

# THE NEW LEADERSHIP MANDATE: CULTURE- BUILDING

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“Aharai!” is the motto Israeli military officers use when leading their forces into combat. The battle cry means “follow me” and it reflects a doctrine that all great leaders embrace.

Today the need for leaders who go first and set an example is greater now than ever before because a healthy workplace culture is critical to an organization’s success and leaders are critical to the health of organizational culture. A vibrant, vital culture is a powerful antidote to the unprecedented threats most organizations face today: a war for talent, the dearth of employee engagement, and issues of equality and diversity. As a leader, you play a critical role in cultivating a thriving culture.

Some leaders think that corporate culture is out of their control because it grows organically, so they shrug off any responsibility for it. It is true that culture can’t be imposed. But you can and should set the conditions to cultivate a culture and deeply influence the way your employees think and perform daily.

Guide and grow your organizational cultures through communication, action, and people decisions.

## Consistent, Compelling Culture-Building Communication

Although strong communication is well-recognized as the key to great leadership and culture-building, most business leaders don’t communicate well. At least that’s what their employees say. According to talent management firm Aon Hewitt, only 42 % of employees feel management communicates effectively. And human resources firm Towers Perrin has found that just over half of employees believed that their leaders generally tell them the truth.

The keys to successful leadership communication—especially as you try to cultivate your desired culture—are consistency, simplicity, storytelling, and relevance.

- **CONSISTENCY.** Consistently and relentlessly communicate your company’s overarching purpose and core values and why they’re important. It’s not enough to talk about these foundational elements of your culture when they’re first being set or on an annual basis. You must regularly weave culture-building messages into your presentations, memos, and conversations with employees and other stakeholders. You may tire of talking about the same topics over and over again or think you’re being repetitive, but studies have shown repetition and consistency are critical to comprehension and traction.
- **SIMPLICITY.** Strive to make your communications simple and accessible. Some leaders try to be charismatic or come across as impressive whenever they speak or share information, so they get caught up in conveying a message that sounds exciting or that is full of jargon or complex terms instead of one that has substance and can be easily understood by everyone. But that doesn’t mean you have to “dumb it down” or make your message boring. Just strive to be clear and authentic.
- **STORYTELLING.** Illustrate your message with engaging stories. Giving examples and telling stories helps people relate to abstract ideas like culture and core values. For example, stories about great successes achieved in the face of great odds or of people who have pushed through challenges will cultivate values like perseverance and performance. Storytelling creates high levels of interest and feelings of authenticity—and a compelling narrative gets people to see themselves in the story so they become personally engaged.
- **RELEVANCE.** Make your communications relevant to the culture you desire. Carefully choose the topics you talk about because they can speak volumes about the kind of culture you’re trying to cultivate. If your desired culture is one that is familial and casual, you’ll want to talk about your employees in a personal way and reference the things going on in their lives outside of work. If you’re seeking to cultivate a culture of innovation and creativity at your organization, infuse your communications with references to cutting-edge ideas and iconic geniuses.



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#### **ACTIONS THAT SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS**

What you say about your culture matters, but just as important, what you do provides models of action for your people and telegraphs your commitment to the purpose and values of your organization.

In her book *Built On Values*, Ann Rhoades, former head of people for Southwest Airlines, reports that 61% of managers said that actions by leaders were the most likely to influence the behavior of others in the organization. She encourages leaders “leverage [this] very persistent tendency of employees to follow the leader.” You must be a paragon of your desired culture because everyone is watching you.

While actions—big and small—speak louder than words, a lack of action can be just as powerful. You can’t expect your employees to act in ways that you don’t or won’t. If you want to inspire a more innovative culture but you yourself don’t take calculated risks or you criticize people when they try something new and fail, employees won’t make the changes you want them to.

#### **THE POWER OF PEOPLE DECISIONS**

The most important culture-building actions a leader makes are in hiring, firing, and promoting employees. People decisions are perhaps the most visible way you can shape your culture, but they must first be embraced a leadership responsibility. You must understand the strategic importance of every hiring decision and be committed to your role in ensuring that understanding is shared across all managers.

When your organization relies on core values to make choices about whom to hire, fire, and promote, you make sure the right people are on your bus—and you send a powerful message to your organization about the importance of its values. Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, advocates using “public hangings,” that is, calling out executives who do not align with a company’s values.

In a *Fortune* article, Welch and his wife and business partner, Suzy Welch, explain, “If your company’s culture is to mean anything, you have to hang—publicly—those in your midst who would destroy it.”

The Welches believe that the employees who most threaten their organizations—who most undermine the culture of the company—are those whose actions don’t align with company’s core values but who produce great results. Managers typically give employees in this category a pass because of their great performance but they should be let go. Keeping these employees, they argue, sends “a big fat message to every other employee: Our company’s values are a joke.”

The Welches’ language may be harsh, but it describes spot-on why a leader’s decisions about people are critical. The hiring and firing decisions you and your fellow leaders make may be the ultimate litmus tests for the strength of leadership commitment to cultivating your desired culture.

#### **A GREAT CULTURE REQUIRES GREAT LEADERSHIP**

Culture is only going to increase in importance in business success. As savvy employers increasingly use data and analytics to pinpoint the skilled workers needed in their organization, the war for talent is only going to escalate. More companies will then have to offer more distinct and sustainable cultures to attract and retain in-demand talent. And the need to unify and align diverse and dispersed employees with a singular purpose and values is only going to grow as companies continue to globalize, workforces continue to diversify, and the pace of business continues to accelerate.

Building a healthy, valuable, sustainable culture starts with you. You must prioritize culture-building and take responsibility for achieving it. You can’t take it for granted, you can’t delegate it, and you can’t take a day off from it.