

Practical Tips To Shaping Your Optimal Culture

Cultivate a Peak Performing Organization

In years past, to grow and capture market share, the big ate the small. In today's 'commoditization economy,' where customers and clients have more choices than ever before, the game has changed significantly. We are in a brawl with few rules, where the fast, flexible, resilient and agile will eat and then spit out the slow, over-thinking and complacent. Cultivating a peak performing culture where employees at all levels are unconditionally engaged, impeccably aligned, relentlessly committed, laser focused, abundantly creative, generously collaborative and possess implacable ownership and accountability to achieve what matters most is paramount.

Your organization's culture - simply put - is the way that your employees think, the beliefs they hold and the way they act and go about their work. That **culture is producing your organization's every result (financial, operational, customer, employee, etc.)**. An organization's (or team's) **culture is either an engine propelling it toward its desired results, or an anchor impeding and hindering its progress**. You can define, lead and shape your optimal culture.

If your future desired results are loftier, more difficult, or just different than those you are achieving today, will your current culture be able to deliver? Most often, the results teams and organizations must achieve in the future will require employees to think and act differently. Creating **those 'shifts' in how employees think and act is what will propel your team or organization** toward those desired results.

Through intentional focus on a few proven principles, you can ignite extraordinary results within your team or organization. Decades of research have pinpointed principles and practices that accelerate desired shifts in culture. These principles are not complicated—they don't require an advanced degree or any specialized training. These straightforward, practical and memorable tips can transform your culture to support and deliver your 'must-achieve desired results.' The results that will ensure you survive and thrive in the new world of work.

- 1. Culture Shaping Cannot Be Delegated – Leaders Must Be Intentional**
- 2. Define Your Optimal Culture – Foster Supporting Beliefs**
- 3. Nurture Desired Behaviors and Actions**
- 4. Leverage the Opportunity - Focus on the Middle**
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Customers and clients (external and internal) have an abundance of choices today. What draws customers to your team or organization? When they do choose you, do they stick with you? Exceptional service and high quality products are the price of entry today. In today's 'commoditization economy', where customers have a sea of options from which to choose, the winners will be the teams, organizations and individuals that create memorable experiences that differentiate them from the competition. Experiences create loyalty, and are as distinct from service as services are from goods. Is your organization (culture) clearly distinct from your competition? What makes you different? Have you developed a customer base that would never dream of not doing business with you? Do your employees 'think and act' in a manner that is speeding you toward your 'must-achieve desired results?'

Is your organization's stated culture congruent with the actual culture—the culture that your customers and employees experience? The espoused culture may not be the true reality. This stated culture, and the leaders that have declared it, can lose credibility with the organization and customers when people see a stark difference between the 'leader-speak' and the reality that they experience on a day-to-day basis. The 'brand-inside' must be congruent with the 'brand-outside.' When they are not, the result is a hollow brand.

For the most part, an organization's culture thinks, acts and behaves the way it does as a result of the experiences leadership has created, and allowed over time. Your organization's culture is a reflection of its leadership. Senior leaders must be deliberate and intentional when it comes to shaping their optimal culture. When you do not lead your culture, your culture will lead you. When your culture is not producing your desired results, leadership can proactively create shifts in the way employees think, act and behave. How? By being intentional and deliberate in creating appropriate experiences to trigger new thinking and ultimately new behaviors. The process must start with identifying the specific beliefs and actions, that if held and acted upon by the majority of employees, would accelerate and propel your team or organization toward achievement of your 'must-achieve desired results.'

Culture Shaping Cannot Be Delegated – Leaders Must Be Intentional:

Leaders must own the process to foster and cultivate those desired beliefs and behaviors. For many, it may feel awkward, or perhaps they may believe it is something that should be handed off to Human Resources. No matter how skilled your HR team may be, delegating culture change is always the death-knell to the effort. Senior leadership must possess the same degree of ownership, rigor and passion around creating its optimal culture that it holds for developing the most important strategic initiatives that if flawlessly executed bring ongoing success. After all, culture trumps strategy every time. As a leader, you are being thoroughly scrutinized at all times. Your employees are watching you. Every word you utter, every signal you send through your body language and the tonality of your voice,

and most importantly the congruency between what you say and what you do. The quickest way to derail something as crucial as shaping your optimal culture is to behave in a manner that does not mirror the message. Not being involved is an observable experience for everyone watching you and sends a loud and clear message. Leaders must be involved and highly visible throughout the process. You are being watched!

Leaders must be deliberate and highly aware of the experiences they are creating for those they lead. As those experiences will either reinforce the beliefs your employees already hold, or create new beliefs. When a leader is cognizant of this, they are more likely to create experiences that develop beliefs that will instigate and forge the desired actions they wish to see from employees.

Considerations: What actions have you demonstrated in the past two weeks that model the behaviors that would manifest in your optimal culture? What percentage of your time is spent talking about and creating examples of desired behaviors?

