

# Cracking Your Church's Culture Code

Seven Keys to Unleashing  
Vision & Inspiration

*(Chand)*

## Summary

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**Cracking Your Church's Culture Code: Seven Keys to Unleashing Vision & Inspiration**

Samuel R. Chand

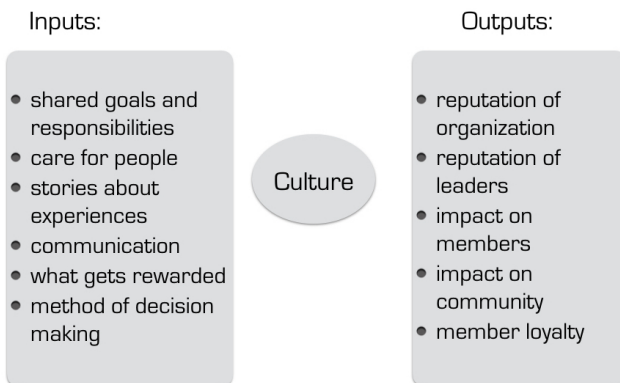
Thesis: Culture, not vision or strategy, is the most powerful factor in any organization. Each of us is responsible for contributing to the culture of our organization.

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## Culture Trumps Vision

Culture determines the receptivity of staff and volunteers to new ideas. It unleashes or dampens creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, and creates a sense of pride or discouragement about being involved with the church.

No matter how good the strategy, without an enabling culture and systems, it will fail.



Culture is the personality of an organization.

- Culture is often unnoticed and unexamined. That is dangerous because toxic culture is like carbon monoxide, you don't see it or smell it, but it can kill you.
- Culture determines how people respond to vision and leadership. Where trust and respect are present, people tend to think, create, and work together to accomplish goals.
- When there's a disconnect between a leader's vision and the receptivity of staff and volunteers, it's not a vision problem, it's a culture problem.
- Spend at least as much time working on creating a positive culture as you do on casting vision. A positive culture will act as an **accelerant** for your vision.

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## Culture Killers

### *Five-Point Continuum of Culture*

1. **Inspiring:** clear direction, decentralized authority, compelling sense of purpose, high and realistic expectations, atmosphere of trust and respect, creativity rewarded, free-flow of communication, leaders celebrate success, significant investment in building a healthy culture
2. **Accepting:** positive atmosphere though some topics are taboo, not all issues are resolved quickly, generally good communications, good care for people though staffing misfits not quickly addressed
3. **Stagnant:** leaders view staff as production units, staff tolerate rather than respect leaders, complaining is commonplace, energy is low, leaders fail to accept responsibility
4. **Discouraging:** top leaders view all others as there to make them successful, resentment is common, blaming others is common, leaders don't listen to others
5. **Toxic:** closed system where input is only accepted from a select few, leaders expect compliance, turf battles are accepted, leaders delegate responsibility without giving authority, lack of creativity, use of fear

### *Potholes, Mud Pits, and Collapsed Bridges*

Without trust and respect, even the smallest molehill becomes a mountain. Common hazards are:

- Unrealistic demands: more bricks with less straw
- Blaming others: teflon leaders
- Feeling threatened by others' success
- Power struggles: law of the jungle
- Dishonesty
- Atmosphere of fear
- Using people instead of valuing them
- Unclear vision, strategy, goals, values
- Lack of authenticity

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## Seven Keys of Culture

### *Control*

Team members need to see themselves as partners in a grand venture. Good leaders involve everyone in the planning process. They give authority to match responsibility. Good leaders give clear direction, provide resources, and maintain accountability.

### *Understanding*

Each person on a team needs to be clear on the way the team functions. They also need to be aware of each team member's vision, gifts, contributions, experiences, and heart.

### *Leadership*

Organizations need to focus on the heart and character of people as they develop them as leaders. Healthy organizations are pipelines of leadership development.

### *Trust*

Mutual trust among team members is the glue that makes everything possible. Trust takes time to build. It requires people who are honest, open, and transparent.

### *Unafraid*

People face difficulties and challenges with courage if, and only if, they are convinced that what they are doing counts for all eternity and they believe in the people serving on their team. Great leaders welcome dissenting opinions, as long as people offer them in good will and with an eye toward a solution.

### *Responsive*

For teams to be responsive, they must develop a consistent process for collaboration. Being responsive requires both a sensitive spirit and workable system to make sure threats and opportunities don't fall through the cracks.

### *Execution*

Systemwide failure to execute decisions poisons the atmosphere of an organization. To ensure that execution becomes the norm, you must clearly define goals, delegate well, measure progress, and hold one another accountable.

### *Getting Buy-in*

Successful culture change requires buy-in from each person. Everyone on the team must become a willing partner in the venture.

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## Vocabulary Defines Culture

Words have the power to shape lives and organizations.

### *Language of Trust*

- Help people know that you appreciate them by engaging in small talk about things that matter to them.
- Use inclusive language to build trust. Use "we" instead of "they."
- Take care to use positive words such as "challenge" rather than "problem."

