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How to Become a True Culture Warrior and
Lead Your Organization to Victory

Jeff Veyera



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For Anita, who has heard all these stories already—four times.

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PREFACE

Culture Is Everything

Does that sound like hyperbole? Perhaps it strikes the ear in such a manner as to make you wonder whether the author has gotten carried away with monographic myopia. How can culture be *all* that matters in business?

Sure, we've all heard that "culture eats strategy for breakfast." But doesn't that merely mean that certain kinds of strategy better match certain cultures than others? For example, we wouldn't expect stodgy old buttoned-down GE to successfully drive the same strategies that a hot Silicon Valley startup would, right? Old dogs don't learn new tricks very easily.

And yes, we certainly must admit that company culture is the topic of some discussion at present, in no small part because those tech sector disruptors like Amazon simply will not shut up about the cultures they've built and how important these are to their ongoing success. Culture is cool. But is it everything?

Surely there are many other factors which are more predictive of a company's long-term success than its culture. In *Good to Great* and its sequels, for example, Jim Collins emphasizes the importance of leadership. A top leader (Level 5 in his terminology) is often the difference maker in separating the truly special companies from the rest of the pack. Isn't superior leadership a significant driver of company performance?¹

Luck must count somewhere as well. Isn't that the real difference between MySpace and Facebook, when you think about it? Betamax was the technically superior technology to VHS; it failed due to poor luck. It doesn't matter how much fun your teammates are having if you get snake-bitten by events. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb persuasively argues, "black swan" events do occur, are quite difficult to predict in advance, and can be extremely disruptive.² Take the financial crisis in 2008 as but one example. Fortune favors the bold, but misfortune can strike anybody.

Let's face it—government picks winners and losers in the marketplace all the time. That's why there are so many lobbyists. The State doesn't give a fig about how well you do on employee engagement surveys. It cares about compliance with regulations, the avoidance of antitrust concerns, the company's ability to provide jobs, and the millions of dollars in tax revenue associated with the firm. If your company is a heavy hitter and that scrappy startup with the game-changing technology threatens it, the bureaucracy will build those barriers to entry higher and save your market share. You can build a better mousetrap, but it's government that decides whether the world can beat a path to your door—because it builds the roads. Shouldn't government favor, therefore, matter more than what company leadership tacks to the walls?

Besides, if culture truly were everything, all these companies with horrible cultures getting panned on Glassdoor.com would be consigned to the scrap heap. Those in the Quality and Lean trenches know that there are far more awful cultures out there than great ones, and yet we still somehow get the job done, right?

In the following pages, I will convince you that culture *is* everything and rebut these arguments definitively in the process. Moreover, I will demonstrate to you that efforts undertaken without regard to company culture are doomed to irrelevance if not outright failure; that it is folly to state (as we in the Lean community in particular are wont to do) that having a certain kind of culture is a prerequisite for our approach to continuous improvement to work, and then make no effort to determine whether that requirement has been met; and that in certain cases, you will have no choice but to either transform the company culture or relinquish the goal. Finally, I will provide you with a toolkit to help you navigate the battlefields of the corporate culture wars and thereby maximize your chances of survival. And don't worry: along the way I'll pepper the text with the war stories upon which a lifetime of reflection finally convinced me, every bit as skeptical as you, that culture is in fact everything in business success. As Mary Poppins sang, *A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.*

Let's begin.

What Is a Company Culture?

“It seems like those of us who run a business can’t go five minutes without encountering the term ‘company culture.’ The phrase is always uttered with extreme adoration, yet the very concept seems as nebulous as it is elusive.”

—LEAH BUSQUE³

Nebulous and Elusive

That sort of fuzzy terminology doesn’t bode well for a book about company culture, particularly for an audience that will likely be comprised largely of hard-nosed engineers and business leaders who have built their entire careers on precision and attention to detail.