Define Your Optimal Culture – Foster Supporting Beliefs:

In one sense, your culture is your brand. It is the way your organization is perceived. Ideally, an organizations culture is strongly aligned with the brand promise. Your culture is a manifestation of the way your employees think and behave – the experiences they create.

Your 'brand' - the way your team or organization is perceived, is a result of the experiences your employees create for your customers and clients (internally as well). Your employees think and act the way they do for a variety of reasons. One of the main drivers is the manner in which they are led, as well as the experiences leadership creates.

Think about the business results you must achieve in the future. If the majority of your employees continue to think, act and behave in the manner they do today, will you achieve those results? What shifts are needed in the way your employees currently think and act that would accelerate change and thrust you toward your desired results? What beliefs exist that impede progress? Or simply, what beliefs must be abandoned and what beliefs must be adopted?

Consider this, if your employees continue to think and act the way they think and act today, can you expect to achieve tougher desired results in the future? Is that not the definition of insanity?

Considerations: If you could create your optimal culture, what are the specific beliefs, actions and behaviors you would see in the way that your employees go about their work? What experiences will your leadership team create to foster these desires beliefs and behaviors?

Nurture Desired Behaviors and Actions:

Even the best strategy is useless with an ineffective, cynical or apathetic culture. You can have the absolute best strategy, the top technical resources and positive intent, but all of that is useless with an ineffective, disengaged, unaligned, cynical or apathetic culture.

More than 20 years of data collection points to 'communications' as the number one vehicle to accelerating culture change and optimizing individual performance. This includes top down communications, peer to peer, and employee to leader. Effective communication can accelerate change, foster collaboration, ignite employee engagement, bolster morale, cultivate accountability and create shifts in behavior. Yet, often communication is not as precise, clear and consistent as needed.

Once senior leaders have defined their ideal culture, they can hasten the culture change by:

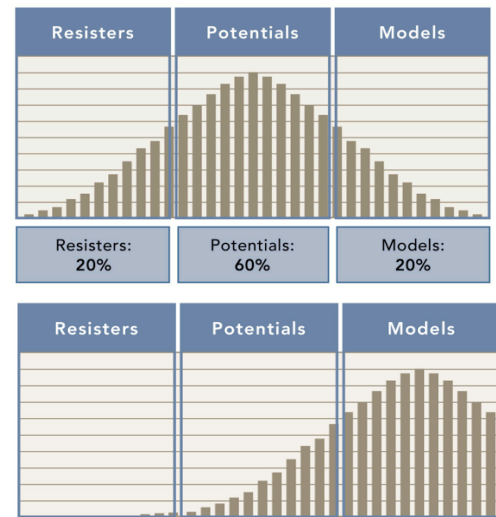
- Maintaining absolute alignment with one another and modeling the way.
- Recognize publicly, appreciate and reward employees who demonstrate desired behaviors.
- Share stories with teams, departments and individuals about how these desired behaviors have produced positive results (stories shift beliefs).
- Consistently, in all communications, cite the desired behaviors and link them to success stories or the impact they are having on results.
- Frequently offer appreciative feedback to those living out the desired behaviors. When individuals receive appreciative feedback they will demonstrate those behaviors more frequently. This also calls attention to, and creates alignment, around the desired behaviors that will propel the organization toward what matters most.
- Integrate desired behaviors and beliefs into performance management systems and rewards and recognition systems.

Considerations: What is happening in your organization to ensure the spotlight and focus is aimed at calling attention to desired behaviors and actions? What are you doing daily to increase awareness and alignment around ideal behaviors and actions?

Leverage the Opportunity – Focus on the Middle:

No matter the strategy or initiative, no matter how critical or mundane, there will always be employees that fall into one of three categories:

- **Nevers/Resisters** (Will never jump on board. Either they can't, or they won't)
- **Potentials** (Too busy with the day-to-day work to help. Caught up in the minutiae of the day to day tsunami of work)
- **Models** (Will walk on broken glass for you)



One of the keys to accelerating culture change is to move as many 'potentials' (see graphic to right) further to the right into the 'model' category. The real opportunity is with the potentials. The nevers/resisters often never come along or jump on board. In fact, that is the group the often heavily recruits the 'potentials' to join them. When leadership can move the 'bell' righter and tighter, achievement of desired results accelerates.

Simply telling people to change and embrace and adopt new ways of thinking, hold new beliefs, and in some cases change habit, without engaging them in the process yields poor results. It is human nature to resist change.

Most individuals externalize the need for change. They believe every one else must change and that they are doing quite well. So as a leader you must focus your attention on those that are 'on the fence.' This is the group that will provide you with the most leverage. As you engage more of those 'in the middle', others will join the cause or self-select out. Don't waste a brain cell worrying about the 'resisters.' They will never help your organization achieve anything of significance.

These principles to accelerating culture change equip leaders with the ability to connect to the head and heart of employees in the 'potential' segment of the bell shaped curve. That is the group where the most opportunity and leverage to accelerate change exists. When employees in the 'potential' category self select to move into the 'model' category, organizations realize exponential impact on the ability to realize their 'must-achieve desired results.'

