

# **Leaders Build Cultures: Action Steps for Leaders to Build Successful Organizational Cultures**

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*The ability to build strong cultures is a critical skill for leaders, and should be a top priority for their training, development, and education. This article addresses the need for leaders at all levels of an organization to be skilled at building cultures capable of achieving excellent results and bringing out the best in people, and offers specific advice on how to do so. The article draws from the extensive research available on building cultures and also includes lessons learned from the legendary turn-around of the culture and resulting success of Ford Motor Company by former CEO Alan Mulally.*

*Keywords: culture, building culture, leadership, organizational success, Alan Mulally*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Many of the most profitable organizations attribute their success to their culture. Southwest Airlines and Zappos are famous for consciously managing their cultures, but other lesser-known companies like Salesforce and Hubspot also believe their success is a direct result of their proactive management of culture. There is considerable research that demonstrates the important role culture plays in the performance and success or failure of organizations and groups of all types and sizes. Because of the impact of culture, a case could be made that building culture is a critical skill for leaders and should be a top priority in the training, development, and education of leaders at all levels of an organization. Indeed, experts on leadership and culture like Edgar Schein believe that culture building is the most important leadership skill.

Despite the growing body of research, articles, and books showing the impact of culture, many leaders are either not aware of the available research, confused trying to sort through and make sense of the various perspectives on culture, or are unclear about what they specifically need to do to build culture. This dilemma is likely to result in misunderstandings about culture and failed efforts in trying to build it. In this article, we review research on organizational culture, and offer ten practical actions leaders can take in building strong cultures. The article also provides a questionnaire based on the ten actions that can be used to evaluate a leader's skills in building culture. In addition, a case history based on dialogs with the former CEO of Ford Motor Company, Alan Mulally, is presented that outlines the actions he took to change the culture of Ford, and take it from near bankruptcy to one of the most profitable automobile companies in the world. This article draws from available research on building cultures and many years of

personal experience in helping leaders develop strong cultures, and can be applied to building culture in organizations and groups of all types and sizes.

### **The Importance of Culture**

Organization researchers and informed leaders alike realize that culture is critical to the success of organizations and that culture affects many important factors such as performance, morale, quality of work life, and the ability to attract and retain employees. Richard Barrett said in his book, *The Values-Driven Organization*, “When you truly get to the heart of the matter—what creates long-lasting value for investors—you cannot fail to come to the conclusion that culture is everything! Culture drives performance by unleashing human potential” (Barrett, 2017, p. 30). Culture researcher Charles O’Reilly emphasizes that a strong culture facilitates accomplishing an organization’s strategy and increases the commitment of employees to the firm, and that together, these two factors “provide a competitive edge, giving a strong culture firm an advantage over its competitors” (O’Reilly, 2008, p. 92). Organization culture is recognized as such an important factor in the success of organizations that it is a major criterion in determining *Fortune Magazine’s 100 Best Companies to Work For* (Fortune, 2018). Those companies that are chosen for their strong cultures have delivered stock market returns two to three times greater than major stock indices and rate high on revenue growth, employee retention, productivity, innovation, resilience, agility, customer service, employee engagement, and many other factors (Bush, 2018, p. 4).

Culture research has also shown the close connection between culture and organizational performance. Top level executives sometimes view culture as being part of the soft side of the organization, something nice to have when it is positive, but not critical to an organization’s financial success. However, rigorous academic research over the last 30 years indicates that this soft side of the organization, especially culture, is as critical to the financial success of the organization as is the hard stuff like financial management, operational efficiency, and product design. One of the books that helped launch interest in the connection between culture and performance, *Corporate Culture and Performance* (Kotter & Heskett, 1992), reported that over an eleven-year period companies with healthy cultures saw stock increases of 901% versus 74% for comparable companies. Chatman and Cha report that strong cultures enhance performance “by energizing employees – appealing to their higher ideals and values and rallying them around a set of meaningful, unified goals,” and by “shaping and coordinating employees’ behavior” (Chatman & Cha, 2003, p. 21). Costanza and his colleagues (2016) performed a historical analysis of 95 companies founded prior to 1940, and concluded that those with an effective (adaptive) culture were much more likely to survive than companies with other types of cultures. Hartnell, Ou, and Kinicki (2011) reviewed research from 84 different empirical studies and 94 different companies on the relationships between different types of culture and indicators of organizational success (financial, operational, and employee attitudes). They concluded that culture was positively related to the various measures of success, but that some types of culture were strongly related to attitudes and operational effectiveness, while others were better at predicting financial success. Still, the positive relationships between culture and success were consistent. Related, it might be tempting to conclude that the causal arrow goes the other way, that financial success causes positive cultures. Successful organizations might have the resources to invest in employee wellness and cutting-edge operational procedures. Boyce, Nieminen, Gillespie, Ryan, and Denison (2015) studied this question in a number of organizations (car dealers) over time, and concluded quite persuasively that “culture comes first, consistently predicting subsequent ratings of customer satisfaction and vehicle sales” (p. 339). The hoped-for relationship between organization culture and financial success has been well-studied over the last 30 years, and there seems to be little doubt healthy cultures go hand-in-hand with organizational success.

