

# Culture 2.0: Leveraging Culture for Breakthrough Results

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# Culture 2.0: Leveraging Culture for Breakthrough Results

By **David Maxfield & Joseph Grenny**

**Who are we? And how do we get things done?** Today's organizations are caught in an identity crisis. In years past, you could tell you were looking at a company because it operated from a fortress-like building. You knew who the employees were because they sported titles, dressed similarly, and could be located on org charts. That world is rapidly disappearing.

So, it's no wonder today's organizations are rethinking their business models. Twenty years ago, it would have been inconceivable that a company could grow from nothing to a billion-dollar market cap—or possibly the reverse—in less time than it takes a child to learn to talk. Who could have imagined an infant company would one day book more rooms than any major hotel chain—without owning so much as a parking lot? And who would have wagered that you could assemble a company with thousands of cars and drivers without formally employing a single one of them?

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A few examples:

**HARALD RIEGLER:** Harald used to describe his job as “herding cats”<sup>1</sup>. He managed teams of software developers at Sproing, a leading multi-platform free-to-play game-design firm in Vienna, Austria. Multiple factors—his industry, customer base, technology, competition, and workforce—all conspired to create chaos. And Harald saw himself as the adult in the room attempting to exert control.

Today, he describes his job as more like pitching than herding. Rather than overseeing compliance, he broadcasts new projects to a dynamic network of development teams that assemble, reconfigure, and disband at will. Talent flows naturally, quickly, and willingly to where it's needed. He no longer sees his software engineers as assets to be supervised, but rather as a self-organizing marketplace of talent that operates within a culture of trust and respect.

**GENERAL MCCHRYSTAL:** In the mid-2000's, General McChrystal led an organization that was failing despite its huge advantages in numbers, equipment, and training. No, he wasn't working in the gaming industry or with software developers. His employees were Special Operations Forces and Navy SEALs in Iraq. But the business model he created was similar to Harald's.

Historically, past special ops teams were tightly controlled with strategy and decision-making held closely in central commands. General McChrystal organized his warriors into a decentralized network of empowered teams—teams that could respond as quickly as their adversaries. Their focus was AI

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1016484/Studio-Culture-Beyond-Herding>

Qaeda in Iraq. In his book, *Team of Teams*, General McChrystal argues that this new business model can be scaled to benefit any organization<sup>2</sup>.

**MATT VAN VRANKEN:** Matt, former CEO of Spectrum Health, implemented a team-of-teams business model within health-care. “Healthcare has become a team sport,” Matt explains. “Having the best experts isn’t good enough anymore. It doesn’t work to have a great surgeon if the surgeon intimidates the nurses on his or her team. The result would be breakdowns in patient safety and quality of care.” Matt explains that today’s healthcare requires expert teams, rather than teams of experts.

A recent study by Deloitte<sup>3</sup> suggests that businesses are becoming more like Hollywood movie production teams: “with people coming together to tackle projects, then disbanding and moving on to new assignments once the project is complete.”

How widespread is this business model?

The researchers at Deloitte found that nearly half (45 percent) of the executives they surveyed report their companies are either in the middle of, or planning a restructuring to align with this type of model. And more than nine out of ten (92 percent) rate organizational design as their top priority.

## Norms for High-Performance Teams

The performance of an organization is measured by its ability to do two things: execute and innovate. It must execute flawlessly on today’s mission. And it must innovate consistently to remain relevant tomorrow.

In decades past, organizations were optimized for execution. Tall hierarchies which were designed to produce predictable results limited innovation—but not so much as to matter. Since product life cycles were often measured in decades, this “plan-organize-control” design produced acceptable levels of innovation. It created cultures that valued compliance more than self-direction and loyalty more than candor—and in the competitive landscape of the time, it worked. Everyone was happy. But the landscape has changed.

While today’s marketplaces and customers continue to expect flawless execution of products and services, they also expect exponentially escalated levels of innovation.

