

Organizational Culture Change Manifesto

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About the Author

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About the Guide

This guide is a free tool I want to share with you for changing your workplace culture. I am working on another, more complete book that I plan to release soon, and I would love to let you know when it is ready. If you haven't already, could you [click here and subscribe](#)? It takes 30 seconds and I would really appreciate it. Thanks!

Preface

I've always been a believer in the power of culture in the workplace. Shared values and ideas can get people through difficult times, and the lack of a shared mission can devastate an organization from the inside out. The most common question I hear, though, is how to change workplace culture.

I sent out a survey recently, and the results blew me away. There were so many heartfelt stories about working in a place with serious culture issues. The underlying theme of the survey was "How do we get from Point A to Point B?"

Let's discuss, shall we?

Change models-not just a pretty picture

I can still remember sitting in my college business classes thinking about how funny it was for us to sit and learn about change models. Unfreeze, move, and refreeze? Really? (No offense to Mr. Kurt Lewin, the developer of that model, but my four year old niece could have come up with that one.) Seriously, that's the best you can do to create a tool to help companies change? And I'm willing to bet many of you had that same opinion. How in the heck do we move from where we are to where we want to be with something as bland and nondescript as that?

Kotter's change model is better, though. The thing that I've learned, and it might seem humorous, but it's true, is that these change models really work. It's certainly not cut and dried like the textbook makes it sound; however, the general process and necessary steps exist in nearly every scenario of change management that I've run across so far. The hard part for many of us is taking the concepts and applying them to real life. In this manifesto I'm going to take the steps from Kotter's model, give some concrete examples, and leave you with a blueprint for changing your workplace culture.



Create urgency

Start building your case for change. This requires a level of influence, whether it be through position or your ability to inspire and motivate others. Talk about what's wrong, but don't leave the conversation as another of the all-too-common gripe sessions. Finish your thoughts with a rousing, "But now it's time to do something about it." Then do it.

Share stories that generate an emotional response. Use that emotion to drive people to action. Whether it's on the positive side (results) or the negative side (consequences), people need to hear both and consciously make the decision to follow.

A good example would be sharing how the negative culture is leading to higher turnover and costs across the organization. That's a negative for everyone involved. The alternative is working to build a culture that encourages positive behavior and longer employment with the company.

The people around you need to understand that it's not an either/or scenario for making the change. It's sink or swim. Life or death. Success or failure. Not making a choice **is** a conscious choice to do nothing about the problem.

Form a powerful coalition



Once people are aware of your ideas for change, it's time to grow your team. You need to find the most influential people and harness their leadership. Be careful not to look only to people in senior positions. While they may have the traditional position expected of a leader, there are probably many more in the "rank and file" employees who would be valuable assets to your change effort.

Take the time to seek out those who others turn to for guidance and support. Maybe it's someone on the sales team with a depth of experience. Maybe it's one of the admins who has a few minutes face-to-face with every employee in the company. Whatever the case, find them and recruit them to your team.

If you have a communications department, then at least one person needs to be on your team so they know the overall vision and goal and can craft messages to reflect that.

Consider it this way—there's no way you can singlehandedly make a sweeping change across the organization, even if you happen to be the CEO. This team is going to be doing the heavy lifting and communicating to ensure the change is understood and accepted. Choose wisely and quickly while the urgency-building momentum is still present.

Create a vision for change

Once you have the team established, it's time to decide how you want to change. Remember, you've already decided change was necessary; that's the reason you built the team in the first place. Now it's time to decide what you want that change to look like. One of the most important reminders is to know what you are moving toward, not just what you are moving from. All too often I run into people who want to leave a job they hate. However, when I question them on what they want to do instead, they can't give me a good answer. *That's a bad plan.*

If you strike out blindly without regard to a plan or vision, you will eventually fail and the team will (more often than not) no longer follow you if another similar opportunity arises.

So, how should you create your vision? It's time for a sit down, face to face meeting with the members of the team. Share your vision that started the process and ask for feedback and ideas. Remember, you trusted them enough to add them to the team, so don't write off their ideas or you risk alienating some of your most influential supporters.