Because of the information now freely available about organizations on the internet and social media, culture has become a major factor in determining the reputation of organizations, and how they are viewed by present and potential employees, customers, and investors. Nordstroms is well-known for a culture that places a strong value on employee empowerment and customer service. Southwest Airlines has developed a culture designed to emphasize a warrior spirit, servant’s heart, fun-loving attitude, and empowered employees. Zappos is known for a zany culture where employees are recruited and trained for

culture. Employees work hard and are empowered to make decisions that “wow” customers while working in a relaxed environment characterized by free lunches, snacks, ice cream, and parades to celebrate successes. Starbucks, Whole Foods, Google, Jersey Mike’s Subs and The Container Store are also well-known for their strong, positive cultures. Unfortunately, there is also a long list of companies known for their unhealthy, predominantly bottom-line oriented, and sometimes inhumane and toxic cultures that make work unpleasant, and experience high turnover rates because of their cultures. We hope this article helps leaders to develop positive organizational cultures.

### **Understanding Organizational Culture**

The first step for leaders to develop skills in building culture is to have an understanding of culture and what influences it. While the word *culture* can be traced back to the ancient Roman orator Cicero, anthropologists and sociologists have a long history of studying culture and the effects that it has on groups and societies. However, researching culture and the impact it can have on organizations, and groups and teams within organizations, is a more recent phenomena. Elliott Jacques is perhaps the first organizational researcher to formally use the term organizational culture in his book *The Changing Culture of a Factory*, in 1951. Other writings highlighting the importance of organizational culture came from the field of organization development in the late 1960’s, addressing the importance of organizational culture for organizational success (Blake & Mouton, 1969). In 1982 a classic book on organizational culture, *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*, was authored by Deal and Kennedy. Also, in 1982, Peters and Waterman brought attention to the importance of culture in their best-selling book, *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982). They took the position that a company’s success could be attributed to a culture that was decisive, customer- and people-oriented, and empowering.

Since the 1980’s, much has been written about culture. However, communicating what has been learned so leaders can understand and apply what they need to know about culture has remained a challenge. Many authors have tried to capture the essence of what organizational culture is. For example, organizational culture has been defined as:

“The taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, and definitions that characterize organizations and their members” (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, p. 18).

“A system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that show employees what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior” (Chatman & Cha, 2003, p. 21).

“The shared basic assumptions, values, and beliefs that characterize a setting and are taught to newcomers as the proper way to think and feel, communicated by the myths and stories people tell about how the organization came to be the way it is...” (Schein, Ehrhart, & Macy, 2013, p. 362)

“The predominant beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, and practices that are characteristic of a group of people” (Warrick, 2015, p. 4).

There are several considerations that should be kept in mind in understanding definitions of culture. Cultures of whole organizations or groups of all types and sizes can differ significantly in what they are like, and in the effects they have on the way people think, feel, and act (Walsh, 2004, p. 303). They can be uplifting, motivating, invigorating, and bring out the best in people. However, they can also be dysfunctional, toxic, stressful, unhealthy, demotivating, and bring out undesirable behaviors and feelings in people. They can have good and bad points, and can be a good fit for some and not for others. Cultures are also driven by the values leaders have, and the values that are shared by followers. Values are abstract beliefs about what is good (or bad). When people share these beliefs, they agree about what is acceptable in terms of their organizational attitudes, behaviors, and decisions. People are motivated to behave in

ways consistent with their values, because it signals their social acceptance, and it bolsters their self-esteem (Gardner, Wickramasinghe & Pierce, 2018). People who do not behave in ways consistent with the organizational values and norms, such as by deceiving customers, become stigmatized, ostracized, and in some cases expelled from the organization.

In understanding culture, Schein elaborates on how culture exists on three levels (Schein & Schein, 2017, pp. 17-25):

1. *Artifacts*: visible indicators such as how leaders lead, how people are treated, how things are structured, how things get done, patterns of behaviors and attitudes, norms adhered to by most, dress, ceremonies, office design, and working conditions;
2. *Espoused Beliefs and Values*: expressed core values, philosophies, strategies, and practices that may or may not be consistent with what people experience; and
3. *Basic Underlying Assumptions*: unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values that determine behavior, perceptions, feelings, and how an organization does things and that often go unquestioned or unchallenged.

Schein's three-level model has widespread acceptance by leaders, practitioners, consultants, and academics. Rigorous research provides a sound basis for this acceptance. For example, Hogan and Coote (2014) studied Schein's model in 100 law firms, and found support for positive relationships between the three levels of culture, and organization effectiveness (e.g., using innovation to solve client's problems). Other research has demonstrated that thoughtful planning regarding artifacts can have effects on the more abstract beliefs, values, and assumptions (Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018), and is another tool by which leaders can build their intended cultures.

Leaders need to be aware of the impact of strong cultures, the need to match cultures with desired outcomes, and the need to build cultures that can adapt to changing situations and goals. A strong or "tightly-coupled" culture is one that has widely-shared beliefs and values that have a significant effect on the behaviors of members (Chatman & Cha, 2003; Schneider et al., 2013). While strong cultures typically improve performance, they can also be a liability if they value the wrong behaviors (e.g., deception) or foster resistance to change (e.g., bureaucracies).