The Deloitte study demonstrates leaders’ heightened anxiety to find a way to match these new expectations. And, unsurprisingly,

2 <http://www.amazon.com/Team-Teams-Rules-Engagement-Complex/dp/1591847486>

3 <http://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/human-capital/articles/introduction-human-capital-trends.html>

leaders look to their organization’s culture for the solution—82 percent of the leaders surveyed believe their culture *could* be a competitive advantage. However, knowing the answer lies in their culture hasn’t been much help. Only 28 percent believe they understand their organization’s culture and only 19 percent think they have the right culture to remain competitive.

While many leaders scramble to match their culture to the changing competitive landscape, leaders at Google took a more proactive approach. Researchers embarked on a five-year, multimillion-dollar comprehensive study to find the link between culture and team performance<sup>4</sup>. The study, dubbed Project Aristotle, was designed to reveal the key to perfect teams—teams that combine superior innovation with best-in-class execution.

The Google researchers tested several hypotheses: For example, “Are the best teams best because they include the best people?” “Is it because they combine different or similar personality styles?” “Is it because they are more or less structured?” “Does it relate to friendships or to after-work socializing within the teams?” None of these or a dozen other hypotheses provided the answer.

*But they did find the answer. It came down to norms—the unspoken rules that govern teams. And the two norms that made the biggest difference in the Google research were: Active Participation and Psychological Safety. In the best teams, members spoke up and participated. And this participation came as a result of feeling welcome, valued, and secure within the team.*

Over the last thirty years, we at VitalSmarts have worked with thousands of organizations and conducted our own research on cultural norms that support high-performance teams. Our work and research<sup>5</sup>, as well as the research of others<sup>6</sup>, supports Google’s findings—and we add a few crucial details. We divide Google’s norm of Active Participation into two components: Open Dialogue and Universal Accountability.

4 [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?_r=0)

5 Maxfield, D., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., Patterson, K., & Switzler, A. (2005). Silence kills. *VitalSmarts, Crucial Conversations*.

6 Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2008). Organizing for high reliability: Processes of collective mindfulness. *Crisis management*, 3(1), 81-123.

**Open Dialogue:** Team members can raise concerns and questions to anyone about anything—when the purpose is to improve performance.

**Universal Accountability:** Team members hold each other accountable, regardless of role or position.

We also view Psychological Safety as a pre-condition for speaking up and holding others accountable.

These findings are reasonable in light of the changing world of work. When organizations pursue this ad hoc team design, they adopt a business model that has less hierarchical authority and more peer-based accountability. Hierarchies are slow. Teams can be fast—but they are only effective once the right norms are established. Historically, norms could evolve and strengthen over decades. Today's ephemeral teams demand leaders who can rapidly foster dialogue, accountability, and safety.

## How and Why these Norms Fail

Too often, individuals are not accustomed to operating in a culture that demands taking risks and holding others accountable. If these cultural norms don't take root, any number of changes to the organization chart will fail.

Here is what happens: Team members seem to embrace their greater empowerment, and so do their leaders—until they encounter their first sensitive, high-stakes, politically-risky situation. Often, it's a situation where the team is at odds with its manager, or where team members need to hold a leader, a peer, or a customer to account. In these moments, you see the concern for safety win out over performance. Team members stay silent or give in, despite their conviction that doing so will undermine performance. And this trade-off becomes the cultural norm.

Ironically, this concern for safety can lead to death and destruction. The transportation, construction, energy, and healthcare industries are rife with examples where people who knew better deferred to others. Results range from plane crashes and building collapses to oil rig explosions and botched surgeries<sup>7</sup>. The common theme across these disasters is that people saw “speaking up” as risky—as something that could make waves or otherwise cost them. But they failed to consider the risks of not speaking up, even though the costs included death and destruction.

This choice of safety over performance has been attributed to many underlying causes; for example: poor engagement, insufficient trust,

and lack of alignment. But, regardless of the label, the phenomenon is well understood, because it's fundamental to human behavior.

