

# The Power of An Aligned Culture

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

**T**he future success of your organization hinges on your capacity to build a strong, aligned culture. Viewed all-too often in the past as an “HR project,” culture must now be your leadership team’s top priority.

Culture is how you behave together. It reflects your organizational beliefs, and gets to the very core of how you work together. Culture is what people talk about when the boss leaves the room. It is not abstract. You can’t couch it in a mission statement, or read it on the corporate website. Culture exists of its own volition. It’s a living thing. It attracts, repels, and is in constant flux and motion. It cannot *not* be there. Don’t cultivate it, and you have culture by default. Cultivate it, and you have *culture by design*.

As we continue to move towards a healthier economic climate, organizations will improve at developing their own talent as well as recruiting top talent from the outside. Competition for the best employees will become increasingly more aggressive. Stimulating work environments, high-quality colleagues, and attractive compensation will no longer be enough. The talent pool is not only shrinking, those within it are educated, connected, and grounded in the idea of personal choice. They will avoid culture by default, and seek out culture by design.

## David’s key messages about culture:

1. **Create your culture by design.** You can either create a culture around you by default or design. Don’t leave it to chance. Whatever you focus on will grow. You are going to have a culture anyway; why not have a great one? By deciding to be the steward of your culture, you start a ripple effect beyond your immediate sphere of influence, regardless of your position.

2. **Your actions define your culture more than your value statements do.** When it comes to culture, actions speak louder than words. Culture is not what you say; it’s how you *behave*. Culture is expressed by who you hire, who you promote, and what gets rewarded. The goal is to get your actions and your value statements aligned. See every decision you make and action you take as a test of your values.

3. **Make your value statements real by getting them off the wall and into the hearts of every employee.** Create conversations about the meaning of your values; turn conversations into action; turn actions into promises; and hold yourself and others accountable for keeping the promises. Then keep the values alive through story telling, acknowledgment, continual recognition, and repeated messaging. What you focus on grows.

4. **Trust is the currency of all great cultures.** Without trust, nothing is possible. Make building trust your #1 priority by spending half of your time out of your office building it. Most of your influence will happen when you get out of your office and have uninterrupted time with your key stakeholders, those you serve.

5. **There are two fundamental elements of an engaged culture of trust: *accountability* and *authenticity*.** Accountability is about creating a place where people can be counted on, where all blame is viewed as a waste of time, and where execution of results is the norm. Authenticity is about creating a place where people don’t have to leave who they are at the door. You can be who you are. Organizational values are aligned with personal values. Each are the wings that give the culture lift.

6. **The real power in an organization is not at the top. It’s at the roots – the operations.** As positional leaders, you set the tone. You create the environment. You establish the culture. If you are serious about designing a great culture, getting the front-line leaders engaged is critical.

7. **Don’t mistake *climate* for *culture*.** Climate is how people feel about the organization and their work (employee satisfaction, engagement, etc.). Culture is what *causes* them to feel that way. While employee engagement surveys might give you an indication of the culture’s climate, you have to get into the cafeteria and the hallways to find out what’s really going on. Don’t be afraid to find mistakes and listen to the complaints. They can be your best teachers.

8. **Culture trumps strategy.** It’s culture that will sustain you long after your strategic plan has been through the shredder. While strategy and goals give you *direction*, it’s culture that gives you the energy and power to get there. Strategies will come and go, but culture, if designed effectively and focused on continually, will ultimately keep you going.

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