When I worked for a large nonprofit a few years back, I was working on a change to our hiring process with one of our other HR team members. We were trying to decide what we were hiring for, and then we realized that we had a head start already. We discussed our highest performing employee in the specific supervisor category and talked about the specific traits that made him a great employee. Then we started asking questions to assess those characteristics in future interviews.

If you could clone your best employee's work traits, what would those favorable attitudes, behaviors, and actions be? Those should form the basis for the new culture.

Think back to the time of urgency building. The negative aspects of the culture that you talked about then need to be minimized or eliminated in the vision. The positive aspects that do not already exist need to be created and nurtured. Once you've settled on a satisfactory description of what the culture should be, it's time to share.

Communicate the vision

“*The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel and misrepresentation.*”

— C. Northcote Parkinson

Common reasons to fear change

- Uncertainty and insecurity
- Reaction against the way change is presented
- Threats to vested interests
- Cynicism and lack of trust
- Perceptual differences and lack of understanding

Once you have figured out where you want to go and how you want to get there, it's time to share that roadmap with the world. This is where the battle starts to get tough. At this point my position is that there's no such thing as too much communication. Share the vision in every possible method and channel. Address resistance and uncertainty. When people see how you respond to those kinds of behaviors, they will be more willing to follow you.

Some of the best ways to share your vision are through open forums, town hall meetings, and an open invitation for anyone to ask you or the team anything about the impending change. Some people will instantly think the worst at the slightest hint of resistance or evasion on your part, but don't be afraid to say, “I'll have to get back with you on that” if you don't know the answer.

Don't miss a single opportunity to share the vision with people. Mention it casually in conversation. Slip in some supporting details in a weekly company newsletter. Help people to feel comfortable with it.

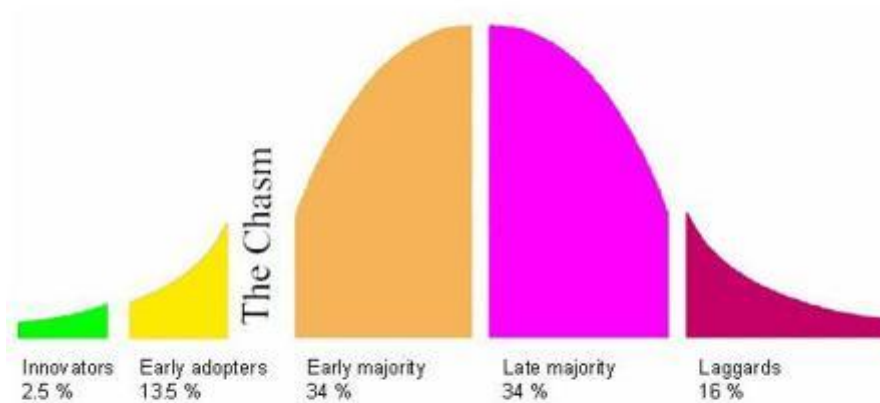
Share the Why. Share the How. Don't make people think there's a hidden agenda.

Tip: Don't tell people you're trying to change the culture. Most need a better frame of reference than something as fluid and soft as "culture." Instead, call it "the way we work" to make it more concrete in peoples' minds. Sometimes it's the small things that make the biggest difference.

Remove obstacles

Once people know about the change, they'll settle into distinct groups.

Roger's Innovation Adoption Curve



Trying to convince the mass of a new idea is *useless*.
Convince *innovators and early adopters* first.

You've already recruited the innovators and early adopters in the earlier steps of forming a team. Now it's time to build critical mass by converting the naysayers one by one. The farther right you go on the adoption curve, the more difficult it is to get people to believe in your ideas.

Remove people, system, and/or resource barriers. Leave no open areas to excuse resistance. At this point you are fighting the status quo, and that is a tough battle. However, as I mentioned before, highlight problems with the established culture and share some of the positive aspects of the new.

