

# Is It Easy To Change Culture? No - And That's Why Many Leaders Overlook It

Is it easy to change culture? Literally everything you say and do has an impact on the culture - and so does that of everyone else. That's what makes it hard. Everything you and everyone else says and does (and doesn't say or do) is what makes up your culture, so managing it is time consuming, gradual and long-term. For the most part, time consuming, gradual and long-term projects aren't that appealing to lots of senior leaders - it's often much easier to focus on and celebrate the easy/quick wins.

We don't often reward people for focusing on the long-term. Instead, we worry about short-term results. We should think about changing our understanding of what gets results. It's behavior - the behavior of all the individuals in an endeavor - that will, singly and collectively, lead to the result of that endeavor. In other words, the culture of the organization is what leads to its results in the short, medium and long term.

And culture is immensely malleable. It changes rapidly and can do so for good or for ill - you can probably think of at least one example where a newly appointed leader or, in some cases, an individual with no formal leadership role, rapidly changed the culture of an organization or team within a business.

It's possible to make changes that will support the long-term success of the business, regardless of the size of the organization. Here are some tips.

## **Prepare**

Your job is to set expectations. To explain what you're trying to achieve and how every person around it contributes to that. In other words, explain the "why" and connect every behavior you make to it.

A great example of this was a recent team leader who changed behavior (culture) around meetings, because they were seeing a lot of "bad" behavior - people using phones, coming in late/missing them, talking over one another, failing to clarify who owned specific actions after the meeting. They now start on time, people are prepared (the behavior) and they are more interesting and productive as a result (the why).

## **Sweat the small stuff**

The small stuff matters. How people talk to each other in meetings, whether people are greeted when seen in reception, what happens when people are stressed and under pressure - these are the things that really matter. They are the behaviors that, assuming a certain level of technical capability, make the difference between success and failure. Focus on these and the rest will follow.

## **Call out/shout out constantly**

Humans need to be told again and again, and in many different ways, that they are making choices or at least that they could be making choices if the rational part of their brain was working. Calling out “bad” behavior and shouting out the “good” you want to see is part of that. It can range from a bonus to a thank you, or from a “listen I need to tell you that we don’t do X around here because Y” to letting someone go. We’re always sending signals about what’s important.

### **Welcome and deal with pushback**

You will notice that something becomes apparent very quickly - your culture won’t suit everyone. That’s ok too. In fact, to some extent, you want others to make changes. “In life, change is inevitable. In business, change is vital,” as Warren Bennis tells us. But don’t forget, there will always be some people you’ll say goodbye to.

### **Make the difficult decisions**

As you change and/or maintain your culture you will need to make some difficult decisions. You will have to decide what is and isn’t ok and be prepared to “put your money where your mouth is”. This might involve walking away from a client or a supplier. It might mean saying no to an opportunity. These are the moments, when it hurts, that you know your culture is sustainable.

As a leader, you need to be explicit about your intentions to change the culture - help people to understand why it matters and what part they play in it. Work out what’s stopping people from behaving in the way that you want and then help them come up with solutions. Provide training to give people the skills they need. And remember that this change won’t come overnight - don't lose sight of the result you’re trying to achieve.

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