Schein points out that there can be subcultures that differ from the predominant organization culture (Schein & Schein, 2017). Schneider et al. (2013) discuss how organizations have overarching cultures (integration), subcultures based on level of the organization, jobs, demographics, etc. (differentiation), and different values that are shared or are somewhat unique to different sectors of the organization (fragmentation; also see Ellinas, Allan, & Johansson, 2017). Leaders need to be aware that different cultures serve different purposes, that culture and purpose need to be well-matched, and that both purposes and cultures may change over time (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Studies also suggest that it may be as important to consider an organization's subcultures as it does to focus on its predominant culture (Hartnell et al., 2011). Plus, because circumstances change, leaders need to build cultures that can adapt quickly to changing situations (Chatman, Caldwell, O'Reilly, & Doerr, 2014; Costanza et al., 2016).

While there are cultures that send mixed messages to people and have few consistent patterns, most are long lasting and can be difficult to change. However, cultures can be changed with a sound process and can change quickly, for better or worse, with new leaders or significant events (Cummings & Worley, 2019; Grosberg, Lee, Price & Cheng, 2018; Katzenbach, Steffen, & Kronley, 2020).

### **What Influences Culture**

There is no doubt that leaders are the primary influencers in shaping culture (Steers & Shim, 2013). It is a leader's values, leadership style, personality and practices that predominantly create the culture in which people work. For example, Berson and his colleagues (2008) studied these relationships in a sample of 26 CEOs, 71 Senior Vice Presidents and 185 other organizational members in 26 different companies, and found that CEO values affected organization culture, which in turn affected an organizations' financial success. That is why this article focuses on what leaders at all levels of an organization can do to influence the culture of the organization or group that they lead. The top-level

leader of an organization influences the culture of an entire organization, and leaders at all levels influence the cultures of those they lead. Even people who are not in a formal leadership role, but who are respected or have a strong effect on others, can have a positive or negative effect on culture (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1997).

While leaders are the primary shapers of culture (Schneider et al., 2013), they are not the only influences. Leaders need to be aware of other potential effects on culture so they can maximize opportunities to build culture and minimize possible damaging effects. For example, exemplary efforts by individuals or teams that reflect cultural ideals can be congratulated and celebrated, and negative events such as a downturn in the economy can be used to engage the appropriate people in finding solutions while practicing the cultural values. Examples of potential influences on culture are:

- Changes in leadership and ownership
- The actions, decisions, and practices of higher-level leaders
- Changes in organization goals, strategies, policies, processes, systems, working conditions, and/or practices
- Hiring decisions regarding key personnel throughout an organization
- Changes in reward systems and what is valued
- Changes in economic conditions, the market, or technology
- Changes in budgets and particularly budget cuts and downsizing
- Significant internal or external events
- Government policies, laws, regulations, and influences

### **Ten Actions Leaders Can Take to Build Strong Cultures**

There are many ways that leaders can build culture. In efforts to build culture, it is important for leaders to: (a) become well-educated and trained on what organization culture is; (b) understand what affects culture; (c) purposefully and skillfully build culture; (d) consider cultural implications in their decisions and actions; and (e) take a big picture approach to building culture by aligning the many factors that drive culture. What follows are ten actions leaders can take to build strong cultures (summarized in Table 1).

#### *Model the Cultural Norms You Desire to Establish*

How leaders act, get things done, interact, treat, involve and engage people, how transparent they are, the emphasis they place on teamwork, and the values and beliefs they embrace, all work together to create a unique culture (Gehman, Trevino, & Garud, 2013). For leaders to create the desired culture, their talk and walk must be consistent and worthy of following (Kottke & Pelletier, 2013). Much can be inferred about a leader and the culture they are shaping by observing the morale, motivation, attitudes, and behaviors of the people they lead.

There is growing evidence that humble leaders are the most effective at building healthy cultures, as humility is associated with outcomes such as employee trust, open communication, engagement of employees, and leader teachability, approachability, and openness to the ideas of others (Hess & Ludwig, 2017; Ou, Waldman, & Peterson 2015; Owens & Heckman, 2012; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Schein & Schein, 2018). Indra Nooyi, former CEO and Board Chair of PepsiCo, serves as a prime example of a humble leader who built a strong culture at PepsiCo and who helped make PepsiCo a frequent Fortune Magazine's *100 Best Companies to Work For*. She has been described as a "deeply caring person" who "can relate to people from the boardroom to the front line" (Namin-Hedayati, 2015). She maintained a blog at Pepsi where she talked to her employees via posts every other week, and was known to write letters to the parents of employees thanking them for raising such fine daughters and sons.