### *Starting Strong*

Be sure your first few sentences in a meeting are positive, inclusive, and hopeful.

### *Asides*

The **process** of conversations in meetings is just as important as the topic. Occasionally, point out how members are using helpful techniques to move the conversation forward. Also mention when there are opportunities for the team to use better techniques.

## *Gift of Honesty*

Authentic conversations create a culture where the survival, prosperity, and success of the organization is everybody's business. Withholding information or downplaying challenges is harmful to a group. Good leaders listen to those who disagree with them without becoming defensive.

### *Questions*

To improve listening in meetings, get all members involved by asking questions.

- Ask people what they think about a topic or about someone's point of view.
- When someone states a point of view, ask a follow-up question.
- When you don't understand what someone is saying, ask the person to help you understand.

## *"Some People"*

Avoid vague accusations. Only address concerns when you know the source.

### *Consistency*

Your public words and behaviors should match your private words and behaviors.

### *Authentic Affirmation*

If your intent is to encourage people, be **specific** about what they did that impressed you and how their **behaviors** made a difference. Mutual affirmation among team members is particularly powerful.

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## **Change Starts with Me**

Instead of waiting for other leaders to change the culture and make everything smooth, pleasant, and easy, each of us needs to begin with the one person we have the power to control: **ourselves**.

### *Replace Disappointment*

Instead of filling your thoughts with how someone or something "should be," try these strategies:

- Focus on what you can control. Devote your energies to improving your own sandbox. Making a steadfast commitment to not complain about what's outside your control is crucial to your spiritual, emotional, and relational health.
- Be tenaciously thankful.
- Resolve role alignment issues. Find a place where your gifts and interests are a good fit for the team and the mission.
- Face challenges with courage and hope. Invest yourself in a meaningful mission.

### *Be a Change Agent*

- People in the church world are motivated by meaning. Appeal to their desire for their lives to count.
- Trust God as you pursue the vision He gives you.

- Ask the tough questions to determine God's plan and find the best way to align roles and goals.
- Be candid about your limitations. Affirm the contributions and strengths of others so that all members feel valued.
- Show warmth and humor as you connect with others.
- Share what you observe with the team and how their processes help or hinder progress.

### *Take Practical Steps*

- If you have a problem with a leader, have a private conversation to share your observations. Do NOT complain or demand a fix.
- Reflect on how you are hindering change. Ask, "What is it about me that keeps me from becoming the best me that God intends me to be?"
- Make a solemn commitment to be the best team member and leader you can be. Promise yourself that you will lead with integrity, love, and skill.
- Assess your situation. Have you misunderstood your leader? What is the severity and nature of the issue? Are you being overly defensive? How will your decision affect your family and others?
- If you leave, go gracefully. Express thanks for the time you have been there. Share how God is

leading you elsewhere. Ask how you can make the transition a smooth one. Keep what you say pleasant and future-centered. Leave things in good shape for your replacement.

### *Take the Change Process into Account*

It takes about three years to bring about a culture change.

- Stage-1: Knowledge. Provide facts to support the reason for the change.
- Stage-2: Attitude. Provide support, listen carefully, and help people steer through emotional minefields.
- Stage-3: Behavior. Help all members recognize that their behaviors affect the culture.
- Stage-4: Institutional Behavior. Establish cultural norms for key behaviors.

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## The Catalyst of Chaos

If people are convinced that the church's core values will remain intact, they will be more willing to embrace changes in other areas.

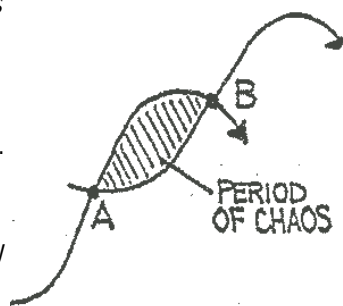
### *Redefine Failure*

- Know how you respond to failure. How do you view yourself and others when you fail?
- The goal isn't to take wild, crazy risks. It is to bring people along to trust God to accomplish His purposes.
- Respond to success by not only celebrating but by taking time to reflect on what went right and what you could do better next time. Give credit to God and those who trusted God to use them.
- Respond graciously to failure. Affirm people for their boldness and faith. Ask them:
  - ▶ What did you learn?
  - ▶ What will you do next time?

### *Anticipate Opportunities*

Failure to capitalize on momentum is the beginning point of decline.

Great leaders are often misunderstood, especially when they create chaos while everyone expects a



### *Manage Your Happiness*

We thrive emotionally when we know we are contributing our knowledge and skills to accomplish something bigger than ourselves.

- Analyze your current relationships. Emotional health is primarily a function of relationships.
- Clarify expectations.
- Learn to live with some ambiguity.
- Glean the wisdom of new voices without using what you learn to devalue other people.
- Monitor deposits and withdrawals. Be a leader who makes more emotional deposits than withdrawals. Spend more time with those who make deposits into your emotional account.

time of tranquility. When leaders anticipate and implement change at point A, they can infuse their culture with optimism and urgency. Waiting until point B to make a change may avoid chaos, but there will be extreme loss of momentum.