If someone is trying to actively fight the change, it's time for direct action. I would give them a chance to open up. Sit down and talk with them for a few minutes. The easiest advice to follow is that of the book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie. Here are a few high points ([more listed here](#)):

- Don't criticize, condemn or complain-Starting with any of those three statements will instantly close the person off to further discussion and could hamper future communication efforts.
- Give honest and sincere appreciation-Tell them something they did well, and make it sincere. People can tell when you're setting them up with false appreciation, so make it truthful and heartfelt.
- Smile-It might be hard, but it can make or break your discussion.
- Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language-This is a sales technique, and it works. People enjoy hearing their own name and you can use it to keep them focused on the conversation and what you have to say.
- Talk in terms of the other person's interests-This is one I've used to great success. Instead of asking them to make your work easier, show them how making a change will actually help them in the long run. Make it about them, not you.
- The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it-If an argument begins, drop it. There will be another time and place to continue the discussion, but arguments have a way of getting us to say things that we can't recover from.
- Show respect for the other person's opinions. Never say, "You're wrong." Even if they have the dumbest idea and are completely incorrect, you need to be tactful in the handling of the issue. If not, they will (again) close off and become defensive instead of focusing on the problem and how it can be solved.
- If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically-This can help teach others that it not only is okay to admit mistakes, it is preferred to the long, drawn-out battle of the wills over who is right and wrong.

Create short-term wins



One of the best illustrations for creating short-term wins is the Dave Ramsey plan for your personal finances. One of the steps in his plan focuses on paying off all non-mortgage debt with the "debt snowball" tool. The idea is that you pay minimums on everything and attack the smallest debt until it's gone. Then you take everything you were putting on the smallest debt and attack the next one down the list. Each time the "snowball" rolls over, *it picks up more*

momentum. Every time you move to another item on the list, you're getting more motivation and more progress.

Let's look at that from an organizational perspective. If there are five big changes needed to make the culture switch, which one will be the most visible and have the highest impact in the shortest time? As long as no other changes are dependent and need to go first, go ahead and knock out that first item. Then (as always) communicate it like crazy. Talk about that victory like you've won a major sporting event. Everyone in the organization needs to know about it, because it will help get them energized and provides forward momentum for the next, more difficult, change ahead.

Another neat suggestion I've heard is to utilize new hires to make culture changes. While the incumbent workforce might be entrenched in their habits, it would be easier to make the changes gradually as new hires come aboard, then each of them helps to push the culture forward just a little more over and over again.

Change, more than anything, is about behavior. When people think they are going to win, they are more positive and more willing to pursue a course of action. It's your job to help them believe that they will win if they are committed to the goal.

Build on the change

It's right around this time that many changes fail. Leaders fail to build on those initial changes and people fall back into the old routine. Face it, we don't like change and won't do it unless we have no other choice.

This time our communication strategy is going to focus on our legends. We will use them to inspire others to continue on the path toward our vision and to give them some guidelines to follow that describe our ideal work culture.

We often hear that communicating organizational culture is an important task. However, most people fail to provide examples on how to do that very thing! I've been testing different methods for sharing culture (collecting [touchstones](#), for one), but one of my favorite ways to share our corporate beliefs and values are through the "legends" within our organization.

What is a legend?

In this sense of the word, a legend is defined as a person who took extraordinary action to achieve a goal. The guy who drove 400 miles to support a customer's urgent request. The team that brought 40 employees on board with 48 hours' notice. The woman who, despite all odds, successfully navigated a corporate audit with a successful conclusion.

Basically, it's the people and actions that embody the high standards that your organization stands for.

What's the purpose?

Sure, I can tell you what our corporate values are. I can even give you some generic idea of what they mean. However, human communication has a long historical basis in storytelling and traditions. Telling you about how one of our employees really embodies the spirit of our corporate values makes it stick in your brain that much better. If a similar situation arises, you won't be wondering how to proceed. You'll be able to recall the legend and what someone else did to achieve success.

How to get started

Start talking with the people who have been at your company for a while. Ask questions that are designed to dig into previous accomplishments. For example:

- Can you tell me about a time someone went above and beyond the call of duty?
- What was the biggest success this department has ever had?
- Has there ever been a big innovation or breakthrough at the corporate or team level? What was it?

If you're stuck with few examples, you need to get started capturing and communicating the legends that you have. Start reaching out to managers and ask them to share with you when one of their people has a successful project or does something that demonstrates excellence. It's your job to take those stories and use them to encourage others to embody the same characteristics.