#### *Make the Strategy Compelling and Clear*

The strategy of an organization typically focuses on the vision, mission, core values, and goals that guide the organization. One of the most effective ways to build culture is to have a compelling vision,

purposeful mission, memorable core values that are known, valued, and practiced, and goals that are clearly communicated and understood throughout the organization. By contrast, it makes sense that when there is no vision or the vision is not clear or compelling, the mission doesn't exist or does not create dedication and pride, core values have not been established or are not memorable or utilized, and goals have not been established or are confusing or unknown, it is difficult if not impossible to build strong cultures

In particular, a compelling vision, purpose, or mission can become a strong motivator for people to join and stay committed to organizations, and for strong cultures to emerge. Purpose-driven organization researchers Quinn and Thakor point out "A higher purpose is not about economic exchanges. It reflects something more aspirational. It explains how the people involved with an organization are making a difference, gives them a sense of meaning, and draws their support." Working for a higher purpose or engaging in meaningful work can have a number of positive outcomes such as reduced stress, turnover, absenteeism, and cynicism, as well as increased commitment, engagement, empowerment, and sense of fulfillment. John Mackey, founder and CEO of Whole Foods, is quoted as saying, "Most of the greatest companies in the world also have great purposes...having a deeper, more transcendent purpose is highly energizing for all of the various interdependent stakeholders."

Research suggests that for strategies to bolster strong cultures they need to be results-oriented. Having a nicely stated strategy is not enough. Organizations need to make progress in delivering on their stated strategies to have credibility. Research by Groysberg, Lee, Price, and Cheng, reported in the Harvard Business Review, shows the importance of being results-oriented when building strong cultures. Balancing a results-orientation with a caring people-orientation is critical, as an overemphasis on results can create a high pressure, stressful culture.

#### *Align Strategy and Culture and Make Both Important Priorities in Decision Making*

Some experts believe that culture is the cure for an organization's problems, and that an organization's strategy will succeed or fail based on the type of culture that the organization has. Others believe that culture is the result of an organization's strategy and that culture is an outcome rather than a cause (Lorsch & McTague, 2016). In other words, culture is what you get when you address challenges and make strategic decisions. Strategy can include many things such as the vision, mission, goals, values, plans, processes, policies, and practices of an organization. What leaders need to understand is that both strategy and culture are important and that they need to be aligned for the best results. Culture needs to reinforce and help accomplish the strategy, and strategy needs to reinforce and help build the culture. When they are misaligned, and they often are, employees get mixed and confusing messages.

In aligning strategy and culture, it is important for leaders to agree on the desired culture that is the best fit for achieving an organization's strategy. How can leaders purposely build, manage, monitor, or recruit for the desired culture if they do not know what the desired culture looks like? Culture is typically defined in terms of cultural ideals or core values. Cultural ideals specifically address the desired culture. Examples would be: engaged and empowered leaders and employees; an action-oriented culture that delivers results; exceptional internal and external customer service; a one-team, collaborative mentality and no guerilla warfare; keep things clear, transparent, and simple; open, safe, and straightforward communication; everyone valued and involved; and innovative, out-of-the-box thinkers. Core values can also drive culture. For example, the core values of Zappos are: embrace and drive change; create fun and a little weirdness; be adventurous, creative, and open-minded; build a positive team and family spirit; practice open and honest relationships; and be passionate and determined. Once the desired culture is defined, leaders need to evaluate the present alignment between strategies and culture. It is also important for leaders to clearly communicate the cultural ideals and to make practicing the cultural ideals and considering the cultural implications of decisions a norm throughout the organization.

#### *Create an Excellent Place to Work*

The research partner for Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For surveys millions of employees in more than 50 countries to determine the best companies for which to work. They use a culture audit to

review each company's people programs and benefits. Their number one criterion to make the list is for a company to be a "Great Place to Work for All" (Bush, 2018, p. 7). This means that a company is a great place to work at all levels for all members. They have concluded in their studies of Best Companies to Work For that great workplace cultures translate to an organization's growth, excellence, and business success (Bush & Lewis-Kulin, 2018).

Other studies on excellent cultures reveal a number of consistent characteristics that leaders need to pay attention to and develop. The best cultures are typically characterized by: (1) valuing all people at all levels; (2) making it safe for people to be open and candid without fear of retribution; (3) engaging and involving employees; (4) developing a collaborative, team-oriented work environment; (5) providing opportunities for the continued growth and development of employees; (6) seeking ways to motivate employees to perform at their best; (7) turning mistakes and failures into opportunities for learning; and (8) creating a culture that is quick to adapt to changing situations (Chatman et al., 2014; Warrick, 2016). These cultures benefit customers as well as employees. While there is research supporting all of the characteristics for building culture described above, the research is particularly strong on the first three. The growing emphasis on positive scholarship, positive organizations, positive leadership, and positive psychology has stimulated a focus on developing organizations with positive cultures, where all people at all levels are valued (Quinn, 2015; Cameron, 2012; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014).

Some of the best research on creating safe, open, and candid communication has been done by Amy Edmondson and reported in her book *The Fearless Organization* (Edmondson, 2019). She reports that Gallup polls showed that only 3 in 10 employees strongly agreed that their opinions count at work. By increasing the ratio to 6 in 10 employees, organizations could realize a 27 percent reduction in turnover, a 40 percent reduction in safety incidents, and a 12 percent increase in productivity. Edmondson reports that psychological safety helps explain differences in performance in workplaces she has researched. There is also convincing research showing the close link between building strong cultures and efforts to engage, involve, develop, and motivate employees. Engaged and well-trained employees are likely to be much more productive and committed to, and less likely to leave an organization (Schneider et al, 2017; Albrecht, 2010; Bakker, 2010; Saks & Gruman, 2014).