### *Embrace the Chaos of Change*

Perceptive leaders ask themselves:

- What about me embraces or resists this change?
- What about the culture of our team embraces or resists this change?

Some factors that affect the way people respond to change include:

- The way they hear about the change
- Who presents the change
- Understanding how the change will affect them

About 60 percent of people are "midders." They are comfortable with the status quo. They need to be assured that the change won't reduce quality and won't deny them an important role on the team.

Know your people. Those entirely resistant to change can harm a team. Encourage members to raise questions with an eye toward solutions.

## Manage Conflict

Having the right staff members and top volunteers is crucial to fulfill a church's vision. Don't let a desire to avoid conflict prevent you from removing those who have demonstrate these signs:

- Stubborn and resistant to change
- Reactive rather than proactive
- Makes promises but seldom delivers
- Identifies problems without offering solutions

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## Changing Vehicles

### *Vision and Vehicle*

- **Heart** Test: Is the vision burning brightly in the heart of the leader?
- **Leadership** Test: Do the top leaders in the church share the vision? Are these leaders the ones who can take the church to the vision's destination?
- **Organization** Test: How well does the current organization structure work to achieve the vision? What are the bottlenecks?
- **Recruiting** Test: Are new hires and volunteers fully on board with the vision?
- **Message** Test: Is the vocabulary of the vision consistent and strong in every part of the church?
- **Planning** Test: Does the staff use the vision as a benchmark for planning in every area?
- **Facility** Test: Do facilities, layout, design, and decor reflect the vision?
- **Money** Test: Does the budget demonstrate the vision's priorities?
- **Pragmatism** Test: Does the vision make sense? Is it both God-sized and workable?
- **Capacity** Test: How well does the capacity of the current organization structure and personnel match the vision?
- **Clarity** Test: Can people throughout the organization articulate the vision clearly and with passion?
- **Counsel** Test: Who are the outside voices that are helping to shape the vision and the vehicle to fulfill it?
- **Growth** Test: How do you need to organize the ministries of the church to capitalize on the next two stages of growth?

## Value Candid Feedback

Good leaders are observant. They notice what makes people tick, the resources they bring to various issues, and their level of integrity. They find people who will give them candid feedback with good intentions.

### *Clarity, Congruence, and Courage*

When a leader's vision and values are aligned with the organization's goals and the team members' hearts, there will be congruence in everything they do.

To flourish, organizations need a constant infusion of entrepreneurial spirit. It takes courage to move beyond the security and familiarity of the past to embrace new opportunities.

### *Congruence and Strategic Planning*

When you must make a complicated decision that could change the direction of the organization and shape the culture, ask these questions:

1. Is what we are considering **aligned** with our vision, mission, and core values?
2. Do we have the organizational and human **capacity** (and heart) to do this?
3. In what way would this choice **glorify God**?
4. How much will it **cost** (money, people, time, resources, energy pulled from other efforts)?

### *Steps of Transition*

1. Make a list of all possible challenges and changes. How will you position each team member for success?
2. Before presenting the change, help people understand what is NOT working and why there must be a change. When you paint a picture of the pain, heartache, and lostness in others' lives, people will embrace solutions to meet those needs.

## Transitions in a Team's Culture

Focus on improving the culture in your immediate group. Know the culture of your group. Slowly and carefully build trust and authenticity to move the culture into the next higher stage. Attempting to jump stages doesn't work.



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## Yes, You Can!

To guide a team through a culture change, you must engage their hearts and minds. Asking great questions is more valuable than a brilliant lecture.

### Personal Reflection

- What matters most to me?
- How does my daily schedule relate to what matters most to me?
- What is my most compelling motivation?
- How do I define success?
- Where am I in the process of learning, growing, and changing as a person and leader?

### Team's Perception

- What would you most like to change about our team?
- What do you most want us not to change?
- What do you want from the leader?
- What helps or hinders your motivation?

### Team's Planning and Processes

- How well does each team know how their work fits into the overall vision of the church?
- In what ways do we celebrate successes and affirm people for contributions?
- To what degree do people feel empowered?
- In what ways do our reporting and operating systems stimulate candid dialogue?
- How adequate are our tools and resources?
- How good are we at identifying, selecting, and developing leaders in our pipeline?

### Team's Four Needs

1. Clarity
2. A model of steady emotions from the leader
3. Evidence of action immediately after the leader sets the new direction (For most people to be comfortable with change, they need to hear the specific plans associated with the vision.)
4. Security

### Change with Grace

The conundrum of leadership is this: people want improvement, but they resist change.

Using any language that devalues the hard work and dedication of those who have come before us will create emotional distress and resistance. The leader proposing the change will see the benefits; however, virtually everyone else will feel a genuine sense of loss because of the proposed change.

To help people accept the change, we must acknowledge their losses, celebrate the past, and gently lead them into the future.

### Quo Vadis

Either you embrace the process of transforming a culture and devote yourself to it or you go back to business as usual. There is no middle ground.

Culture change is not for the fainthearted, but it's worth it.