We humans are hardwired for self-protection. We are built to assume that the rustling in the bushes is always bad news. And, when we feel unsafe—threatened or attacked—our amygdala, a part of the brain the size of an almond, jumps in to action. It causes our heart to speed up, adrenaline to flood our body, and blood to rush to our major muscle groups. It also seizes our attention with a surge of strong emotions. Our brain is preparing us for fight or flight.

Because we are social animals, we are especially programmed to look out for bad news, threats, and attacks from our social group—displays of anger, impatience, dismissal, control. We attend to the subtlest signs of disapproval—the frown, the raised eyebrow, the furrowed brow. And we assume the worst about what these signs mean. When we feel unsafe in a group, we are very likely to move to fight or flight.

**GENERAL JAY GARNER:** In 2003, General Garner returned to the US, retiring from his job as head of the post-war planning office in Iraq<sup>8</sup>. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld arranged for him to meet with President Bush and his advisors so the General could warn them about what he described as “three tragic decisions” that had been made in Iraq. However, during the meeting with the President, General Garner failed to raise his concerns. Later, he described the situation to a reporter: *“I think if I had said that to the president . . . (he) would have looked at (his advisors) and they would have rolled their eyes. . . and the president would have thought, ‘Boy, I wonder why we didn’t get rid of this guy sooner?’”* Notice that General Garner was attending to very subtle signs of disapproval—in this case, a potential eye roll. And he assumed the worst about what an eye roll would mean—complete loss of the President's respect—and so he moved to flight by choosing safety over honesty with its potential for controversy. The President and the rest of his team weren't given the opportunity to hear critical information from the person who may have been the most informed expert in the room.

Candor is the only path to sustained team excellence. And psychological safety is the precondition for candor. The research literature uses the term “psychological safety” to describe<sup>9</sup> the comfort level required before people will ask for help, admit errors, and discuss problems. It's not surprising that psychological safety is essential for teams and teams-of-teams to function.

7 Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J.. (2000). Organizational Silence: A Barrier to Change and Development in a Pluralistic World. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 706–725. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259200>

8 Woodward, B. (2006). *State of denial*. Page 226. Simon and Schuster.

9 Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative science quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383.

## Building Psychological Safety

What are the roles of formal leaders and human resource, training, and organizational development professionals in helping organizations create psychological safety? And how can organizations build the capacity of individual contributors, teams, and teams-of-teams to thrive in an environment of open dialogue and universal accountability?

Our work and research point to five key strategies:

1. Make the business case for change.
2. Build the required skills.
3. Begin with a universal value.
4. Ask leaders to lead.
5. Employ all Six Sources of Influence™.

# 1. Make the business case for change.

The first step to real change is for the senior team to make a detailed business case that ties behaviors to bottom-line results. Position the behaviors as “means to achieve valuable ends” rather than “ends in themselves”. The business case needs to reach beyond sympathizers. It must appeal to the skeptics and cynics who place little value on openness, but care deeply about results.

**RICHARD SHERIDAN:** At Menlo Innovations, a custom software-design firm in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Richard Sheridan has built a culture that embodies open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety. He calls this culture a “Culture of Joy”<sup>10</sup>. Imagine the field day skeptics could have with that!

However, while Richard clearly embraces dialogue, accountability, and psychological safety as important values, he is quick to make the dollars-and-cents business case that supports them. He can demonstrate how these norms drive unheard of levels of quality and customer satisfaction, which in turn drive bottom-line revenue and margins.

The reason it’s important for Richard to make the hard-headed business case for Menlo’s culture is that, while Menlo is very successful today, it may, like any firm, hit rough patches in the future. When it hits the inevitable bumps in the road, Richard doesn’t want open dialogue, universal accountability, and

psychological safety to be seen as extra baggage or as optional nice-to-haves. He needs everyone to understand that the Culture of Joy is essential to Menlo’s success—in good times and bad.

# 2. Build the required skills.

Where do individual contributors get their team skills? Most were educated in an academic environment that views dialogue as an intellectual battlefield and collaboration as cheating. And many learned their problem-solving skills watching debates on cable news. It’s no wonder they recreate these conditions when they organize into teams.

