

How to Improve Company Culture and Increase Capacity for Change

By Andrew Bartley, MDiv, MBA and Corinne Walsh, MA, LLM
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In a dynamic business environment where goal posts keep moving, what will it take to have strong, agile teams in place to perform at the next level? Wish lists for the latest gadget come and go while a crucial element remains; teams need a field they can count on to play their game. That's what a positive, healthy organizational culture at work provides: a sure foundation for leaders to implement strategy in pursuit of vision.

HOW DO YOU AND YOUR EMPLOYEES DESCRIBE THE CULTURE AT WORK?

For good or ill, each of us has personal experience of what it's like to being at work each day. How would our perception change if we could 'go high in the stadium,' and understand our company's cultural reality from the perspective of each employee, and the family and friends they go home to?

In the Platinum Leadership Business Alignment Model, we define culture as, 'the dominant values, thinking, attitudes and behaviour in an organization.' It is the mutual story of a group of people who share experiences over time. It is explicitly expressed and intuitively understood by members of an organization. It includes guiding principles and behavioural norms that form the operating system of 'how we do things around here.' Culture is 'who and how we are,' rather than, 'how we aspire or are told to be.'



Platinum Leadership
Business Alignment Model

IS YOUR CULTURE AN ASSET OR LIABILITY IN ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS?

From a systems perspective, your company is a single body; a group of groups, a 'community' united in a dynamic, living entity. The collective stories your people tell about themselves are incredibly important, reinforcing in vicious and virtuous cycles behaviours that prove these narratives true.

Stories are typically expressed in language held together with a logical consistency that serves their current momentum. Peter Drucker warned, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic." His caution is often recalled during strategic thinking, for which he also famously wrote, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." In times of change, a leader needs to know what stories are 'stuck on repeat' in the minds of his or her people, the impact they are having, and how to leverage resources to support people creating better scripts together.

HOW CAN WORKING ON CULTURE HELP US IMPLEMENT AND COPE WITH CHANGE?

Improving culture on an organizational level is akin to motivation in a single individual: it's an inside job. Stephen R. Covey wrote, "Motivation is a fire from within. If someone else tries to light that fire under you, chances are it will burn very briefly." Only the members of a system can actually change the stories they tell of themselves. A leader's role is to increase the likelihood this will occur.

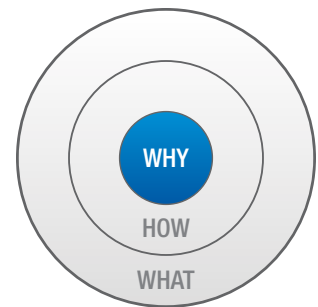
The Center for Right Relationship teaches, "By helping a system see itself — its strengths, its obstacles, its potential — a leader can create the groundwork for a system to find its own answers." Often, it's helpful for a senior leadership team to engage coaches to cultivate this self-awareness and capacity for change across an organization.

When awareness increases in a system, freedom to choose specific goals intensifies. Victor Frankl wrote, "Life can be pulled by goals just as surely as it can be pushed by drives." A group of people doing their work becomes increasingly response-able, as they begin to overcome what Kegan and Lahey describe as their 'natural and powerful immunity to change.'

WHAT WILL IT COST IF WE DON'T IMPROVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

When 'the way you do things' isn't at the world-class level your vision and goals require, it's time for cultural change. If your vision is murky and your goals insufficiently inspiring, ask yourself, "Why are we in business? What is the core mission of our organization? What is the impact we intend to have?"

Movement toward your 'Why' is in jeopardy when culture is a poor fit with leadership, strategy and vision. Companies are what we make of them, and disillusioned staff working in toxic environments rife with lost opportunity and unfulfilled potential are all too common. The costs are ridiculously high. Life is too short not to make your company's culture an amazing story to be part of. Once their basic needs are met, most people want to be part of something bigger than themselves, and the folks you most want to retain will be first out the door if they feel unfulfilled for too long.



Simon Sinek,
Start with Why, 2009

WHAT CAN WE ACTUALLY DO?

Talking about a shift in culture won't bring about cultural change. It takes concrete action to create new momentum, traditions and story. Assuming managers are 'getting the right people into the right seats on the bus,' we've found it helpful to facilitate memorable experiences through adventure initiatives, active learning and team building. These playful, growth-zone encounters with the magnificence of others serve as pattern-interrupts. They're a wise investment when a firm's collective mindset isn't equal to the boldness of its goals.

Practical introduction of timely and specific material into a company's consciousness can add great value. Given common experience and language, a critical mass of employees can motivate themselves to do things differently. How the material is introduced and experienced is at least as important as its content. Four highly effective approaches we've seen work in a variety of settings follow.

I. Develop your vision and support champions for change

Shifting 'the way we do things around here' takes intentionality; it doesn't just happen. It requires:

