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How leaders shape cultures

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Culture is a hot word in organisations. Everyone talks about it, many want to change it but find it's about as easy as finding a needle in haystack. This is because culture can't be captured in processes, policies and procedures. Culture can be aided by a sensible infrastructure, but is ultimately shaped by people's behaviours and nothing else.

There is always a culture, wherever you work (just like any society is guided by its cultural norms) and the culture can either be left to its own devices or it can be consciously created, adjusted, tweaked or changed. You decide.

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE HAPPENS AT A BEHAVIORAL LEVEL

So what is culture?

Culture simply determines 'how things get done around here'. It is usually implicit rather than explicit. It is not the 'what', it is the 'how' of business. It is how people react, behave and interact every minute of every day. It's not determined by a framed poster on the wall in reception, it is more complex than that. And this is the challenge with culture, the concept is simple but the implementation can be very complex as habits die hard, and to change



So where does culture start?

Leaders at all levels have a responsibility when it comes to the organisation's culture, but the buck stops with the CEO and the senior leadership team. Everyone's behaviours shape the culture, but the behaviours that are displayed by and accepted or even rewarded by leaders are the biggest culture shapers.

The 'Bad' culture shaper

Imagine a CEO who speaks about the value of transparency and openness, but who goes behind his executives backs, sharing certain things only with his 'trusted few'. The executives that experience this become cautious, thinking *it's not about transparency at all – I'd better tread carefully around here from now on*. These executives in turn become less transparent with their teams, who become disenchanted by the false behaviours (=not in line with the values) of their leaders.

This is how leaders shape culture

The 'Good' Culture Shaper

Imagine a company that says it values and respects people's work/life balance. The leaders then reward and praise people who work smarter and within work hours, and work together in teams to achieve. They are rewarding what they value not what they don't value (they are *not* rewarding people who work long hours and sacrifice their personal lives).

This is how leaders shape culture

Culture should be on every board's, executive team's and leader's agenda. Leaders at all levels set the tone for 'how things get done'. Culture starts at the top, but can't just be dictated from the top. It needs to resonate with people at all levels, as something they would 'stand for' themselves.

So leaders who want to maximise the power that is culture, must look to themselves first: How am I behaving? What messages am I sending through my behaviours? What behaviours am I creating in others? And then start changing and adapting their behaviours, creating new habits if needed to create the desired culture.

In a clear, strong, healthy culture, people know EXACTLY how to operate and this helps them to act with integrity for the good of all constituents. This is the only way to long-term success.

Culture is *not* soft and fluffy – it is the strongest driving force of an organisation. How you behave as a leader and what behaviours you accept in others become the culture – make sure you are consistent by role modeling and rewarding the right behaviours.

By [Mandy Flint](#) and [Elisabet Vinberg Hearn](#). Their award-winning book '[Leading Teams – 10 Challenges: 10 Solutions](#)' (FT Publishing) is available to buy now on Amazon.

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