

Are You Building Your Culture or Merely Tolerating It?

The significance of organizational culture cannot be overstated. Culture is the bedrock upon which every action, interaction, and decision is built. But the question for many leaders today is: Are you actively building your culture or are you merely tolerating it? Understanding the distinction between these two approaches is critical for fostering a thriving, dynamic, and successful workplace.

BY FRED JEWELL AND TRACY REZNIK

The difference between building and tolerating culture lies in the commitment of leadership to actively shape and nurture it. It is about making deliberate choices, setting clear expectations, and holding everyone accountable to the same standards. Only through such concerted efforts can organizations create a culture that not only supports their strategic goals but also drives long-term success and employee satisfaction.

Understanding Culture: Values, Mindsets, and Behaviors

At its core, culture is the amalgamation of values, mindsets, and behaviors within an organization. The outward exhibition of these elements shapes how employees perceive their work environment and interact with one another.



Values are the principles and standards that an organization holds dear. They are the guiding lights that influence decision-making and define what the organization stands for. Values might include integrity, innovation, customer focus, and/or respect.



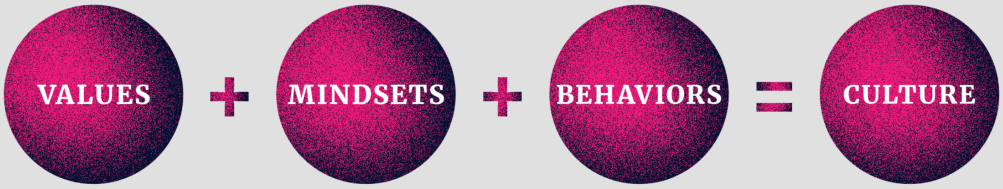
Mindset refers to how individuals and organizations view the world. It encompasses attitudes toward challenges, changes, and opportunities. For example, a growth mindset encourages learning and development, while a fixed mindset may resist change and innovation.



Behaviors are the tangible actions and conduct of individuals within the organization. These are the visible aspects of culture that are most often judged and measured. Behaviors can include collaboration, punctuality, accountability, and/or ethical conduct.

Jabian's Definition of Culture

Culture is the written and unwritten rules of "the way we do things around here," and those rules are visible through the ways in which people behave.



Rewarding and Rejecting Behaviors: The Role of Leadership

Organizations play a crucial role in shaping culture by rewarding or rejecting specific behaviors. The actions that leaders take in this regard send powerful messages to employees about what is and is not valued in the organization.

Rewarding "Good" Behaviors

Positive behaviors that align with the organization's values should be recognized and rewarded. Behaviors such as collaboration, respect, and integrity reinforce the desired culture. Rewards can come in multiple forms, including promotions, bonuses, public acknowledgment, and opportunities for professional development. For instance, a company might implement a "peer recognition" program where employees can acknowledge each other's contributions, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment.

Rejecting "Bad" Behaviors

Conversely, behaviors that are detrimental to the culture must be addressed and discouraged. For example, if a salesperson withholds key information to secure a deal solely for personal gain, the organization can withhold their commission to emphasize that how we achieve results is as important as the results themselves. This underscores the message that ethical behavior and collaboration are non-negotiable. Leaders must act decisively when negative behaviors emerge, setting a precedent to establish that such conduct will not be tolerated.

What are some challenges you face in avoiding the tolerance of negative behaviors within your organization?

"While by no means unique, niceness remains a plague on cultures like ours that value caring. Caring and being nice are often mistaken as the same thing by new leaders who can struggle to have hard conversations. We frequently talk about principles of Crucial Conversations, Radical Candor, and The 100X Leader... employing ideas like love and family and fighting for the success of others requires addressing negative or unproductive behavior, even when it is hard."

– Travis Dommert, OneDigital Senior Vice President of Talent

Tolerating Behaviors: The Silent Culture Killer

One of the most insidious ways an organization's culture can be undermined is by tolerating both good and bad behaviors without acknowledgment or consequence.

Tolerating "Good" Behaviors

When positive behaviors go unrecognized, employees may feel undervalued and unmotivated. The lack of recognition for good behavior can cause a decline in morale and engagement. For example, if employees consistently go beyond their duties but receive no acknowledgment, they may feel that their efforts are unnoticed and unappreciated and cease to go above and beyond, leading to disengagement and turnover.

Tolerating "Bad" Behaviors

Allowing negative behaviors to go unchecked sends a dangerous message that such conduct is acceptable. This practice can erode trust, create a toxic work environment, and lead to a culture of mediocrity. For example, if an employee consistently misses deadlines but faces no repercussions, it can signal to others that deadlines are flexible and undermine the work ethic of the team.

What behaviors or practices do you categorically reject in your organization, and why?

"As an entrepreneurial company that values relentless optimism, few things would facilitate a hard conversation or an exit faster than getting stuck in your ways, fixated on the belief that something cannot be done, or being rude and inconsiderate to others. We can all have an off day, but counter-cultural behaviors stand out. If you can't align to putting others first and doing so with optimism, you probably won't be here long."

– Travis Dommert, OneDigital Senior Vice President of Talent

Tolerating Behaviors: The Consequences

The tolerance of behaviors without acknowledgment or consequence leads to a culture defined by the "least common denominator." This results in several negative outcomes:

Mixed Messages

Employees receive conflicting signals about what is expected of them, leading to confusion and inconsistency in performance.