Let’s lift some of this fog right from the jump: A company’s culture exists to help the company achieve its objectives. There is no other reason for it to exist. If you work for the English football club Manchester United, you are there for one reason and one reason only—to win the championship. Every aspect of the organization’s culture is defined through this one objective. Anything taking focus off this objective, no matter how otherwise desirable it might be, is necessarily countercultural and requires additional effort to happen. Were you to propose, for example, that the team hire a talentless-but-lovable teen idol as goalkeeper because it would boost interest in the club by teenage girls, you could expect considerable resistance due to cultural misalignment.

The first service I shall do the reader in this book is to dispel the miasma that suffuses the very concept of company culture by proposing a definition, which, within the covers of this work if nowhere else, will allow us to properly explore the topic in useful breadth and depth. To wit: Company culture is the manner by which an organization’s values are communicated, understood, and lived by its members.

Let's unpack that definition a bit. It's important.

"The manner"—A culture is a living thing; it involves motion and action. It is a way of doing something. When we speak of American culture or French culture or Ancient Egyptian culture, we may think immediately of cultural artifacts (movies or paintings or pyramids), but those artifacts were created in order to do something of value to the creator or his or her patron. Similarly, a company culture does not exist because people need something to do to kill time, but rather because the company needs to do something in order to achieve its goals.

"Organization's values"—Why values? Why not goals, or strategy, or metrics, or hiring practices, and so on? Because culture is upstream of goals, strategy, metrics, and hiring practices. For example, if your company highly prizes integrity and ethical behavior, it will not pursue opportunities or means of achieving them that conflict with these values. Culture takes some potential actions off the table as values filter the universe of possible behaviors and actions down to those which are acceptable for the culture being built. When football fans speak of "The Patriot Way," they often invoke the cultural value of personal accountability (in the form of "do your job"). This is such a dearly held value that in the barrage of postgame interviews you will not hear New England's players or coaches making excuses, blaming others, or even saying, "That's not my job." To do so would be to betray the organization in a fundamental manner and guarantee a one-way ticket out of Gillette Stadium. The offender would be exposed as not sharing the team's values, a crime which cannot be tolerated in any winning outfit.

"Communicated, understood, and lived"—As we'll soon demonstrate, what we call a company's culture can be quite different depending on whether we are referring to what has been said, what has been comprehended, or what has been done. Few companies lack some provision in their list of values for ethical considerations, and yet examples are legion of high-ranking employees failing to understand how to behave in a manner that will not land the company in court. Even where the values are backed up by policy and procedural guidance, actual practice can be quite different. To define a company's culture, then, it stands to reason that all three areas need to be examined. In the end, it is how the culture is lived which will determine how successful goals, strategy, and the rest will be, springing as they do from the cultural values.

"By its members"—Note that this includes all of the organization's members, not just the executive leadership team or the customer-facing teammates. Culture

is carried like genetic code by each and every person within the company. If we claim to have a customer-focused culture but our call center personnel are foul tempered and rude, the customer will see a very different set of norms as typical of our organization, and our brilliant marketing strategy to brand ourselves as The Customer Care Colossus will fail miserably. It extends beyond customer-facing employees too—we may pride ourselves on integrity yet look the other way when Ted from IT uses the company cloud drive to store his photos from his Sumatran vacation last summer. At least one company I know of prided itself on its commitment to its employees yet reserved a bunch of parking places by name for its company officers, very few of whom even lived in the same state where the headquarters were located. As George Orwell famously put it in *Animal Farm*, “All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others.”⁴

This definition of company culture is illustrated by the following diagram.