Here is a challenge: Observe a few teams within your organization—any teams at any level. Attend their physical or virtual meetings and you are likely to see the signs of fight and flight. Some people will resort to rudeness, labeling, sarcasm, and controlling behaviors, while others will self-censor their opinions or retreat into silence. Individual contributors don’t arrive with the skills they need to create psychological safety for themselves and others.

Notice we aren’t saying that team members need communication skills in general. They do just fine in most conversations. Our work and research shows that three ingredients combine to break down dialogue: high stakes, differing opinions, and strong emotions. This is the trifecta that triggers the fight or flight response. Formal leaders and human resource, training, and organizational development professionals must support individual contributors in mastering these specific crucial moments.

Our method for achieving this mastery is detailed in our books, *Crucial Conversations*<sup>11</sup> and *Crucial Accountability*,<sup>12</sup> and our related courses. The skills taught in these courses are summarized in the call out box on page 5.

Leaders at Michigan Department of Child Protective Services changed their culture by training their employees in the skills that lead to open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety. Here’s how they did it:

**THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES** is organized into flexible teams that coordinate with police, prosecutors, and judges; with professionals in different

11 Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2012). *Crucial conversations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

12 Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., Switzler, A., & Maxfield, D. (2013). *Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior*. (Paperback). McGraw-Hill Professional.

10 Sheridan, R. (2013). *Joy, Inc.: How We Built a Workplace People Love*. Penguin.

jurisdictions; and with parents and guardians to create safety for the children they supervise. When open dialogue or universal accountability breaks down, children's lives are put at risk. The stakes are high. They used Crucial Accountability and Crucial Conversations Training to build the skills needed in their flexible team environment.

They identified five team situations where open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety were breaking down.

- Multiple stakeholders with uncoordinated efforts and priorities.
- Unrealistic expectations and underfunded mandates.
- Slow responses to emergency requests.
- Hostility and disrespect from judges, police, and other stakeholders.
- Managers who disappear when team members feel under attack.

They focused the training, deliberate practice, and follow-up efforts on these five crucial moments and created improvements that were significant and substantial. As dialogue, accountability, and psychological safety improved, teams became more effective and the children they supervised were made safer.



### Principles of Crucial Conversations

- Recognize when dialogue is breaking down—get back on track before damage is done.
- Look for silence and violence—and re-establish safety so you can return to dialogue.
- Control your own strong emotions—remain completely frank and honest, showing respect.
- Share strong opinions without shutting down contrary views—so you can build understanding and commitment.
- Encourage others to share issues they fear bringing up—build a stronger working relationship.



### Principles of Crucial Accountability

- Hold anyone accountable—no matter the other person's power, position, or temperament.
- Master performance discussions—get positive results and maintain good relationships.
- Motivate others without using power—clearly and concisely explain specific, natural consequences and permanently resolve problems.
- Manage projects without taking over—creatively help others avoid excuses, keep projects on track, and resolve performance barriers.
- Move to action—agree on a plan, follow up, engage in good reporting practices, and manage new expectations.

**MIKE WILDFONG:** Mike Wildfong, a plant manager at Ti Automotive, describes himself as a “fanatic about workplace safety”. He uses safety as his laboratory for building dialogue, accountability, and psychological safety. Mike begins with a very simple and well-defined behavior: speaking up about safety risks. He asks everyone to speak up and have an accountability conversation whenever they see anyone violate safety practices.

To make sure they understand, he uses the following example: *“If you are a janitor on the night shift and you see a bunch of suits from headquarters walk in without eye protection, I expect you to stop them and get them to comply with our policy.”* Notice how countercultural this request is? It violates the longstanding norm that janitors don't tell “suits from corporate” what to do. Changing culture isn't just about changing skills—it's also about changing the norms that keep us stuck.

