

So, great leaders don't just get things accomplished. Great leaders create environments where the right things become normal. And that can be summed up in one simple but profound word: culture.

See, culture is one of those words that can be hard to define but is really easy to feel. You can walk into a restaurant, a school, a locker room, a hospital, a business, a team meeting, and within a few minutes, you can feel the culture. You can feel whether people are encouraged and engaged, or quietly trying to not get in trouble.

And we've all felt bad culture. Like you walk into a restaurant and the employees are arguing, one person's just aggressively wiping the same table for 17 minutes, and the manager's nowhere to be found. Nobody has to say, "Welcome to our culture of chaos." You just feel it. And on the other hand, walk into a place like Chick-fil-A, and you know there is culture. There is a consistency, language, hospitality, and a way that things are done. That's the power of culture.

See, culture is invisible, but it's not imaginary. So, let's define it. Culture is the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that become normal in an environment. It's what people believe, what people value, and how people behave. And over time, those things become what is normal. You see, culture is not what you say is important. Culture is what actually becomes normal.

A company can say, "We value excellence." But if everyone cuts corners and says, "That's good enough," then excellence is not the culture. "That'll do." is the culture. A team can say, "We value honesty." But if everyone avoids hard, hard conversations and gossips after the meeting, honesty is not the culture. Avoidance is the culture. A family can say, "We value connection." But if everyone's on their phone at dinner, connection is not the culture. Screens are the culture. That's not a family dinner. That's just a very quiet Verizon commercial.

I mean, culture is not what we put on the wall. Culture is what people experience in the room. So, here's a question every leader has to ask. What has become normal in the environment I lead? Not do I what, not what do I wish was normal. Not what do I say is normal. What is actually normal? Is encouragement normal? Is ownership normal? Is preparation normal? Is joy normal? Is we'll we'll circle back normal, even though everyone knows we're absolutely never circling back?

Or, here's another way to say it. Culture is what happens when the leader is not in the room. When the leader is present, people often perform the culture. When the leader is absent, people reveal the culture. And here's where leadership gets personal. See, leaders create culture whether they mean to or not. The beliefs, the values, and behaviors of the leader will reproduce in the environment. Not perfectly. And not immediately. But consistently.

If the leader is anxious, anxiety spreads. And if the leader is passive, passivity spreads. If the leader is cynical, cynicism spreads. If the leader is prepared, preparation spreads. If the leader is life-giving, life starts showing up in the room. So, ask yourself, what part of my leadership is being reproduced right now? Is my team carrying my clarity or my confusion? My peace or my anxiety? My encouragement or my criticism? See, a leader is not just a manager of products, uh, uh, of projects. A leader is a carrier of culture.

And one of the clearest examples of culture in the marketplace is the Mayo Clinic. You see, their primary value is simple. The needs of the patient come first. But what makes that powerful is not that it sounds nice. A lot of organizations have a nice-sounding value. What makes it powerful is that Mayo has built ways of working that that proves it. Their culture is shaped around integrated care where specialists from different areas work together around the patient instead of staying in isolated silos. Like, they don't just say patients matter; they organize teams around the patient. They make decisions around the patient. They train people around the patient. They build systems around the patient. That is culture.

An aspirational value says, "This is what we hope is true." An actual culture says, "This is what people experience here every day." And that leads to a really important question. Where does our stated culture show up in actual behavior? Because if we say we value people, where do people feel that? If we say we value excellence, where would someone see that? If we say we value empowerment, where are people actually trusted to lead? You see, the test of culture is not, "Can we say it well?" The test of culture is, "Can people experience it clearly?"

And so, how do leaders create culture? There's four handles. Name it, model it, celebrate it, and protect it. That's the four handles. First, you name it. You cannot create culture that you cannot describe. If you want a life-giving culture, define what life-giving means. If you want an excellent culture, define excellence in real behaviors. Because vague culture creates vague behavior. And a lot of leaders are frustrated with people for not living out standards that were never clearly named.

We say, "I just want them to care more." Okay, but what does care look like? Does care mean responding within 24 hours? Noticing the new person? Bringing solutions, not just problems? Does care mean being fully present instead of bringing your laptop, your phone, your coffee, your emotional support water bottle, and your ability to be distracted by literally anything? You got to name it.