Considerations: How much of your time is spent leveraging the opportunity that exists within the 'potential' segment of the bell-curve versus the 'resister' segment? What did you do last week to move more of the 'potentials' into the 'model' category before the 'resisters' recruit them?

Embed the Culture into the Fabric of the Firm:

Create a culture focused on achieving desired results. Sounds great, right? Yet, so often employees within many organizations focus on 'daily activity' and not the highest priority organizational desired results. There is a major difference between 'activity' and 'results'. Activity in and of itself will not necessarily produce desired results. Answer this - does all activity produce results? Trick question. Many quickly say, "no." The answer is **yes**. Even if you do nothing you will achieve a result. It simply may not be the result you want. When we develop a culture that views their 'job' as 'achieving desired results', organizations realize:

- Heightened levels of collaboration, teamwork and esprit de corps
- Increased levels of trust and candor
- An elevated focus on the key constituents
- An escalation in personal and organizational accountability
- A 'solutions' focus versus playing the blame-game
- A mindset of 'what else can I do' versus 'it's not my job'
- Soaring levels of employee engagement, commitment and perseverance

The following model (**see diagram on following page**) depicts how organizations have achieved exceptional results. Once a leadership team has defined their optimal culture, it then becomes the focus of leadership. However, nothing happens until leadership engages a team, or several teams, to take accountability to achieve that desired result. Those teams most often must do something different.

When team members move from team/group accountability to taking individual accountability and ownership is when organizations realize an exponential spike in results. Through repetition these behaviors become habits (**top of model**). Defining and shaping your optimal culture is about creating shifts in the way your employees think and act. Again, the way your employees think and act is your culture.

Shaping and creating your optimal culture begins with:

1) The senior leadership team creating clarity, alignment and understanding on the top two to five most important results (goals) that the organization must achieve in the next 12-24 months. These 'must-achieve desired results' must meet three criteria: **meaningful**, **measurable**, and **memorable**. These are the 2-5 outcomes **in addition** to the 'day-to-day work' (maintaining the organization) that will propel your organization toward a better and more desirable state/position.

2) Once the desired results are agreed upon, the senior leadership team must be 100% aligned and all members accept ownership and accountability to communicate the key messaging to the organization.

3) The third step is to define what the optimal culture would look like in order to achieve these desired results. How would you see people behave? What beliefs would they hold? What would they be doing differently? What are the key gaps in behaviors and beliefs that are impeding progress toward the desired optimal culture? What behaviors do we want to maintain and fortify? What behaviors must be abandoned?

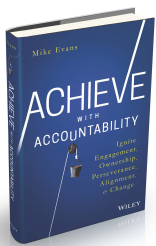
4) Leaders at all levels apply proven, pragmatic tools, principles and methodologies to create shifts in the way that employees think, act and behave in order to support and ultimately realize the defined optimal culture. Leadership must then create the appropriate experiences that will heighten focus on desired beliefs and actions, and provide the impetus for employees to voluntarily choose to change their behaviors.

The process takes discipline and focus, but the payoff is huge.



Considerations: When was the last time you asked those you lead to cite the top 2-3 ‘must achieve’ goals for your team? Can they clearly and precisely communicate each goal? Do they know exactly how each is being measured? Do they know what the desired metric is for each? How well can each member of your team translate the impact of what they do to the desired results (goals)?

About The Author:



Mike Evans is Managing Partner of QuestMark, and has developed a unique perspective from 20+ years of working alongside a star studded list of world-renowned thought leaders, including: Dr. John Kotter, Dr. Stephen Covey, Tom Peters, Jim Kouzes, Hyrum Smith, Steve Farber and Chris McChesney. Mike served in senior leadership and consulting roles with Kotter International, FranklinCovey, and Tom Peters Company.

In addition to being a best-selling author, Mike is a leading authority on ***Unleashing Personal and Organizational Accountability***, clients rely upon Mike's solutions to; ***Accelerate Change, Shape Their Optimal Culture, Flawlessly Execute Key Strategies, Ignite Leadership Capacity at all Levels, Amplify Employee Engagement and Cultivate Peak Performance.***

31 of Fortune 50 are clients. Mike works with organizations around the globe and in virtually every arena, from the tech sector to financial services, manufacturing, health care, hospitality, entertainment, retail, and the US Government. Clients include: Intel, Capital One, Cargill, General Mills, Monsanto, Apple, BNY Mellon, BP Alaska, Masonite, Rite Aid, ACE Hardware, H&R Block, McAfee, Pfizer, The United States Navy, Fidelity Investments, Johnson & Johnson, Symantec, Cigna Corporation, US Steel, PharMerica, Oracle, Astra Zeneca, Baxter International Inc., Shell Oil, Cargill, American Airlines, DuPont USA, Novartis and NASA.