### *Hire and Train for Culture*

Leaders should make culture fit a priority when recruiting and preparing people to succeed in an organization (Gardner et al., 2012). Culture fit is important at all levels of an organization, but it is particularly important at the higher levels of an organization. An organization must have a planned and focused approach to hiring for culture fit, or for the desired culture. This is especially true in key leadership positions. Otherwise, they are rolling the dice in the hopes that a new leader will build a strong culture and prove to be a successful leader. A cultural misfit at the top can quickly undermine a culture that took years to build. At lower levels, a culture misfit can impact the morale and performance of a successful team or group of people.

In addition to hiring for culture, organizations should also train for culture, making clear what the cultural values are and what is expected of employees in terms of performance, behaviors, and attitudes. Companies like Zappos make hiring and training for culture a high priority (Warrick, Milliman, & Ferguson, 2016). Applicants at all levels are carefully screened for culture fit as well as for their job competencies. An in-depth process is used that involves HR, managers, and potential co-workers in the selection process. Once selected for a job, new employees, regardless of position, go through an intensive and well thought out employee orientation program that includes a major focus on the company culture and core values. Hiring and training for culture has many benefits to organizations and not doing so can have many visible and invisible costs.

### *Reinforce for Culture*

Leaders can say all that they want about the desired culture, but ultimately employees will respond to what they see valued, measured, recognized, rewarded, and/or discouraged (Kerr & Slocum, 2005). This

requires leaders to have a keen awareness of the behaviors they are encouraging, discouraging, and reinforcing through their various actions. Steven Kerr wrote an article that is now considered a classic on the importance of being aware of the types of behaviors leaders are actually rewarding. The article was titled *On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B* (Kerr, 1975). As an example, if leaders say they desire open and candid communications, but in reality it is risky to be open and candid and what is rewarded is playing it safe and telling leaders what they want to hear, they undermine the cultural values they are trying to create. Leaders particularly need to be aware of the types of behaviors they are reinforcing through their policies, performance review systems, and reward systems.

John Stumpf was CEO of Wells Fargo and a strong believer in the importance of culture, and he took many steps to try to build a strong culture at Wells Fargo. However, when Stumpf allowed the company to become overly sales-oriented and provided attractive incentives to increase sales, the result was aggressive tactics and unethical practices to meet sales targets. Over a 5-year period, it was discovered that over 3.5 million accounts were opened without customer authorization by employees trying to benefit from the incentives. When this was discovered, Stumpf implemented a number of actions and remedies to address the issues, but the damage had been done. Wells Fargo was fined over \$200 million by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), and Stumpf forfeited over \$41 million in unvested equity awards, and eventually he resigned (Guerra, 2008).

#### *Initiate and Support Culture Building Activities and Opportunities*

Leaders can initiate numerous activities that help build culture such as finding ways to make the work environment a fun place to work, or using symbolic acts and ceremonies, social and informational events, and storytelling, to reinforce cultural ideals (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). The key is to look for and provide opportunities to develop and reinforce the desired culture. Stories are often told of Herb Kelleher, the colorful former CEO of Southwest Airlines, that he sometimes showed up in the early morning hours with coffee and donuts for airline personnel. This symbolic act reinforced the service-oriented culture at Southwest Airlines. Formal and informal ceremonies and gatherings that recognize individuals and groups for efforts that required the practice of cultural ideals sends a strong message to all members of an organization. Social events can help build culture by creating opportunities for people to get to know one another and build relationships. Examples of social events that can build culture are lunches, dinners, retreats, workshops, and providing recreational and fun activities and facilities where people from different levels and functions in the organization interact with one another. Speaking with pride about present and past events in the organization that illustrate cultural ideals can also be helpful. The US Olympic Committee (USOC), the organization that manages Olympic activities for the US, has a practice of sending leaders and staff from all levels of the organization to fulfill support activities for the athletes at the Summer and Winter Olympic games. No one carries a title. A high-level executive may be driving a bus to shuttle athletes to events and activities. Everyone works together as a team for the good of the athletes. The experience is so enriching and so characteristic of the cultural value of teamwork, that it has a carryover affect into the USOC and is the source of many stories shared by leaders about the value of teamwork.

#### *Seek Expertise and Knowledge Regarding Culture*

Leaders can benefit from learning from other leaders who are skilled at building culture, and from involving internal or external expertise. Professional expertise may be needed to develop a clear understanding of the present culture, what is driving it, what the desired culture would look like, and in helping build and/or change the culture. It may also be the case that leaders are part of the problem, such as when their personal values and practices are inconsistent with the cultural values of the organization. There are methods for diagnosing situations like this, as well as strategies for overcoming leader-organization values gaps (Nieminen, Biermeier-Hanson, & Denison, 2013). Leaders can also keep up to date by reading articles and books, or attending workshops, on culture.