Culture gets traction when it gets language. We bring energy into the room. We assume the best and clarify the rest. We don't walk past things that matter. We celebrate what we want to replicate. Words create culture, and language gives people handles, and when people have the handles, they can carry the culture.

Now, the second thing you do is you model it. You see, culture is way more caught than it is taught. People may listen to what leaders say, but they reproduce what leaders do. So, if I say we are a culture of encouragement, but I mostly criticize, the team will learn criticism. If I say, "We value health," but I never rest, and I answer emails at 2:13 in the morning like Batman with a Gmail account, the team's going to learn exhaustion. But if I say, "We empower people," and I micromanage every decision, the team's just going to learn dependency. The leader always goes first, because the leader sets the tone. The leader is the thermostat, not the thermometer. A thermometer reflects the temperature; a thermostat sets it.

Now, the third thing you got to do is celebrate it. This is one of the most practical ways leaders create culture because you replicate what you celebrate. Whatever gets celebrated gets repeated. So if you celebrate hustle, but you never celebrate health, don't be surprised when everyone is exhausted. If you celebrate talent, but never celebrate character, don't be surprised when gifted people act immature. And if you celebrate results, but never celebrate teamwork, don't be surprised when people compete instead of collaborate.

You see, celebration tells people, "That right there, do more of that." Encouragement is not just being nice, and gratitude is not just good manners. Celebration is culture formation. When a leader says, "I saw the way you handled that conversation with humility," they're creating culture. When a leader says, "The way you served when no one was watching, that's who we are," they are creating culture. So, don't just celebrate outcomes; celebrate behaviors, celebrate values, celebrate the unseen things that create the visible results. And so, ask yourself, "What did I celebrate this week that I want repeated?"

And now, the fourth thing to do is protect it. You see, culture is not only created by what you celebrate, culture's also created by what you tolerate. You replicate what you celebrate, but you create what you tolerate. You see, if someone consistently brings negativity into a room and the leader never addresses it, negativity becomes part of the culture. And if someone treats people poorly but gets away with it because they're really talented, the culture learns that talent matters more than character. If someone is always late, unprepared, divisive, or cynical and it never gets addressed, the culture learns that the standard is not really the standard. It's just a suggestion. And suggestions do not create culture. Standards create culture.

So, protecting culture does not mean being harsh. It means loving the mission and the people enough to address what's unhealthy. It means having the conversation, clarifying the standard, coaching people back to who we are becoming. It means saying, "That's not who we are." Not with shame, but with clarity. Because healthy culture requires loving clarity. Nice avoids discomfort. Life-giving tells the truth for the good of the person and the health of the culture.

So, ask yourself, "What am I tolerating that is shaping the culture in the wrong direction? What does my silence accidentally communicate approval of?" Cuz if we celebrate encouragement

but we tolerate gossip, gossip wins. And if we celebrate ownership but tolerate blame-shifting, blame wins. And if we celebrate excellence but tolerate sloppiness, sloppiness wins. See, culture is always listening. It listens to what we say. It listens to what we model. It listens to what we celebrate. And it really listens to what we tolerate.

So, here's the invitation. Don't just ask, "What are we trying to accomplish?" Ask, "Who are we becoming while we accomplish it?" Because the culture you create becomes the people you form. And if you create a culture of fear, you form guarded people. And if you create a culture of hurry, you form anxious people. And if you create a culture of criticism, you form insecure people. But if you create a culture of clarity, you form confident people. And if you create a culture of encouragement, you form courageous people. And if you create a culture of ownership, you form leaders.

So this week, don't try to fix everything. Just ask, "What do people consistently see, hear, feel, and experience in the environment I lead?" And then just pick one handle. Either name it, model it, celebrate it, or protect it. You see, culture's being created every day, in every meeting, in every conversation, every response, every celebration, every correction.

So let's not create culture accidentally. Let's create it with intentionality. Because great leaders don't just get work done. Great leaders create environments where the right things become normal. Great leaders create culture. And the culture you create today will shape who people become tomorrow.