



# How to be a culture architect

by Dr. Laura Hamill, Ph.D.

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*Bring your culture to life. Inspire people to be their best.*



About the author

## Dr. Laura Hamill

Laura Hamill, Ph.D., has over 20 years of experience helping companies be more strategic with their most important asset — their people. Laura is the Chief People Officer at Limeade, an employee engagement platform that inspires people and companies to improve their health, well-being, performance and culture. In this role she leads the People Team (Human Resources), while nurturing the Limeade culture of innovation, developing groundbreaking people practices and architecting employee engagement strategies for Limeade and its 100+ enterprise customers.

Prior to Limeade, Laura owned Paris Phoenix Group, an organizational research and assessment consulting firm, focused on improving employee engagement, culture alignment and creating evidence-based talent management systems. In this role, Laura helped Limeade develop its model of well-being and assessment. She also worked at Microsoft as the Director of People Research, a team of organizational researchers responsible for company-wide employee research. Prior to Microsoft, Laura conducted employee research at Allstate Research and Planning Center and Bell Atlantic (now Verizon).

She earned her Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Old Dominion University and a B.S. in Psychology from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Laura lives in Woodinville, Washington, with her husband, two children and a very large dog.

“ Culture is the single most important factor in organizational success or failure. ”

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# What is culture?

When most people think about culture, they focus on tangible, surface-level perks and policies: dress code, the framed mission statement in the lobby and the presence or absence of ping-pong tables in the office. While these may be an extension of culture, they don't define it — and they certainly don't create it.

Instead, culture is the collective values, norms and beliefs of the organization — also known as “how things are done around here.” It's the backdrop for everything that happens at your company and the day-to-day experience. For example:

- ✓ Do employees feel valued?
- ✓ Can employees get their work done?
- ✓ Do we tell the truth to each other?
- ✓ Do we speak the truth to leaders?
- ✓ Do leaders always “win” the conversation?
- ✓ Is the organization luxurious and elaborate — or frugal and modest?
- ✓ Is it fast-paced and risk-taking or methodical and calculated?

“...the collective values, norms and beliefs of the organization — also known as *how things are done around here.*”

In short: *What is it like to work here?*

# What does culture look like?

The thing with culture is that you don't always see it — especially after you've been at an organization for a long time. It's most noticeable as a new employee or when you step into a client's office for the first time. For example, let's say you're in the lobby of a very busy company — there are phones ringing and people rushing around, speaking at a rapid-fire pace. *Does it feel exciting?* Maybe that's because people are psyched about the work, entrenched in the rush. *Or does it feel panicked?* In that case, the organization could be chaotic and constantly putting out fires.

Either way, over time, culture becomes more ingrained and less evident to those who are in it. To determine what culture looks like, you have to take a step back and look at the day-to-day behaviors and expectations.

One of the most important times for you to be clear about the culture you want to have is when a new employee starts. A few questions to ask yourself:

**What are the micro-events that new employees experience?**

**What message are they getting about what's really important?**

**Does your onboarding process orient people to the organization's ways — or let them navigate on their own?**

These early experiences say a lot about your company, and you want them to appropriately reflect your culture.



It's also important to understand culture at the attribute level, not just the overall level. Below are some examples of cultural attributes:

Cultural attributes	
Top down decision-making	Participative decision-making
Rigid	Relaxed
Cold	Caring
Disjointed	Integrated
Quantity/number-focused	Quality-focused
Hierarchical	Flat
Micromanaged	Autonomous
Reactive	Proactive
Secretive	Honest
Relationship saving	Truth telling
Indifferent	Curious

Culture is powerful because it shapes employee behavior — telling people what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally and how to behave. Throughout the day, employees make a series of micro and macro decisions, all of which are guided by the message they receive about the way things are done.

If employees get the culture “message” you intend them to get, they’ll behave in ways you would like them to behave. But if your culture evolves into one you don’t want, it’s likely the resulting employee behavior won’t be optimally aligned with your business goals.

*Culture matters because it “tells” employees how to behave.* And saying a culture is good or bad isn’t really the point — it’s about how the culture is supportive and aligned with what your company is trying to do.

# Why should you care?

Like it or not, a culture IS being socialized at your company. It's telling people how to behave, whether they're valued, how they get their work done and what matters to the organization. So ask your leadership: Is this the culture we want and need? Will it help us achieve our strategy?

Because here's the thing: **Culture is the single most important factor in organizational success or failure.\*** And while most companies understand the significance of strategy, they often don't realize that culture is what drives it. So if your culture doesn't align with and support strategy, your strategy will fail. Period.

**What does it mean to align culture with strategy?** It means you *thread culture through everything you do* — every policy, procedure, system, benefit, perk, even your office set-up. All of it should be intentional and consistent with the culture.

	Average Increase for 12 Firms <b>WITH</b> Performance-Enhancing Cultures	Average Increase for 20 Firms <b>WITHOUT</b> Performance-Enhancing Cultures
Revenue Growth	682%	166%
Employment Growth	282%	36%
Stock Price Growth	901%	74%
Net Income Growth	756%	1%

\* *Corporate Culture and Performance (2011), Kotter and Heskett*



When culture and strategy are aligned

A technology company with a clear focus on sales has done an exceptional job of building a culture where selling is king. It fully supports sales training and new employees receive this message from the get-go, along with an understanding of what's expected of them and a clear-cut process for selling the product and servicing existing customers.