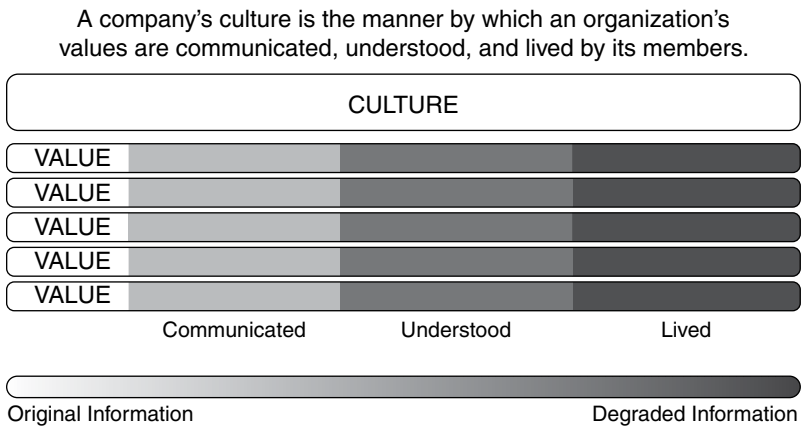


FIGURE 1. Company culture definition

There can be a wide discrepancy between desired values and practiced values due to the miscommunication, misunderstanding, or misapplication of these values. This has the effect of attenuating the information being conveyed from the leadership of the company and compromising the company’s ability to attain its objectives.

An analogy underscores this point.⁵ Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of the French, revolutionized warfare in his day by the ease with which he split his forces and swiftly marched them, often appearing on the battlefield before his

coalition opponents could join their forces and defeating their forces in turn. Key to this remarkable military capability was Bonaparte's standing order to his generals: "March to the sound of the guns." In an age when issuing orders to one's subordinate commanders meant writing them out on paper and sending them via messenger on horseback, the timeliness of the order was always suspect. Situations often greatly changed on the battlefield during the time it took to transmit the order. "March to the sound of the guns" allowed commanders who were following outdated instructions to recover and have an impact on the battlefield, perhaps providing the margin of victory.

At Waterloo, a newly minted marshal named Emmanuel de Grouchy was ordered to pursue the Prussian Army and prevent its combination with its British allies. Grouchy couldn't catch up with the fleeing Prussians by the time the battle of Waterloo began. When he heard the guns firing, he didn't do what was required of a marshal of France under that Napoleonic military culture. He kept to his original orders, eventually defeating a single Prussian corps at the battle of Wavre, but by this time Napoleon had already been vanquished by the combined might of the British and Prussians at Waterloo. The failure of one man to live out the culture as communicated and understood in this instance changed the course of history and the fate of nations. Imagine what such a failure can do to your company!

We change agents continually swim with or against company cultures. In some companies, on some teams, at times, our work is relatively easy and extremely fun. If we're training others, we achieve engagement almost effortlessly due to their natural interest in what we're trying to teach them to do. If we're working on a project, our colleagues shoulder their burdens cheerfully, and we progress steadily from ideation through implementation. If we're coaching others, we can see them grow and blossom as they apply our advice to seize the opportunities spotted. We have the Midas touch; every project we touch turns to gold. Occasionally we speak at industry conferences, not simply to share our wisdom and perhaps teach others how to enjoy some small modicum of the success we have had, but also to spend breaks and happy hours basking in the endless chorus of "I wish my job were half as fulfilling as yours!" and "How did you ever find this opportunity?"⁶ As drinks pile up, there will even be a "Wish I had your luck" or three, but who cares when you're having the time of your professional life? "Shake it off," as the great quality philosopher Taylor Swift once said.⁷

At other companies, on other teams, at other times, sympathetic colleagues approach us and place their hands on our shoulders saying, “Man, I wouldn’t want your job.”⁸ We’re swimming against the cultural tide, trying first and foremost to get people to see something—anything!—that is transparently obvious to us. Eyes roll. Teammates think or even say, “There they go again.” E-mails go unread, meetings unattended, timelines extended asymptotically toward infinity. Time and again we leap at The Opportunity—arrived at last!—only to find another mirage. We start going to ASQ (American Society for Quality) meetings simply so we can confirm that it is not us who are crazy, but the cultures with which we contend. We start thinking about easier and more edifying jobs, like mucking out stables or sparring with mixed martial arts championship contenders.

The difference between gigs we’ll tell our grandchildren about and those we’ll tell our therapists about is down to culture. Culture is everything.

What makes for the kind of company culture that drives process engineers to dance through the hallways like Julie Andrews singing her way across Alpine meadows?⁹ We’ll address that mystery in the next chapter.

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