Mike's request quickly smokes out two kinds of people: those who don't want to speak up or hold others accountable and those who don't want to listen to others or be held accountable. And Mike has what he describes as his “on-the-bus or off-the-bus conversation” with these people. *“We're talking about workplace safety here, so it's non-negotiable. If you can't agree to open dialogue and universal accountability around safety, then you can't work here. Do you want to stay on this bus or get off now?”*

## 3. Begin with a universal value.

Select a value that everyone sees as important and use it as a laboratory for building the skills and norms for open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety. The change you accomplish with this single value becomes the leading edge of a wedge that drives broader changes across the culture.

At the same time, Mike is training these people how to have these specific conversations. They practice them with each other and with their managers. Mike's goal is to help people become “excellent” at speaking up and holding each other accountable for workplace safety—so it can be the leading edge of the wedge.

Once Mike has gotten the new norms and skills established for workplace safety, he pushes the wedge in a very intentional

way beyond safety to include quality, productivity, and cost control—in that order. The norms and skills still relate to speaking up, holding others accountable, and psychological safety—but now they apply to every aspect of the organization.

We have used similar strategies within healthcare, where the leading edge of the wedge is patient safety—often hand hygiene or reducing patient falls. We build the skills and change the norms in these noncontroversial domains and then extend them to other initiatives like quality of care, patient and family experience, productivity, and cost control.

## 4. Ask leaders to lead.

Culture change can't be outsourced to staff or consultants, though they play important advisory roles. Leaders must be in the lead. We put two kinds of leaders into leadership roles: formal leaders and informal (opinion) leaders.

Formal leaders include anyone with formal authority, from front-line leaders and supervisors up to senior executives. Informal (opinion) leaders include anyone, regardless of position, who is broadly respected across an important sector of the organization. The good news about opinion leaders is that there is usually a lot of consensus about who they are.

Techniques for identifying opinion leaders include: conducting a survey asking people whom among their peers they respect the most, or doing a series of focus groups that ask this same question. The two mistakes to avoid are: 1) asking people to raise their hand if they think they are opinion leaders, and 2) asking managers to identify individual contributors who the managers believe are opinion leaders.

Invest extra time and energy on getting these two groups of leaders on board. Make sure they buy in to the business case, put them through the training early, train them to be facilitators, and enlist them to champion the universal value.

**PATRICE PUTMAN:** When she was the Director of Employee Development for Maine General Hospitals, Patrice Putman wanted to influence the 3,500 nurses across their three hospitals to speak up and hold others accountable for patient safety. She decided to ask leaders to lead.

First, she identified the formal leaders—from charge nurses up to the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO). Second, she used a survey to identify the informal (opinion) leaders. The survey was sent to all nurses and asked just one question:

*“If you were facing a challenging problem at work and you had time to ask for advice, who would you ask to get the best, most trustworthy advice? You can name up to three people.”*

Then she tabulated the results. Most nurses were only named by a few of their peers, but about 6 percent were named by fifty or more of their peers. These nurses were Patrice's informal (opinion) leaders.

Next, Patrice asked the CNO to work directly with the formal and informal leaders. The CNO brought them together to hear the business case. She also brought in the CEO, COO, and CMO (Chief Medical Officer) to lead the discussion alongside her. Then, the CNO became certified to lead the training and facilitated the sessions for all of the 350 formal and informal (opinion) leaders. The universal value they used was hand hygiene.

Patrice used a survey to track open dialogue and universal accountability across both the trained group and a control group of untrained nurses. Here is what she found: After completing the training of the formal and informal (opinion) leaders, she saw huge and significant improvement among the untrained nurses in the control group. Specifically, even untrained staff were two to three times more likely to quickly and respectfully address a concern with the right person.

When she interviewed these untrained nurses, they said things like: *“We got the message that we were supposed to speak up and hold each other accountable for patient safety. And we saw people doing it. So we did too.”* By focusing on the formal and informal (opinion) leaders, Patrice had changed the cultural norm for speaking up across the entire organization.