A health technology company with a focus on innovation and collaboration built a team-oriented culture of health that drives its strategy. Everyone works in an open-plan office, the leadership team is accessible, they hold walking meetings more than conference room pow-wows, and the culture is woven through their policies, procedures, benefits and people system (right down to the interview guide to evaluate candidates for cultural fit).



When culture and strategy aren't aligned

An insurance company wanted to “disrupt” the industry by delivering new products and developing innovative approaches to its customers. But the culture of command and control, lack of trust, rampant bureaucracy and “that’s not in my job description” attitude didn’t allow for new ideas and approaches to surface.

A technology company with a large number of customer service employees advertised that its personalized service sets them apart from the competition. Yet they cut back on training for these employees, increased the span of control for service supervisors and took away valued benefits. These employees believed they were second-class citizens and not valued in the organization.

# What happens when you understand your culture

The impact of culture goes beyond growth and profit. Most companies aren't even aware of their current culture, and most companies who delve into culture emphasize the culture they *want* to have (e.g., their values). But the gap between where they are now and what they want to have is rarely understood. That's why understanding your culture allows you to accomplish a variety of key objectives:

- ✓ **Socialize** new employees
- ✓ **Describe** your company to potential partners, clients or employees
- ✓ **Align** employee, manager and leader behaviors — as well as internal work streams — with the culture
- ✓ **Engage** employees
- ✓ **Improve satisfaction** with customers
- ✓ Develop a **leadership framework** for strategy development and communication
- ✓ Differentiate the company for potential **partnerships**
- ✓ Ensure the company is well-positioned to meet its future **business objectives**



# 10 ways to be a culture architect

Being intentional about culture means you approach it from an architectural model — based on proactive leaders — instead of an evolutionary model, which occurs when the culture is allowed to be shaped by random events.

Here's how to be a culture architect . . .



# 1 Secure ownership from your leadership team.

Ideally, your CEO should be the face of the culture you're trying to shape. But HR can also lead this effort! When making the case to leadership for an intentional culture, make sure they understand the importance of aligning culture with your business strategy. Think about the different personalities in the room: for the "system-thinking" leader, show how culture is the backdrop of the entire organizational system. For the "people" leader, show the relationship between climate and culture. And for the "data-driven" leader, show how you can articulate and measure culture, as well as show progress over time.

# 2 Conduct a culture audit.

A culture audit helps you understand how your values are visible through the employee experience. For example, is your organization top-down or participative, hierarchical or flat, secretive or honest? And most importantly, does your culture align with strategy so you can achieve business objectives? It's important to make sure you do this from the perspective of employees as well. Leaders experience culture differently.

# 3 Help employees see what is expected of them.

This doesn't come from a tagline — it comes from developing clear behavioral expectations and educating employees on them. But before an organization can behavioralize, it needs to make sure there is a shared vision and clear articulation of the culture.

## 4 Thread your culture through processes.

This means aligning the culture you want with business strategy. It means always asking if what you're doing reflects the culture when it comes to policies, procedures, systems (especially your people system and organizational structure), communications, benefits and more. For example, if you are trying to ensure a collaborative work environment, stack ranking your employees against each other at performance reviews isn't a great idea. Instead, reinforce collaboration by drawing on peer feedback.

## 5 Hire for culture fit.

At Limeade, we hire for culture first. We've developed interview questions that help us understand whether someone is ready to join our tribe. We've found this approach works best, as it's easier to hire someone who fits our culture and train them a bit where needed, than to hire someone with a glowing resume and ask them to shift who they are to fit in.

## 6 Hold everyone accountable for living the culture — and measure progress.

Create metrics around how well employees demonstrate the culture, rewarding those who live it and determining appropriate consequences for those who don't. And when it comes to giving shout-outs, whatever you're doing has to align with your culture. The gold watch was once a great way to mark tenure when years of service mattered. These days, if you're a financial services firm focused on closing deals and making money, a cash bonus is meaningful. Or if you're a work-life balance consulting firm, try a few weeks of bonus PTO.

## 7 Make sure leaders are walking the talk.

You can't build an intentionally open and honest culture if you have leaders who don't communicate critical information to their team. Similarly, you can't preach work-life balance if you have leaders driving their teams into the ground. Make sure your leaders understand the culture and what's expected of them, and then evaluate how they're mapping their management style and behavior to the culture.

## 8 Empower your culture champions.

There are always respected leaders — both formal and informal — who are great ambassadors of your culture. These are the people who serve as role models by living the culture every day. Make sure they know they're regarded for upholding the culture and give them free reign to align their management or work style.

## 9 Communicate the culture.

Don't be afraid to openly address culture with your employees. Communicate your culture — how it's defined, what's expected of people and how they can "live" the culture. If things are formal and structured, your communications should follow suit: distributed at regular intervals, using more formal language. If your culture is more innovative and iterative, you might just communicate as needed, using a casual, conversational tone.

## 10 Test and reiterate.

Sometimes throwing spaghetti at the wall is the best approach — especially if you can clean it up quickly when it doesn't stick. In other words, be willing to fail fast and fix faster. As you take on the role of culture architect, there are a number of ways to know if you're moving in the right direction — like employee feedback, behavior (is it what you want or not?) and straight-up business results. Test your methods frequently, and be willing to reiterate often, as swiftly as you can.

Want to learn more?

Let's talk.

[www.limeade.com](http://www.limeade.com)



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