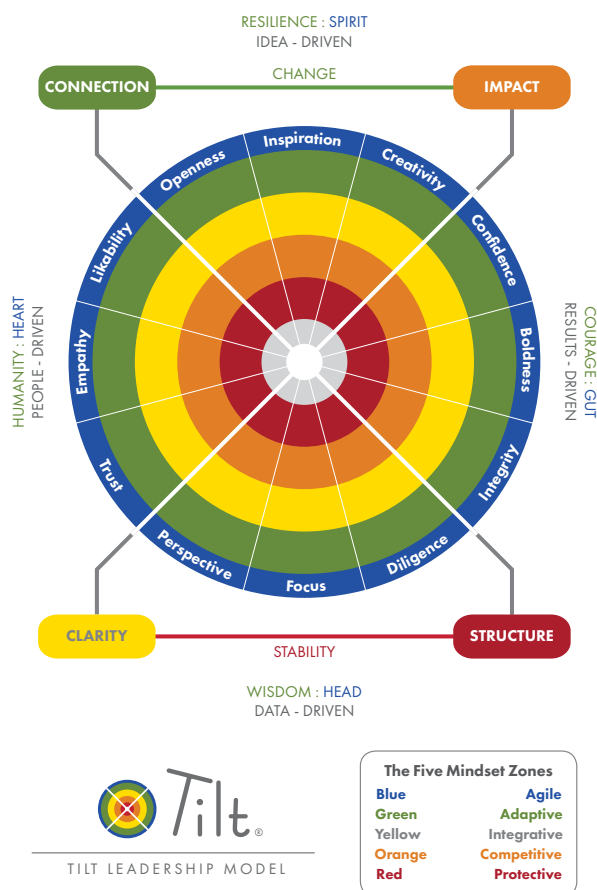
- A vision of the company's why, and what people's experience of the company will be along the journey.
- An identified path and actions for how you will get there, and,
- Champions and influencers who set new direction and tone, implementing strategies to make change possible.

2. Initiate individual, team and system coaching

Coaching can be a powerful, collaborative process of insight, commitment and action for individuals, teams and entire organizations. It accelerates positive change, encourages discretionary effort and maximizes potential to achieve goals. Through the experience of coaching, leaders can gain clarity and awareness, take effective action, develop stronger decision-making, increase productivity, and grow in confidence, creativity and resourcefulness. Positive impacts for entire systems include deepened trust, improved communication, reduced destructive conflict, stronger working relationships, and exceptional performance.

3. Foster positive influence with the True Tilt Professional Profile

In her landmark research into personality and team dynamics, Pam Boney wrote, "Character growth spreads like magic. When people can trust the team culture to provide consistently positive interaction, more energy is freed up for productivity, creativity and innovation." Employees experience more joy in a culture where they're encouraged to show up as a better version of themselves. When we've introduced TILT into organizations, drama decreases and healthy connections between individuals and teams flourish.

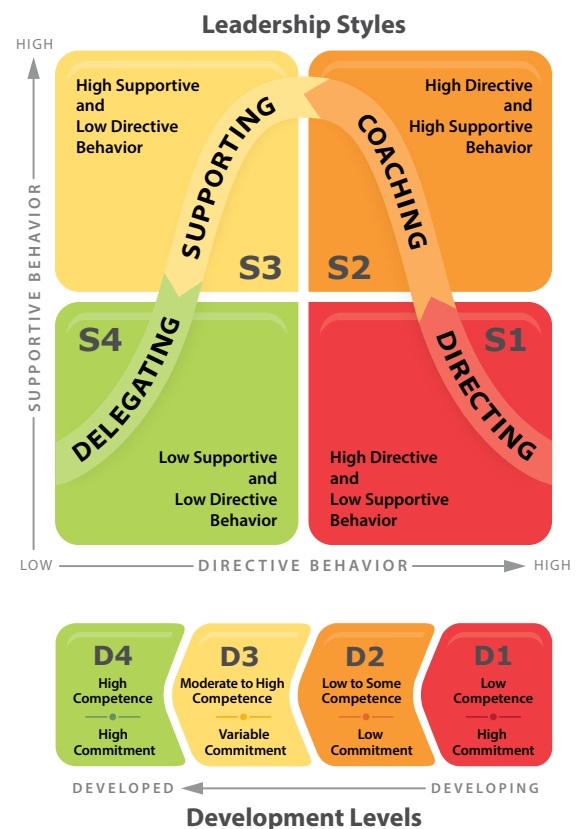


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4. Enhance capacity through Situational Leadership II

Ken Blanchard hones in on the impact of increasing the quantity and quality of leadership conversations throughout an organization. When employees learn, use and request a common language for support and direction, development and problem solving accelerates and people thrive in their roles. When viewed through a cultural lens, the introduction of Situational Leadership II is a systemic intervention that models 'leadership is something you do with, not to people.'

Situational Leadership® II Model



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CONCLUSION

Culture is the ground your leaders stand on. It's their playing field in your company's chosen arena. When employees are part of actively tending a life-giving environment that supports their best version of themselves and their colleagues, intrinsic motivation and discretionary effort follow. Cultural transformation and 'being the change you want to see in your company' accelerates performance, boosts profits, and delivers lasting impact. Your workplace will be marked by greater trust and deeper fulfillment, and life in your company will be a lot more fun.



Visit **Platinum Leadership's YouTube channel** to see the accompanying video and to watch examples of companies improving their culture and increasing their capacity for change.



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Worksheet

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Culture: The dominant values, thinking, attitudes and behaviour in an organization;
the 'way we do things around here.'

As you consider opportunities to improve your company's culture and increase its capacity for change, reflect and discuss with your leaders and change makers.



Platinum Leadership
Business Alignment
Model

1) HOW DO WE (AND OUR EMPLOYEES) DESCRIBE OUR WORK CULTURE?

2) HOW IS OUR CULTURE AN ASSET AND/OR LIABILITY IN ACHIEVING OUR GOALS?

3) HOW CAN WORKING ON CULTURE HELP US IMPLEMENT AND COPE WITH CHANGE?

4) WHAT WILL IT COST IF WE DON'T IMPROVE OUR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

5) WHAT COULD WE DO?



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