

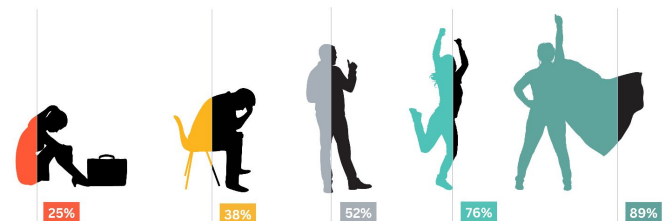


# How to **design** a high performance **culture**

in association with



Build a **high performance** culture





# Andreas Konstantinou, PhD

serial entrepreneur, academic, podcaster, author

- CEO at Rethink Culture, 2023+
- CEO at SlashData, 2005+
- Regional Chair Europe, Entrepreneurs Organisation, 2024+
- Adjunct Professor, Lund University Sweden, 2011-2021
- Adjunct Professor, Athens University of Economics & Business, 2007-2016
- Podcast host, Rethink Culture, 2022+
- Author: Developer Relations & Marketing

**My journey**  
**from micromanager**  
**to conscious leader**



**MYTH**

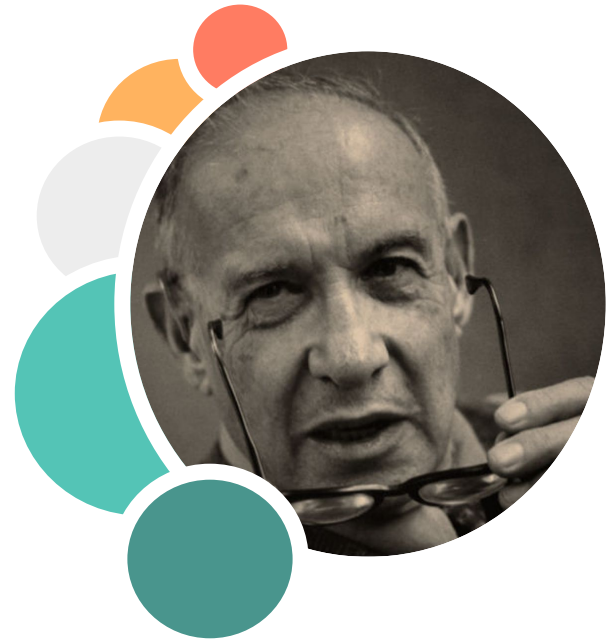
We 'll fix **culture** when we 've fixed  
our other **problems**





# “Culture eats strategy for breakfast

Peter Drucker





## “**Toxic** culture eats your workforce for **breakfast**”

The number one reason people quit their job is **a toxic company culture**, even more so than a low salary, job insecurity, or work-life balance.

\* FlexJobs 2022 survey of 2,200 people ([source](#))

\* 2021 Revelio Labs study of 34M employee profiles ([source](#))

The cost of **replacing** an individual employee can range from **0.5x to 2x the employee's annual salary**.

\* Gallup research (2017) ([source](#))

## Culture topics for today

1. **Culture**: how to understand it and measure it
2. How do you build **trust** and **recognition**?
3. How do you rethink **compensation** and **growth**?
4. How do you build **autonomy** and **ownership**?
5. Next steps for culture leaders



What is **Culture** after all?





“ Your **customer experience** will never be better than your **employee experience** ”

John Spence

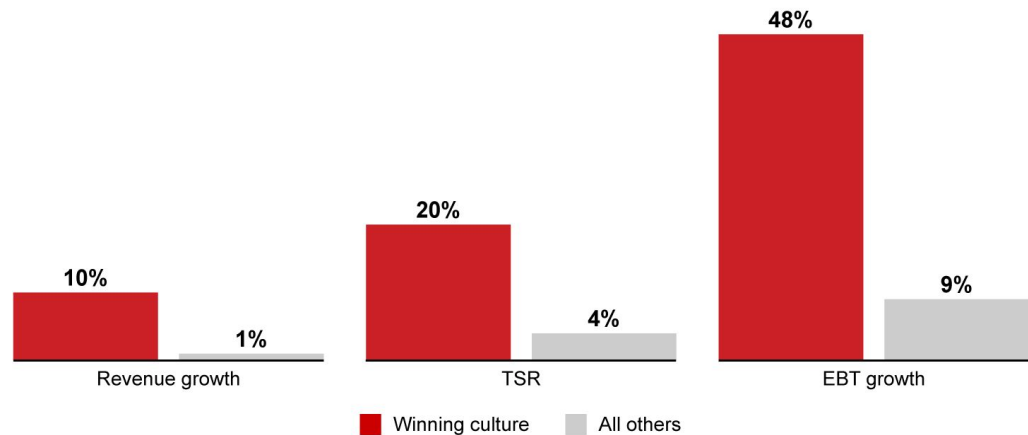




If your entire team was working at its full potential, how much better would your business be?