Absence of Leadership

When leaders fail to address behaviors appropriately, it creates a vacuum and leadership is perceived as absent or ineffective.

Erosion of Trust

Trust in leadership diminishes when employees see that negative behaviors go unpunished and positive behaviors are ignored.

Decreased Engagement

Engagement levels drop as employees feel their contributions are neither valued nor noticed.

How do you reinforce your cultural values throughout your organization?

"Secureworks recently transformed from a pure-play services company to a product-led SaaS business. As we managed through tremendous change, we knew we must be equally thoughtful and intentional about our values and culture. New company, new day. Intent, action, and accountability are foundational to making anything 'stick,' so over the course of a year, we worked with teammates globally to assess what we value about our culture today, and what we aspired to nurture for the future. We hold ourselves accountable to that by documenting this in a shared Culture Framework, encompassing everything from the behaviors we reward and reject, to how we gather, to our values. As a mission-centric cybersecurity company, we must secure our customers – 'there is no try.' That's why our Values are verbs. Together, we Imagine, Engage, Unify, Impact, and Celebrate. By writing down 'how' we achieve our mission – what we stand for, who we want to be, and how we show up for each other – we can climb mountains for our customers and partners while strengthening team bonds on the way to the top."

– Wendy Thomas, Secureworks CEO



Building a Strong Culture: Actions for Leaders

Creating and sustaining a strong, positive culture requires deliberate and consistent effort from leadership. Here are key actions that leaders can take to actively build their desired culture:

1. Define Acceptable and Unacceptable Behaviors

Clearly articulate what behaviors are expected and what will not be tolerated. This clarity helps employees align their actions with the organization's values and objectives. Develop a code of conduct or a set of behavioral guidelines that is regularly communicated and reinforced.

2. Transparency About Values and Mindsets

Ensure that the organization's values and mindsets are communicated openly and frequently. Employees should know what the organization stands for and how it views its role in the broader industry and society. Discuss these values regularly in meetings, newsletters, and other communication channels to keep them top of mind.



3. Regular Communication

Effective communication should flow in all directions — top-down, middle-out, and bottom-up. Leaders should regularly share updates, seek feedback, and engage in open dialogue with employees at all levels. Town hall meetings, open forums, and regular surveys can be effective tools for maintaining an open communication culture.

4. Lead With Empathy

Empathetic leadership fosters a supportive and inclusive work environment. Leaders should strive to understand the perspectives and experiences of their employees and show genuine concern for their well-being. Empathy in leadership involves active listening, acknowledging challenges, and providing support where needed.

5. Encourage Curiosity and Questions

Promote a culture of curiosity where employees feel comfortable asking questions and challenging assumptions. This openness to inquiry can drive innovation and continuous improvement. Encourage a culture where no question is seen as foolish and where employees are empowered to seek new knowledge and solutions.



6. Recognition and Rewards

Develop a robust recognition and reward system that acknowledges and celebrates behaviors that align with the organization's values. This could include formal awards, informal shout-outs, or other forms of recognition that show appreciation for employees' contributions.

7. Consistent Accountability

Ensure that there are clear consequences for behaviors that do not align with the organization's values. Consistent enforcement of policies helps maintain the integrity of the culture and signals to employees that leadership is committed to upholding standards.

Culture: Are You Building or Tolerating?

The choice between building and merely tolerating culture has profound implications for an organization's success. Leaders who actively shape their culture by rewarding positive behaviors, rejecting negative ones, and fostering open communication create a dynamic and resilient organization. In contrast, tolerating behaviors without acknowledgment or consequence leads to a stagnant and disengaged workforce.

By understanding the fundamental components of culture and taking proactive steps to shape it, leaders can create an environment where employees thrive, and the organization can achieve its strategic objectives. Building culture is an ongoing process that requires consistent effort, reflection, and adjustment. But the rewards—an engaged, motivated, and high-performing workforce—are well worth the investment.



What's a leadership lesson you've learned that has had a lasting impact on your approach to managing culture?

Learn How to "Mosey."

"I moved from Pittsburgh to Atlanta in 2006 to join the executive technology team at a large Southeastern bank. I understood the bank was looking to quickly adopt the latest digital technologies, something I had already enjoyed some success in up north, and so I came in ready to get going ... and fast. At the end of my first week on the job, my Georgia-born-and-raised boss took me aside and said, 'Lindsay, I'm gonna have to teach you how to mosey.' He then took me out to lunch, walking and talking along the way. While we ate, he asked about my entire family, my neighborhood, my college life, and my professional journey. He then proceeded to explain how the business culture here might differ from the one I'd known in Pennsylvania. The pace might seem slower at times, he explained, because business relies on personal connections. He suggested I might be wise to slow down and have lunch with more folks first, and then I'd find business would move forward faster. It did. Ever since, I have carried this lesson about the importance of listening first for cultural cues. Whether across the US or around the world, bringing our authentic self to our team requires first understanding the best way for that self to be received."

– Lindsay Soergel, Ratio Chief Client Officer

In the rapidly evolving landscape, the need for a strong, cohesive culture is more important than ever. As remote work and hybrid models become the norm, maintaining a unified culture presents new challenges and opportunities. Leaders must be more intentional in their efforts to build and sustain the desired culture, leveraging technology and innovative approaches to engage employees, foster collaboration, and reinforce values across all locations and levels of the organization.

So, ask yourself: Are you building your culture or merely tolerating it? The answer to this question will determine the trajectory of your organization and its ability to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the future.

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