### *Monitor and Manage Culture*

Just as leaders monitor and manage results, budgets, and other important key performance indicators, they should also monitor the organization's culture, because culture can be a significant contributor or impediment to an organization's success. It is not necessary or helpful for leaders to become preoccupied with culture, as they have many things to focus on in building a successful group or organization. However, it is important for leaders to see monitoring and managing culture as part of their leadership responsibilities. They particularly need to be aware of the importance of responding effectively to events or decisions that have influenced or could potentially influence culture.

There are many informal and formal ways to monitor culture. Informally, approachable and involved leaders who create a climate of open communication and who listen to their people are likely to have a good idea of the cultural climate, and cultural influences and changes. There are also formal ways to monitor culture. For example, questionnaires and interviews can be used to evaluate culture, and internal or external professionals can be used to evaluate and help build or change culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

Another alternative for monitoring and managing culture is to appoint a "Culture Team." A Culture Team, or whatever term is used to identify the team, can have a variety of responsibilities depending on the needs of the organization. Typical responsibilities are to monitor culture, to become experts on culture and how to build and change culture so they can advise top level leadership, and to organize culture-building activities (Warrick, 2002). Culture teams, like all teams, need to have meaningful responsibilities and be designed to be action teams rather than activity teams that meet a lot but have no tangible effect of culture.

### *Commit to Being a Student of Leadership*

In many ways, building culture and effective leadership are synonymous. The many actions required to build strong cultures are the actions skilled leaders tend to practice. Therefore, it is important for leaders to become committed students of effective leadership. This means seeking out and learning from skilled leaders wherever you can find them. It means observing and learning from good and bad leadership practices and being open to feedback on your strengths and opportunities for improvement as a leader. It also means learning as much as possible from books, articles, educational experiences, and training about effective leadership.

**TABLE 1**  
**10 ACTIONS STEPS FOR LEADERS TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL CULTURES**

1. Model the cultural norms you desire to establish.
2. Make the strategy compelling and clear.
3. Align strategy and culture and make strategy an important priority in decision making.
4. Create an excellent place to work.
5. Hire and train for culture.
6. Reinforce for culture.
7. Initiate and support culture building activities and opportunities.
8. Seek knowledge and expertise in building culture.
9. Monitor and manage culture.
10. Commit to being a student of leadership.

### **Evaluate Your Skills in Building Culture**

Table 2 provides a questionnaire based on the ten actions presented for building culture that can be used by leaders in evaluating their culture building skills. There are also a number of statistically

validated questionnaires available that leaders can use to gain additional insights into various aspects of culture (such as Cameron & Quinn, 2011; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

**TABLE 2**  
**CULTURE BUILDING SKILLS QUESTIONNAIRE**

Building strong cultures has become one of the most important skills that leaders at all levels of an organization can have. Research on culture indicates that culture can have a significant impact on performance, behavior, morale, job satisfaction, job engagement, motivation, quality of work life, and the ability to attract and retain employees. Building strong cultures is a learnable skill. To determine your present strengths and opportunities for improvement in building culture please rate yourself on the items below using the scale provided. If you are not or have not been in a leadership position where you can evaluate your skills in building culture, you can use the questionnaire to evaluate what you think your skill level would presently be on each of the items. The questionnaire can also be used to compute an Overall Average for Each Item and Overall Score for a group of leaders such as an Executive Team.

Low Rating    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    High Rating

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. **Model the cultural norms you desire to establish:** Your attitude, performance, speech, and practices set the example you want others to follow.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. **Make the strategy compelling and clear:** The vision, mission, core values, and goals for the organization or group you lead are compelling and clear.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. **Align strategy and culture and make both important priorities in decision making:** You assure that strategy and culture are aligned and considered in decision making.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. **Create an excellent place to work:** You create a positive and supportive work environment where people are valued and engaged and feel free to communicate openly and candidly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. **Hire and train for culture:** In hiring people you make culture fit an important consideration and you provide any necessary training to assure that people understand and contribute to the desired culture.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. **Reinforce for culture.** Your actions value and reinforce behaviors that are consistent with the desired culture.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. **Initiate and support culture building activities and opportunities:** You initiate and support activities that build culture and look for opportunities to build culture.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. **Seek knowledge and expertise in building culture.** You are committed to learning about culture and are open to seeking the experience and expertise of others in building culture.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. **Monitor and manage culture:** You are in close touch with those you lead, have an accurate understanding of the present culture you have created, and are making efforts to continuously build and improve the culture.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. **Commit to being a student of leadership:** You are dedicated to learning as much as you can about being an excellent leader.
- \_\_\_\_\_ TOTAL OVERALL SCORE

**INTERPRETATION OF OVERALL SCORE**

A 90-100	B 80-89	C 70-79	D 60-69	F 10-59
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## **CASE EXAMPLE OF HOW ALAN MULALLY CHANGED THE CULTURE OF FORD**

Alan Mulally became the CEO of Ford Motor Company in 2006 when Ford's U.S. market share had been in a freefall for more than ten years, dropping from 25% to 16.8%. Total losses for 2006 were estimated to be \$12.7 billion, the biggest annual loss in Ford's 103-year history. Ford was a dysfunctional company characterized by an abundance of corporate politics and turf wars, managerial infighting, a silo mentality among the various divisions of Ford, and a slow-moving and unhealthy culture. Ford also faced an economy that was sagging and was causing American automobile companies to seek bailouts by the federal government.