## “Companies with a winning culture generate **five times** the **total shareholder return**”

Bain Consulting



Note: Revenue and EBT growth n=34 companies; TSR n=35 companies; Winning culture defined as top quintile companies on dimensions of performance, inspiration, and inclusion; TSR is total shareholder return, EBT is earnings before taxes  
Source: Bain & Company 2020 Org Navigator Survey

# Countries with better company culture, have better productivity.

Great Place to Work  
European Workforce Study 2025



Labour productivity, expressed as GDP per hour worked<sup>1</sup> vs.  
% agree with "Taking everything into account, I would say  
this is a great place to work"



<sup>1</sup> Source: OECD

**MYTH** **Culture** is the mission, vision and  
**values** of the company



## ‘big C’ vs ‘small c’ culture

“big C” culture is what management & HR does - mission, vision, values, training, events, bonuses.

“small c” culture is the behaviours that people experience at work every day.

Spencer Harrison,  
professor of organizational behaviour  
at INSEAD Business School



# “Big C” culture

“big C” culture is what management & HR does - mission, vision, values, training, events, performance.

	Tactical HR	Operational HR	Strategic HR
People	Hiring Compliance Org chart	Onboarding & offboarding Employee handbook Succession planning	Workforce design Future leaders program Open transition plan
Compensation	Payroll Compensation & Benefits	Salary benchmarking Bonus scheme	Profit sharing & equity Compensation philosophy
Performance	Performance reviews Company goals	Staff goals Personal development plans Job leveling	Dual career tracks Perf & competence matrix
Collaboration	Social events Team building	Collaboration tech stack Meetings design	Process mapping Part of leadership team
Communication	Top-down announcements	Bottom-up feedback Feedback policy	Change management Crisis communication
Recognition	Informal	Top-down recognition	Peer recognition
Purpose & Values	Mission/Vision	Values Bottom-up purpose	Behaviors
Learning	On the job training	L&D programs Retrospectives	Coaching & Mentoring Bottom-up feedback
Employee experience	One to one discussions	People Analytics Employer branding	Mental health Workspace design

# “Big C” culture: “Rockefeller habits” checklist

A sample of habits you can put in place to create a high performance culture.

- ☐ The company has a clear definition of “A players” and every job description includes “culture fit” expectations, and key job outcomes
- ☐ Every new hire has passed a skills assessment simulating the actual day-to-day work challenges, and a reference check with former managers has been completed
- ☐ An onboarding checklist is followed for every new hire, including role clarity, cultural orientation, introductions to key stakeholders and a 30-60-90 day plan
- ☐ Compensation decisions are benchmarked against market data, and it's clear how salary is affected by role, location and experience levels.
- ☐ All staff receive an employee handbook with It is reviewed and updated annually, covering policies, expectations, benefits, and conduct in plain language aligned with company values.
- ☐ The company has a workforce plan that outlines the people, roles, skills and location needed over the next 2-3 years to deliver on business goals, and the plan is used to identify skills and capability gaps
- ☐ There is a job levels plan, that includes clear criteria from advancing from level to level, and career paths are available separately for managers and individual contributors
- ☐ The company has an open transition process (OTP) that offers financial incentives for exiting employees to provide longer notice periods, and professional support for finding their next role.

# “Small c” culture

the behaviours that are experienced by our people, every day. How we make decisions, share information, connect with each other, get recognised, learn from each other, grow personally, or find meaning at work.

Examples of negative behaviours in “small c” culture:

- My job has no meaning
- I have no opportunities to develop
- My job doesn't challenge me
- we don't know where we are going
- things take too long to get done
- meetings are a waste of time
- our goals are unrealistic
- I can't depend on my colleagues
- my efforts are not appreciated
- I have no say in decisions
- I have to compromise my ethics
- I don't feel comfortable speaking up
- People abuse their power
- My manager has favorites
- My manager has no time for me
- Leadership don't admit mistakes
- We have a blame culture
- People are often negative / complain
- I have to work during family time
- My job doesn't give me joy
- My compensation is not fair

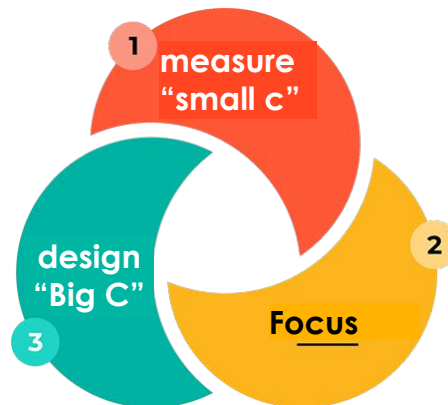


# Integrate “small c” and “Big C” culture

To design a high performance culture, iterate between measuring the “small c” culture and designing the “Big C” culture

