



Culture Shapers: How Leaders Define the Way Organizations Think, Speak and Act

Jennifer Owen-O'Quill

Leaders both shape and define culture.

Leaders *define* culture by what they do, and *shape* culture by what they allow.

Therefore, every leader need to pay attention to in two distinct directions when setting and shaping culture:

1. What are you saying and doing personally? What words do you use? What actions do you take? What is absent from your words and actions? Where are you silent? All of these are defining your culture.
2. What are you allow those in your organization to say and do? What behaviors do you tolerate? Which behaviors do you reward? The answers to these questions are shaping your culture.

The intersection of leading by example and maintaining strong accountability is what gives rise to and maintains strong culture.

Have you been a part of an organization with a great culture?

If not, I am sure you know someone who has, because when we are a part of a great culture, we tend to talk about it. The positive energy, creativity, and commitment generated within strong, successful cultures is contagious. There is a North Star inside the organization: a collective focus, a common pace, and a set of shared values that drive how people perform their work.

Have you been in an organization where the leader is striving to set a new culture, but some (or all!) of the people inside the organization are resisting that new culture?

This can be a terrible tale or a success story. A good leader can become frustrated and fail in the face of a powerful culture that wants to retain its norms. Leaders can miscalculate when attempting to set or re-set culture, and lose the support of key stakeholders. And leaders can listen well, persevere through the tumult of change to navigate a team successfully through to a new, vibrant shared culture.

Sometimes cultures have trouble arising at all. I find that frequently this is because of either an absence of passion or the presence of fear, which leads to my final question:



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Have you been in organizations where the leader is shaping a culture of fear?

What happens, typically, is this: the leader's positional power trumps the efforts of the rest of the organizational leaders to build a collaborative culture. Until sufficient *collective* courage is mustered to address the fear tactics with the leader, the leader's culture of fear will prevail. Only when there is collective courage to name and attempt to co-create a new culture with the leader will the culture of fear dissipate. Most organizations tend not to be able to gather the collective energy to bring this type of request to the leader, so fear, and its limits on creativity and innovation, prevail during their tenure.

5 Behaviors of the Best Culture Shapers

I find leaders who excel in shaping culture share some common skills.

1. They listen. They are aware of the current reality of the organization, and then think about how to respond effectively to that reality.
2. They know and show who they are. Their value system shows up in how they speak, act and organize their work and the organization's work. They infuse their work with that value system. It is who they are.
3. They shape and communicate the values and culture of the organization. They demonstrate and co-create the culture by striving to equip every level of the organization to live the culture.
4. These leaders help people learn how to be culture shapers, and hold others (and themselves) accountable for what they say and how they act.
5. They course correct daily and publicly. They expect themselves and others to miss the mark, and have a process by which they renew their commitment to the shared organizational culture. They are willing to share their own learning and growth as they wrestle to bring their best selves to the table.

Culture hums when the leader and the organizations culture match.

- Are you aware of the culture you are setting with your words and actions?
- If you asked your direct reports what your organization's culture is, could they tell you, and show you evidence of that culture in both your behavior and theirs?

Leaders, we *define* culture by what we do, and we *shape* culture by what we allow.



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Be curious about the impact of your words and actions today. Notice what kind of affect you are having on the organization and team you lead. And at the end of the day, do you like what you find?