Mulally refused government bailouts and set out to transform Ford and its culture. When he left in 2014, Ford was again the top selling US automobile brand and was also the most profitable automobile manufacturer in the world. Mulally led one of the most successful turnarounds in business history. So, how did he do it? Obviously, many factors were involved in the turnaround. One of the main factors was a dramatic change in culture, so this abbreviated account of what he did will focus on how Mulally changed the culture of Ford. As you see what Mulally did to change the culture of Ford, you will observe practical applications of many of the actions presented above for what leaders can do to build culture. The case history is based on personal dialogs with Mulally by the first author, and published narratives on what Mulally accomplished.

It is important to learn from what Alan Mulally did to change the culture of Ford that leaders can be educated and trained to build culture. Much of Mulally's success was a result of the efforts he invested in changing the thinking and actions of leaders throughout Ford. It is also helpful to understand that some of Mulally's personal training and preparation for skilled leadership and for building people-centered cultures began with three overarching lessons his mother repeated to him daily when he was growing up: (1) The purpose of life is to love and be loved, in that order; (2) To serve is to live; and (3) It is nice to be important, but more important to be nice. The case that follows is written to show the specific actions Mulally took to build and change the culture of Ford. Table 3 summarizes the actions Alan Mulally took to build a new culture in Ford.

### **Leaders Must Set the Example for the Desired Culture**

Mulally came to work every day with a smile, an enthusiasm for the daunting mission he was entrusted with, and a genuine concern for the welfare of the company and the people in it. He was known as a humble leader who was uplifting to be around, and who treated people with value and respect. He was also known for being an intent listener, a role model, and for making open and candid communication safe. One of the role modeling stories told of Mulally occurred during one of his early meetings with the new leadership team he had formed. He had a "traffic light" system he used at his weekly leadership meetings. A green light meant all was well, a yellow light meant that some issues needed to be addressed, and a red light that a situation was critical. At his first meeting all of his direct reports showed green lights. Mulally calmly pointed out that this could not be possible since the company had just lost \$12.7 billion. He then created a safe environment for being straightforward about the real issues. In the final analysis, having skilled leaders who set the example for building a smart and healthy organization was a major key to changing the culture in Ford. Mulally made clear what he expected of leaders and held leaders at all levels accountable for being an example for others to follow.

### **Develop a Clear and Compelling Vision**

Mulally emphasizes the power of a compelling vision. The vision that united Ford as one team was creating "One Ford." This term meant getting all of Ford working together for common goals instead of operating as semi-independent kingdoms with duplicated efforts and conflicting goals.

### **Develop a Winning Strategy With Clear Behavioral Expectations**

A two-sided plastic card was given to all Ford employees. One side included the Ford vision of "One Ford" and Mission of being "One Team" with "One Plan" and "One Goal." Specifics were included under

each of the three components of the mission. The other side included “Four Expected Behaviors” including “Foster Functional and Technical Excellence,” “Own Working Together,” “Role Model Ford Values,” and “Deliver Results.” Each behavior included specific components. This approach helped emphasize both strategy and culture.

### **Align Purpose, Performance, and Principles**

In building the Ford culture and transforming the company, Mulally used the terms “Purpose,” “Performance,” and “Principles” to stress the need to align the critical factors in making the company successful and driving the right behaviors. His goal was to build a purpose-driven, performance-focused, principles-led organization. Frequently repeating the three P’s made them part of the conversation and focus of leaders throughout Ford.

### **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate**

Mulally used every opportunity he could find to repeatedly communicate the Vision, Mission, and Expected Behaviors of Ford as well as the importance of aligning Purpose, Performance, and Principles. He kept his communication clear, simple, and often repeated phrases that people were likely to remember.

### **Treat Everyone With Respect, Involve Everyone, and Work as a Team**

Mulally believed strongly in treating all people with respect, involving people at all levels, and working as a team. He developed a set of principles and practices for “Working Together.” At the top of the list was “People First.” Not treating people with respect and not being a team player were behaviors that were not tolerated and could lead to dismissal if not changed.

### **Make Sure Everyone Knows the Plan, the Status, and Areas That Need Attention**

Another principle that Mulally expected others to practice was to make plans simple and clear, ensure that everyone knows the plan and the current status, and to be transparent about areas that need attention. Perhaps the most important key to purposely building a strong culture was what Mulally called his weekly Business Plan Review (BPR) in which all of the key leaders throughout Ford were involved. This well-structured weekly meeting made it possible for the top-level leaders to have a big picture perspective and to work together to make Ford successful and build a strong culture in Ford.

### **Use Facts and Data to Hold People Accountable and Drive Change**

Leaders were expected to have clear and measurable goals and to track progress. Facts and data were used to develop a common view of reality, hold people accountable, and drive needed changes. This approach was made possible by developing a win-win mindset, with everyone working together toward the same goals.

### **Relentlessly Pursue and Achieve the Desired Results**

Mulally created an action-oriented culture where people were expected to have disciplined processes and get things done. He believed that required a sound process for getting things done, a willingness to challenge the process, and a commitment to keeping a laser focus on goals.

