How to Create a Great Team Culture (and Why It Matters)

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**BUILD SAFETY,
SHARE
VULNERABILITY,
ESTABLISH
PURPOSE.**

In my career leading teams, I have worked with large organizations (more than 1,000 people) and super-small teams (a startup with just two people). I have seen that the best teams have one thing in common: a strong team culture.

We all know what it is like to be a part of a great team—when you enjoy coming together and the energy is electric. There is something special that happens when the team becomes greater than the sum of the individuals.

I was really inspired by this topic recently when I read Daniel Coyle's book *The Culture Code*.¹ The author shares a lot of research (and I do love data) about what makes a great team. He boils it down to a few key elements:

- **Build safety.** Create an environment where people feel safe and secure.
- **Share vulnerability.** When people are willing to take risks, it can drive cooperation and build trust.
- **Establish purpose.**

The team should align around common goals and values, with a clear path forward.

The book is filled with many examples and ideas,

but in my experience, I have seen that what works for one team won't work for another. That is one of the reasons leadership is complex and difficult.

You are always working with different variables—different teams, different companies, different goals. And yet team culture is one part of the job that great leaders never ignore. So, how do the best leaders create team culture wherever they go?

SEE THE ROLE YOU PLAY IN TEAM CULTURE

As a leader, it is your responsibility to set the culture for the team. I am sure you have heard the phrase “lead by example,” and that is because when people aren't sure what is acceptable, they look to their leaders for guidance.

You have surely been in the situation where you have seen your manager staying late at the office, and as a result, you might have stayed just a little longer. On the other hand, if you frequently saw your boss taking two-hour lunches, you might not be in such a hurry to get back to the office when your friend stops by to go to lunch.

Every day, people are looking for signals in their environment about what is the norm. As a leader, it is part of your job to set the example for those around you.

You want to create a culture where people are engaged, cooperative, and excited. To do this, you need to be deliberate in your actions. For example, if you want to create a culture of psychological safety, where people can speak up and take risks, it is important that you don't accept or participate in negativity. Research has shown

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that one bad apple or toxic employee can bring down the whole team.² As a result, if you see or hear someone acting in opposition to the attitude and environment you are trying to create, you should do your best to diffuse the situation and address the individual quickly.

If you ignore your team culture or think it's not an important part of your job, some type of culture will still develop. That is just what happens when humans work together and share a space. The leader's job is to cultivate the type of culture that will lead to success.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

I was once on a leadership team that had a very negative dynamic—the manager had a tendency to play favorites, so many of my peers were always trying to win favor by badmouthing or undermining the others.

I remember being very frustrated that this was allowed to happen and decided that whenever someone came to me to complain about another team member, instead of sharing that feedback, I would coach the complainer to tell the other person directly. If the complaint was about how a peer was managing a project, I would talk about how that person could improve and come up with a plan for the complainer to help that other person succeed.

At that time, I was reacting to the problems I saw, but in retrospect, I realized that my actions ended up creating a cohesive team—one where people were encouraged to help one another, and if they disagreed, would always try

to sort it out themselves.

A leader should help create mutual vulnerability among team members. This can be done in a few ways:

- ➔ **Force collaboration.** Have team members work together to solve a problem or complete a project.
- ➔ **Encourage people to talk to one another directly.** Foster an environment of peer coaching and resist being a proxy for critical feedback.
- ➔ **Reward and recognize collaboration.** Drive for shared outcomes that celebrate team successes.
- ➔ **Build trust.** Create opportunities (e.g. summits or meetings) for people to build trust with one another and get to know each other as people—not just as coworkers.

There are many more strategies, but the key is to create opportunities where people can connect. Help build trust among team members by allowing them to resolve their own conflicts without you being the mediator. Over time, this will create a group of people who can trust one another, which, in turn, will create a cohesive team culture.

DEFINE YOUR CULTURE BY KNOWING ITS VALUE

Defining a team culture is not an easy job. Once a culture has been established, it is easy to see its signposts. But when you are new to a team or working to develop a positive team culture, it can be challenging to know exactly what it takes to build a culture.