There might be better ways to communicate organizational culture, but using internal legends is fairly straightforward, it's easy to get started, and it has an immediate impact on the people who hear them.

Anchor the changes in corporate culture

This one is a bit redundant, but it's doable. All through the process I've been conditioning you to communicate in various ways the impending changes. Now it's time to make those communications permeate the organization in ways that you've never even considered.

One of the quotable quotes from the HRevolution unconference this year was in response to someone asking what HR does to create culture. I think the role for HR is not to create it, but to communicate and reinforce it at every possible opportunity. At least that's what I do on a daily basis. I see every opportunity to interact, whether internally or externally, as a way to share what makes us different.

Here are a few areas to communicate your unique culture in the areas of recruiting and selection:

- **Job ads**-talk about your company and what makes you different. But don't do it in a corporate-sounding way. Be as different as you are able to be. Some companies are strict and others are not so much when it comes to this stuff. I include snippets in our job openings about our high performance culture and the fact that we actually **expect greatness** from our people. If appropriate, I also mention that we **hold people accountable** for the work they do. That scares some people, but for others, it's a relief to know what we really want from them. (See also [how to write job postings that don't suck](#).)
- **Interviews**-some time should be devoted in the interview to explaining what it's like to work at the company in a more in-depth way. If you spend the entire time focusing on the person's skills and how they fit, you'll probably skip the culture aspect, so try to squeeze it in first. It doesn't have to be fancy, and it could be covered in a very short phone interview as well. I just like seeing the look on someone's face when I tell them our expectations. *We are a little different here. See, we expect a lot out of our people, but we also pay them fairly, offer a great benefits package, and have flexible work schedules so you get the time with your family that you need. But we do expect a lot out of you. When we put "unequivocal excellence" and "deliver on time, every time" in our*

list of corporate values, we mean it. We hold you accountable for aligning your work with those values (or not), and we aren't afraid to call you out if you're not doing it right. This isn't a place where you can sit in a back cube and collect a paycheck. But it is a place where you get a lot of access to senior leaders, have a team and manager that care about you, and get rewarded for your efforts. Still sound like something you're interested in? Okay, let's get this interview started.

- **Orientation**-Okay, so you've got them past the first hurdles. Now we get to the orientation and it's time to turn it up a notch. If you have slides or a presentation for new hires, make reference to the culture aspects of your company multiple times. Offer a cheat sheet within the new hire packet with info on what to expect. This is your first time to talk about it to the person as a fellow employee, so it's less about selling the idea and more about getting their mind ready to start conforming. *I know we talked about our culture some in the interview, but I wanted to take a minute to explain a few things that you really need to know if you're going to be successful here. You might want to take a few notes just so nothing is missed or forgotten...* And from there go into a few of the areas I talked about in the interview section and give some hands-on tips about how to put those to use into their daily work.
- **Onboarding**-This is an extension of the orientation process and a great opportunity to continuously reinforce the tenets you explained early on. For example, I just did a two week follow up with a new hire and spent fifteen minutes talking about how work was going. I made sure to mention a few of the culture tips I'd given early on and the person was so thankful to be given a "head start" on getting on the right track in those areas. Most people learn about the company culture ins and outs by making a misstep. I want them to be aware long before that happens.

I know it might sound simple, but it makes an amazing difference in the quality of the people you hire and how they perform their work. So many employees just *want to know what is expected of them*. It might be because a supervisor isn't great at communicating that. Whatever the case, take some of the responsibility on yourself and make sure it gets done.

What's Next?

First of, thank you for taking the time to check out the Organizational Culture Change Manifesto. I hope it gave you some great ideas to pursue and that you're successful with your change efforts.

Please take a moment to share this guide with someone you know who might find it helpful or useful. [Or just point them to the website where they can sign up for their own copy](#). Thanks!

This guide is just a preview of my next book I plan to release soon, so if you haven't already [signed up for updates](#), please do.

If you got something particularly helpful out of the guide, please let me know! I am always happy to hear from you guys.

If there's anything else I can do to assist or work with your company on culture issues, please contact me via email and we can talk.

Thanks again!

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