Use formal and informal (opinion) leaders as sounding boards. If they disagree with aspects of the initiative, use their input to adjust those aspects until you have their full support. Remember, these leaders will be either your strongest allies or your strongest opponents—nothing in between. Whether you like it or not, others will go to them, ask for their opinions, and then follow their lead. Make sure they are visible champions for the new norms.

## 5. Employ all Six Sources of Influence.

The *status quo*—the obedience and compliance norms that currently exist in an organization—didn't just happen. They were created by and continue to support the traditional hierarchical organizational design. They are held in place by multiple influences.

VitalSmarts groups these influences into two broad categories: Motivation and Ability, and into three sources: Personal, Social, and Structural. The result is Six Sources of Influence<sup>13</sup>:

**Personal Motivation:**

Preferences, passions, moral imperatives, etc.

**Personal Ability:** Knowledge, skills, strengths, experiences, etc.

**Social Motivation:**

Encouragement, discouragement, prohibitions, etc.

**Social Ability:** Assistance, enabling, blocking, obstructionism, etc.

**Structural Motivation:** Performance reviews, pay, promotions, perks, punishments, etc.

**Structural Ability:** Tools, systems, procedures, resources, etc.

When the goal is new norms—open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety—change can be stubborn and slow. This is because there are multiple sources of influence working against the change. The solution is to address each source of influence until each supports, rather than opposes, the change. Our research suggests that if you can get all Six Sources of Influence working for you, you will be ten times more likely to succeed<sup>14</sup>.

The speed of the change will be determined by how quickly you address and change the sources of influence. If you allow all Six Sources of Influence to remain lined up against you, then more time won't help. If you take rapid action to address all six sources, then change will be rapid and profound.

Our method for mastering Six Sources of Influence is detailed in our book, *Influencer*<sup>15</sup>, and our related course. The skills taught in this course are summarized in the call out box.

influencer  
**Principles of Influencer**

- Discover the keys to influence—what successful influencers do that separates them from the rest.
- Develop tracking measures that will influence the results you want to achieve.
- Identify Crucial Moments—the moments where enacting the right behavior will have an enormous effect on results.
- Select a small number of high-leverage behaviors that, if enacted, will bring about the greatest amount of positive change.
- Map the connections between behaviors to discover leverage.
- Examine the Six Sources of Influence—personal, social, and structural factors—to discover the most significant causes of the current problem.
- Develop actions plans in each of the Six Sources of Influence to create an effective and comprehensive solution.

**PHILIP STEPHENSON:** When he was Vice President of Health, Safety, and Security for Newmont Mining Corporation, Phil Stephenson used this Six Sources of Influence model to change cultural norms across his global organization. His goal was to influence everyone to speak up and hold one another accountable for workplace safety.

The initiative was implemented, one mine at a time, across five continents and thirteen major operations. In each case, change was rapid and profound. After two years, a culture of open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety started to take root. Reportable injuries were down 36 percent, lost-time injuries were down 65 percent, and severe injuries and deaths were down 81 percent. These improvements have continued for three years and counting.

**Where are you headed?**

Research shows most leaders are aware of the crisis affecting their organization's ability to both execute and innovate. In response, they are introducing teams and teams of teams. But these same leaders see that their organization's culture with its existing norms and practices isn't changing quickly enough to keep up. Meanwhile, their competition is evolving quickly to the changing landscape.

Our research, coupled with Google's latest insight into high-performing teams, shows that leaders who don't quickly empower and enable their employees with the skills to create open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety will quickly find themselves at the helm of a sinking ship. Without these norms, your culture will not make the pivot from obedient and compliant to agile and team-oriented.

At VitalSmarts, we work with many organizations that are introducing new operating models to respond to their changing business environments. Many are moving to the kind of flexible team designs that require initiative and independence to succeed.

Using the five strategies outlined in this paper, we help these organizations change their cultures to support open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety. Our goal is to

13 Patterson, K., Maxfield, D., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2013). *Influencer: The new science of leading change*. McGraw-Hill Education.