Before you start picking rituals and values that you think “sound” good, start by going back to the very beginning. Ask

yourself, *What is the value of this team?* Really think about it. *Why does this team exist?* Think beyond the function that the team serves for the organization as a whole (e.g., coding or design). *Why are we a team?* The answer to this question is not always clear.

Other questions to consider: What are the advantages of being a team? What can we do because we are working together? Maybe it is so team members can learn from each other and do better work; there is more learning when there is collaboration. Maybe it is decision making; we make smarter decisions when we have multiple viewpoints. Maybe it is about resources; we can do more with combined skills and time.

HOW TO CREATE CULTURAL TOUCHPOINTS AROUND YOUR VALUES

Once you know the value of your team, then you can start building in elements that support its values.

Let's say you decide that one of the values of your team is peer mentoring; in other words, one of the reasons your team exists is so that its members can do better work by learning from one another. Now, how do you make that happen on your team?

You cannot just say "We learn from each other" during a meeting and make it happen. You have to institute processes that make this a simple part of daily life on your team. Think about which kinds of forums you can set up to help people learn from one another. Do you want to encourage questions in team chat? Set up a code-review

The way
you do
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every day
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builds your
culture.

process? Establish a cadence of brown bags to share lessons learned? Read white papers and discuss them as a group? What makes sense for your team?

Now let's say that another value of your team is decision-making; your team exists because everyone's input helps to make smarter decisions about what to work on and how to work on it. We all know that the more people are involved in a decision, the more complicated it becomes to get a clear answer. So, how do you benefit from getting everyone's input without becoming a team that can get nothing done because no one can agree?

The solution might be to have all decision-making done in the same way. For example, you might institute a format for all reports. That way, the input from various individuals or departments will all come to you in the exact same way, so you can quickly parse the information and make a decision.

TEAM STRUCTURE BECOMES TEAM CULTURE

Team culture is not just wearing the same t-shirts at the company picnic. The way you do things every day is what builds your culture.

So, while streamlining the way your team formats their reports might not feel like it has much to do with team culture, it does. It is a way of steering your team to work together, by prioritizing the values that your team supports.

Culture is in the everyday. It is the small actions that you and everyone on your team takes on a daily basis—the way they speak to each other, the way decisions get made, the way they run meetings—that make up your team culture.

I have seen many amazing examples of culture-building throughout my career. Here are just a few more ideas that might inspire you as you build your team culture:

- ➔ *Weekly demo meetings.* Have someone from the team share a recent accomplishment. This could be a big thing, or even something as small as changing a button color on the website. This creates a culture of sharing work so that people feel more collaborative even outside the meeting setting, since they know what other people are working on.
- ➔ *Teaching slots for every team member.* At every team meeting, have people sign up to share something they've learned recently or teach something to the team. This is a great way for people who have been to conferences or read interesting books to share that knowledge, and it helps give everyone on the team a voice (even those who don't normally speak up during meetings).
- ➔ *Cupcakes for launches.* Mark every team win by bringing people together—literally together, around a plate of cupcakes, instead of just via email. This creates a culture of celebration, where people's successes are noticed and rewarded, and where the whole team celebrates together.

Some of the decisions you make will feel big and some will feel small. But whether it's as huge as developing an online help tool for your team or as small as sharing cupcakes after a big win, the effect is the same. Culture comes from shared experiences. The *what* doesn't matter nearly as much as the *why*.

How can you make people feel like they are valued and important parts of the team?

LET THE CULTURE EXPAND FROM THE TOP DOWN

As leader of the team, you have significant influence over your team's culture. You can institute policies and procedures that help make your team happy and productive, monitor team successes, and continually

improve the team.

Another important part of team culture, however, is helping people feel they are a part of creating it. How can you expand the job of creating a culture to other team members?

Look for opportunities to delegate whenever you can. If a holiday is coming up, maybe you could ask a team member to help organize a team dinner. Look for people with unique perspectives (who maybe aren't heard from as often as others) and give them a platform to share.

This is where truly great leadership comes from. You establish a culture that

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enables your team to be the best it can be, and then you allow the team to take that culture and run with it.

How amazing could your team be with just a few adjustments?

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