams that rise to the highest level in their sports are the products of coaches who understand the “culture of winning.”

How Leaders Use Culture to Get High Performance

Cultural Messaging via Mind *MAAPS*

The brain insists that its pattern recognition and prediction processes function effectively. The leader must imprint cultural messages clearly, and has a number of tools to ensure clarity and alignment. The easiest to understand that links directly to the mind's structure is to frame culture in terms of MAAPS: Metrics, Architecture, Actions, Pictures, and Stories (not necessarily in this order):

Metrics – if you can't measure it, you can't manage it.

- Money is the normal way of measuring business. But it is not the only nor always the best way. The best organizations understand the metrics of value as well as money. Those who fail to understand value default to price and cost. However, if business doesn't translate other metrics into money, it won't survive for long.
- Performance metrics relate the key factors for success. These are leading achievement indicators that cascade their impact down to the bottom line. Sports coaches use this at every step of team-building to create a set of standards of performance excellence to gauge progress.
- Standards of Excellence: what is considered the "best," most ethical, classiest, or worthy of merit.

Architecture – the framework of any structure or system

- Direction, Priorities & Policies – mission, vision, values, aligning with corporate realities.
- Overarching Principles – fundamental laws, governing rules, or core principles of the system
- Power & Organization Structure – power in the organizational structure lies where it belongs to achieve mission, purpose, and gain competitive advantage. Are decisions made for the good of the whole?
- System Interfaces – most organizational breakdowns happen at the interface of different functions. Does human energy flows in positive directions? Do functional units inter-act synergistically? Is trust and teamwork the highest standard of interaction? Does information flow accurately to the places that need it?
- Control Systems: The processes in place to monitor what is going on, limit and govern too much or too little, feedback loops that self adjust, policies and procedures to produce high performance while limiting dangerous conditions.

Actions – speak louder than words

- Recruiting, Hiring, Training, Performance Review, & Promotion: these communicate what is rewarded or punished and can be some of the most important actions a leader can take to build a culture that is high performance, high trust, and high teamwork.
- Relationships, Rituals & Routines: interactions between people, teams, cross-functional units, and outsiders (aliens or alliances)
- Content & Direction of Conversations: what is talked about, what's not said, or couched in denial or distortion, what questions are asked, how does information move up, down, across.
- Programs: what gets attention, top people, & budget
- Core Messages: what the top executives speak (classify messages according to Acquire, Bond, Create, Defend are reinforced)

Pictures – speaks a thousand words

How Leaders Use Culture to Get High Performance

- Visual Communications: people more likely remember what they see than what they hear.
- Graphs: what is the content of graphs?
- Organization Charts: what does it say about how people are supposed to think about networks? hierarchies? alliance partners? stakeholders? authority? decision-making?
- Presentations: how do people communicate to others in presentations?
- Symbols: what icons signify meaning to others, including brand, awards, images, levels of excellence

Stories – the emotional and historical connections to reality

- Legends: the history and myths of the organization and its leaders, particularly how they want to be remembered and memorialized, especially under conditions of stress, difficulty, or turmoil.
- Illustrations: vignettes, books, allegories, movies, magazine articles, media depictions that communicate the emotions, rationale, values, and response mechanisms of the organization and its leaders.

If you want to understand a culture, these the MAAPS of the organization will communicate how people think, what they belief, what they consider important, and the key measures of their culture.

The leader need not use every dimension of the MAAPS – but should be aware when one is missing, misaligned, unbalanced, muddled, or contradictory.