14 Grenny, J., Maxfield, D., & Shimberg, A. (2008). How to have influence. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 50(1), 47.

15 Patterson, K., Maxfield, D., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2013). *Influencer: The new science of leading change*. McGraw-Hill Education.



be a resource to every organization that is working to make these kinds of transitions and our results show we are successful.

*Organizations can embed these important values into their culture to better execute and innovate at a rate that leads to long-term, bottom-line success.*

## Next Steps

If you are looking to change your culture contact us today to learn how our solutions and consulting services can help you succeed. Call 1.800.449.5989 or visit us at [vital-smarts.com](http://vital-smarts.com).

# Common Culture Mistakes to Avoid

**Equate culture to engagement.** Employee engagement is critical to success. Organizations need their employees to be passionate about their work and to know they can make a difference. However, culture work requires a more strategic focus on the norms that drive performance—both innovation and execution. These norms are open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety.

**Focus on apps instead of the “Cultural Operating System.”** In technology, an app is a small and simple application program that gets you what you want. Apps are great, but they ride on top of the device’s Operating System (OS). They only function if the OS is robust. The same is true in organizations. Organizational apps, such as Lean, Agile, and Big Data, only function if your Cultural Operating System (COS) is robust. Without open dialogue, universal accountability, and psychological safety, no organizational app will work to its potential. To learn more about the Cultural Operating System, visit [www.vital-smarts.com/COS](http://www.vital-smarts.com/COS) to download our COS white paper.

**Implement change management but forget influence.** Change management is the project-management side of culture change. It provides a pathway, milestones, and a timeline. But most change-management approaches don’t provide the detail required to influence stubborn norms and practices. A robust influence strategy shows how to build motivation and ability across the organization.

**Believe they can outsource their culture change.** The old saying is the managers manage the status quo, while leaders lead their organization to new destinations. Culture change requires leaders to lead. While HR, OD, and Training professionals can provide essential support, the senior team needs to lead a culture change initiative.

**Bet the farm on a single source of influence.** This happens whenever a leadership team employs too few sources of influence. VitalSmarts’ research shows that combining all Six Sources of Influence improves the chances of successful change by ten-fold. Here are a few examples of this bet-the-farm mistake.

*The answer is always “Rev Up Their Motivation”*—It’s important to build personal motivation and passion. It should be a part of the overall strategy. But, by itself, passion won’t produce lasting change.

*The answer is always “More Training”*—Training is an important way to build personal ability, but it can’t work in a vacuum. For example, most employees report that they have far more skills than they are allowed to use at work. A comprehensive solution will include training as one of many sources of influence.

*The answer is always “Change The Incentive Plan”*—Some leaders see every problem as a failure of incentives. As a result, they spend a lot of time tinkering with performance reviews, pay, and promotion plans. These plans need to be a part of any comprehensive solution, but they can’t drive culture change on their own.

*The answer is always “The Latest Management Fad”*—The list of failed management fads is long and varied. Most contain many great ideas that didn’t quite work. Often, they were apps that only worked if your Cultural Operating System was already robust. Jumping on the latest management fad is not the way to make fundamental culture change.

**About Joseph Grenny.** Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. He is also the cofounder of VitalSmarts. For thirty-five years, Joseph has delivered engaging keynotes at major conferences including the HSM World Business Forum at Radio City Music Hall—sharing the stage with Jack Welch, Colin Powell, Jim Collins, Daniel Pink, Patrick Lencioni, and Bréné Brown. Joseph’s work has been translated into twenty-eight languages, is available in thirty-six countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500.

**About David Maxfield.** David Maxfield is a three-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and Vice President of Research at VitalSmarts. For the past thirty years, David has conducted social science research to help Fortune 500 leaders and organizations achieve new levels of performance. Specifically, he has focused on human behavior—the underlying written and unwritten rules that shape what employees do every day. Articles resulting from David’s research have been published in many notable and peer-reviewed journals including the *MIT Sloan Management Review* where his article, “How to Have Influence” was named the Change Management Article of the Year.



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