### **Have Fun and Enjoy the Journey**

In the end result, Mulally enjoyed work and challenges, and tried to make work as fun, purposeful, and enjoyable as he could for others as well. Mulally maintained an optimistic, positive attitude, that set the desired standard throughout Ford. His goal of making Ford successful and creating a smart, healthy, and high performing culture was partially accomplished by making the journey challenging but fun for everyone at Ford.

**TABLE 3**  
**HOW ALAN MULALLY CHANGED THE CULTURE OF FORD**

1. Leaders must set the example for the desired culture
2. Develop a clear and compelling vision
3. Develop a winning strategy with clear behavioral expectations
4. Align purpose, performance, and principles
5. Communicate, communicate, communicate
6. Treat everyone with respect, involve everyone, and work as a team
7. Make sure everyone knows the plan, the status, and areas that need attention
8. Use facts and data to hold people accountable and drive change
9. Relentlessly pursue and achieve the desired results
10. Have fun and enjoy the journey

### **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN BUILDING CULTURES**

#### **Can Bad Cultures Produce Good Results?**

The focus of this article has been on positive ways leaders can build culture and the impressive results typically achieved with healthy cultures. However, can cultures that would not meet the criteria for healthy cultures or that are created by leaders who are not known for their humility or people skills achieve good results? Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, had a reputation for his lack of people skills and humility, and yet he built one of the most successful organizations in the world. Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, another leader of a highly successful organization, was known for building a high-pressure, aggressive culture.

There are many reasons for the temporary or even long-term success of an organization, including those with unhealthy cultures and leaders with questionable leadership practices. For example, the leader may be a visionary genius such as Jobs and Gates or perhaps a company has a unique place in the market. However, success depends on how you define it, and there are costs to having unhealthy cultures for the people in it and how the organization functions. Defining success only by bottom line results can overlook many internal and external dysfunctional consequences of unhealthy cultures, such as employee burnout and fear-driven opportunity costs. It might be noted that one rigorous research study of 114 CEOs and 324 top management team (TMT) members found that good leaders can compensate for bad cultures, and vice versa (Hartnell et al., 2016). The task-oriented leadership styles of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates may have been what their companies needed at the time to compensate for cultures that had become too friendly and not sufficiently results-oriented.

#### **Too Busy to Focus on Culture?**

Leaders may have good excuses for not focusing on culture, such as being too busy with other pressing priorities. However, before defending their excuses, they should consider the significant benefits of focusing on culture, and factor in the costs for not making it a higher priority. Strong cultures are likely to improve financial results and save time and resources, and neglected cultures are likely to have undesirable consequences in terms of performance, morale, teamwork, inefficient practices, the loss of respect for leaders and confidence in leaders, and many other dysfunctional outcomes.

#### **The Folly of Quick Fixes for Building and Changing Culture**

Leaders may also make the mistake of thinking that there is a quick fix for building and changing culture. Lots of talk about culture, nicely framing cultural values or ideals on walls, passing around articles or books about culture, or even having a few workshops on culture would be a fast and easy way

to build culture without having to expend much effort or resources. Unfortunately, while all of these efforts can be important as part of the process of building culture, they are not likely to change it.

For culture to be purposely built, sustained, or changed, the desired culture must be embraced, supported, valued, rewarded, and lived, breathed, and practiced by the top-level leader and leaders. There is no magic program or talk that will replace the power of leaders modeling the cultural behaviors they desire, and integrating culture and considering the impact of culture into their responsibilities and decision making.

## CONCLUSION

### Getting Started at Purposefully Building Culture

Culture is recognized as critical to the success or failure of organizations and groups of all types and sizes. Understanding the importance of culture and developing skills in building culture should become an essential part of the education, training, and selection of leaders. Thus, the first step in purposefully building culture is to educate leaders in the importance of culture and what it takes to build strong cultures. The education process needs to include the understanding that building culture involves much more than deciding on some values and then telling people to act accordingly. Building culture involves aligning many factors with the desired culture such as the behavior and practices of leaders as well as an organization's strategies, policies, performance review and reward systems. Organizations that do a good job of preparing leaders to understand and build culture could realize a significant return on investment.

Once leaders are educated on understanding and building culture, there is no "one size fits all" formula for building culture in a purposeful way. The process depends on many factors unique to each organization. However, the number one factor is the commitment of top-level leaders to building a strong culture. A strong commitment at the top can accelerate building a strong culture and a weak commitment can make building a strong culture difficult no matter how skilled other leaders are at building culture. However, regardless of how weak the commitment is at the top, this should not deter others from doing their part to help build strong cultures. While there is no set formula for all organizations in building strong cultures, the ten skills discussed in this article that leaders can use in building culture, and particularly the lessons learned from how Alan Mulally changed the culture of Ford, can provide guidelines for getting started in building strong cultures.

As a final thought, whatever is done to build culture needs to follow at least two important criteria. Efforts to build culture should as much as possible simplify rather than add complexity to what leaders and employees do, and improve rather than make things worse for leaders and employees. Too many well-intended programs and changes just add more work and requirements to already overworked people. For culture to change, the reasoning has to be clear and convincing and the incentive to change has to be greater than the incentive to maintain the status quo.

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