



How to be a

# CULTURE ARCHITECT

by Laura Hamill, Ph.D.

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About the author

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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 family and a very large dog.

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**“CULTURE IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS OR FAILURE.”**



# WHAT IS CULTURE?

When most people think about culture, they focus on tangible, surface-level perks and policies: like 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 extensions 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.

**“CULTURE IS THE COLLECTIVE VALUES, NORMS AND BELIEFS OF THE ORGANIZATION – ALSO KNOWN AS HOW THINGS ARE DONE AROUND HERE.”**

For example:

- Do employees feel valued?
- Can they get their work done?
- Do we tell the truth to each other?
- Do we give honest feedback?
- 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?

**IN SHORT: WHAT'S 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 sustained amount of time. It's most noticeable as a new employee or when you step into an 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, opening and closing doors, speaking at a rapid-fire pace. Does it feel exciting? Maybe that's because people are psyched about the work and entrenched in the rush. Or does it feel panicked? In that case, it could be that the organization is chaotic, lacks integration and is 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.

**WHAT ARE THOSE LITTLE 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.

Note that there's no right or wrong here. It's about how specific cultural attributes are helping versus hindering. Another way to look at it is that ***culture is to organizations as personalities are to individuals***. A culture's characteristics are not overt or concrete, but they're powerful because they shape employee behavior — telling people what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to

react emotionally and how to behave. And the culture is ubiquitous throughout the organization, even though it may present itself differently from one department to the next. Finally, whether a culture is “good” or “bad” is relative, depending on the behavior and results it drives.

## Cultural attributes:

- Top down decision making
- Rigid
- Cold
- Disjointed
- Quantity/Number focused
- Hierarchical
- Micromanaged
- Reactive
- Secretive
- Relationship saving
- Indifferent

VS.

- Participative decision making
- Relaxed
- Caring
- Integrated
- Quality focused
- Flat
- Autonomous
- Proactive
- Honest
- Truth telling
- Curious

**IT'S ALSO IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND CULTURE AT THE ATTRIBUTE LEVEL, NOT THE OVERALL LEVEL. BELOW ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES BASED ON HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE IN THE COMPANY.**

# 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 to get their work done and what matters to the organization. So ask your leadership: Is this the culture we want? And 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.

	Average Increase for Twelve Firms <b>WITH</b> Performance-Enhancing Cultures	Average Increase for Twelve 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%

**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.

# 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:

- **ALIGN** employee and leadership 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**
- **SOCIALIZE** new employees
- **DESCRIBE** your company to potential partners, clients or employees

# 10 WAYS TO BE A CULTURE ARCHITECT

Being intentional about culture means you approach it from an architectural model — which is based on proactive, activity by 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 . . .

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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 for an intentional culture, make sure leaders 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?



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## WEAVE CULTURE INTO ALL PROCESSES, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES.

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, interviews, conducting meetings, benefits and more. For example, if you're a team-oriented, flat organization, you can't squirrel away your leadership team behind bulletproof glass doors. Maybe they have a slightly larger office — or a corner desk if your space is open-plan — but they need to work alongside everyone else.

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## 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 expectations.

At Limeade, we created our own "Limeade DNA" one-pager that defines our values and the behaviors that reflect them. This is how we set expectations from the get-go.

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## HIRE FOR CULTURE FIT.

At Limeade, we hire for culture first. We've found it's easier to hire someone who fits our culture and train them, than to hire someone with a glowing resume and ask them to shift who they are to fit in.

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## HOLD EVERYONE ACCOUNTABLE FOR LIVING THE CULTURE – AND MEASURE PROGRESS.

You know what they say: “You have to live it to give it.” Create metrics around how well employees are demonstrating 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, bonus PTO would be appropriate.



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## MAKE SURE LEADERS ARE WALKING THE TALK.

You can't build an intentionally open and honest culture if you have a leader who doesn't communicate critical information. 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. Then evaluate how they're mapping their management style and behavior to the culture.

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## 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 “walking the culture walk” 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 with it.

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## COMMUNICATE THE CULTURE.

Don't be afraid to openly address culture with your employees. Communicate about your culture — how it's defined, what's expected of people and how they can “live” the culture. Keep in mind that your communications must also align with 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.

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## 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. Listen to employee feedback, watch employee behavior (is it what you want or not?) and measure business results. Test your methods frequently and be willing to reiterate often, as swiftly as you can.



Limeade integrates well-being, engagement, inclusion and social recognition software into one seamless experience that brings workplace culture to life and helps employees and companies feel more connected.

# TOGETHER, LET'S CHANGE THE WAY WE WORK.

Get in touch, we'd love to talk.

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