## 1. **Measure “small c” culture:**

measure the behaviours  
that are experienced every  
day by your people



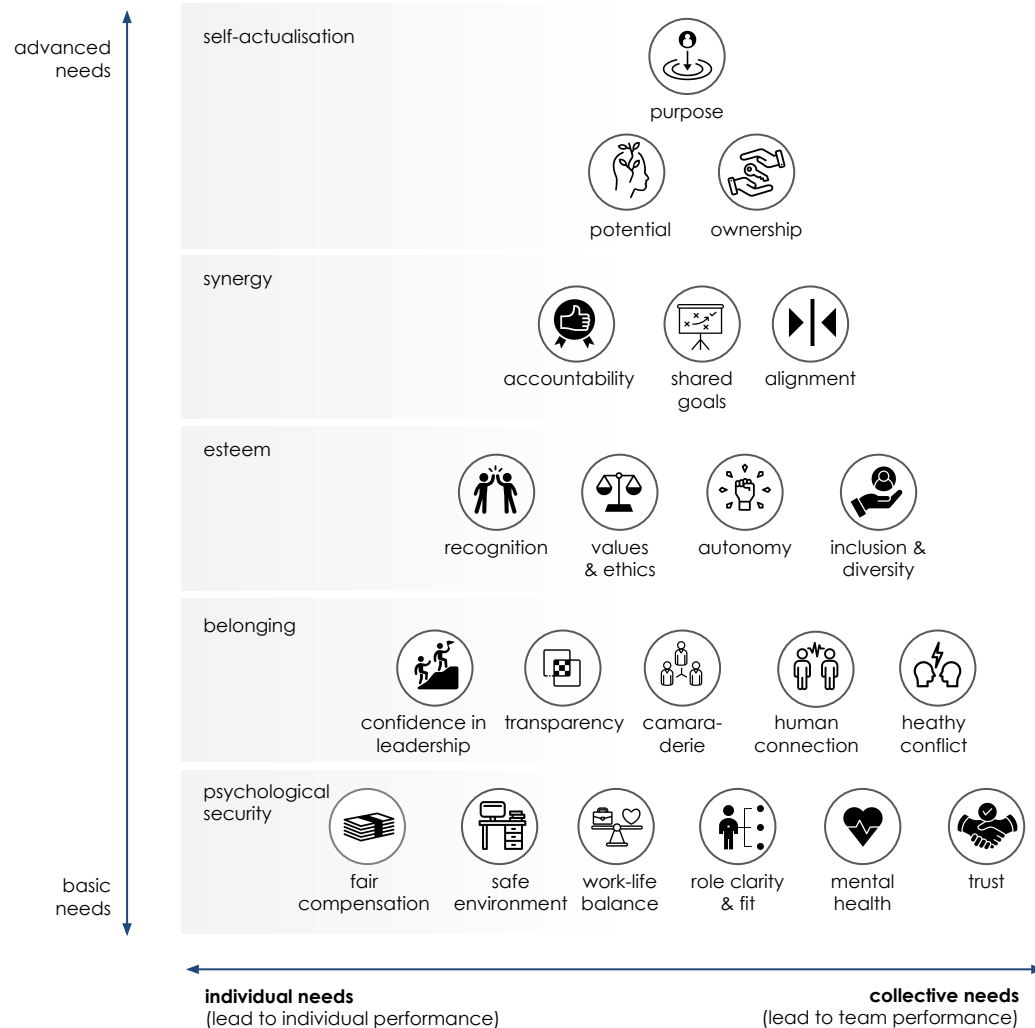
3. **Design “Big C”.** Identify and implement the culture interventions needed to build a high performance culture.

2. **Focus.** Identify what's holding back your teams from reaching their full potential and decide where to focus on.

**MYTH**

A high performance culture  
is **art**, not **science**

# A shared language to understand what holds your **people** and **teams** behind

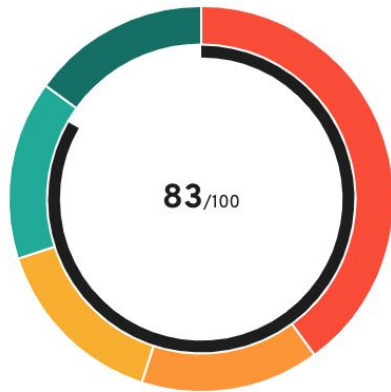


# Human needs are the universal lens for measuring culture



# What does a **high performance** culture look like?

The case of insurance company Hellas Direct



● Toxic < 40 ● Critical < 55 ● At risk < 70 ● Healthy < 85 ● Thriving > 85





# Shared behaviours = the **unit** of culture

how we make decisions,  
share information, connect  
with each other, get  
recognised, learn from each  
other, grow personally, or  
find meaning at work.



inclusive decisions

63

dependable colleagues

50

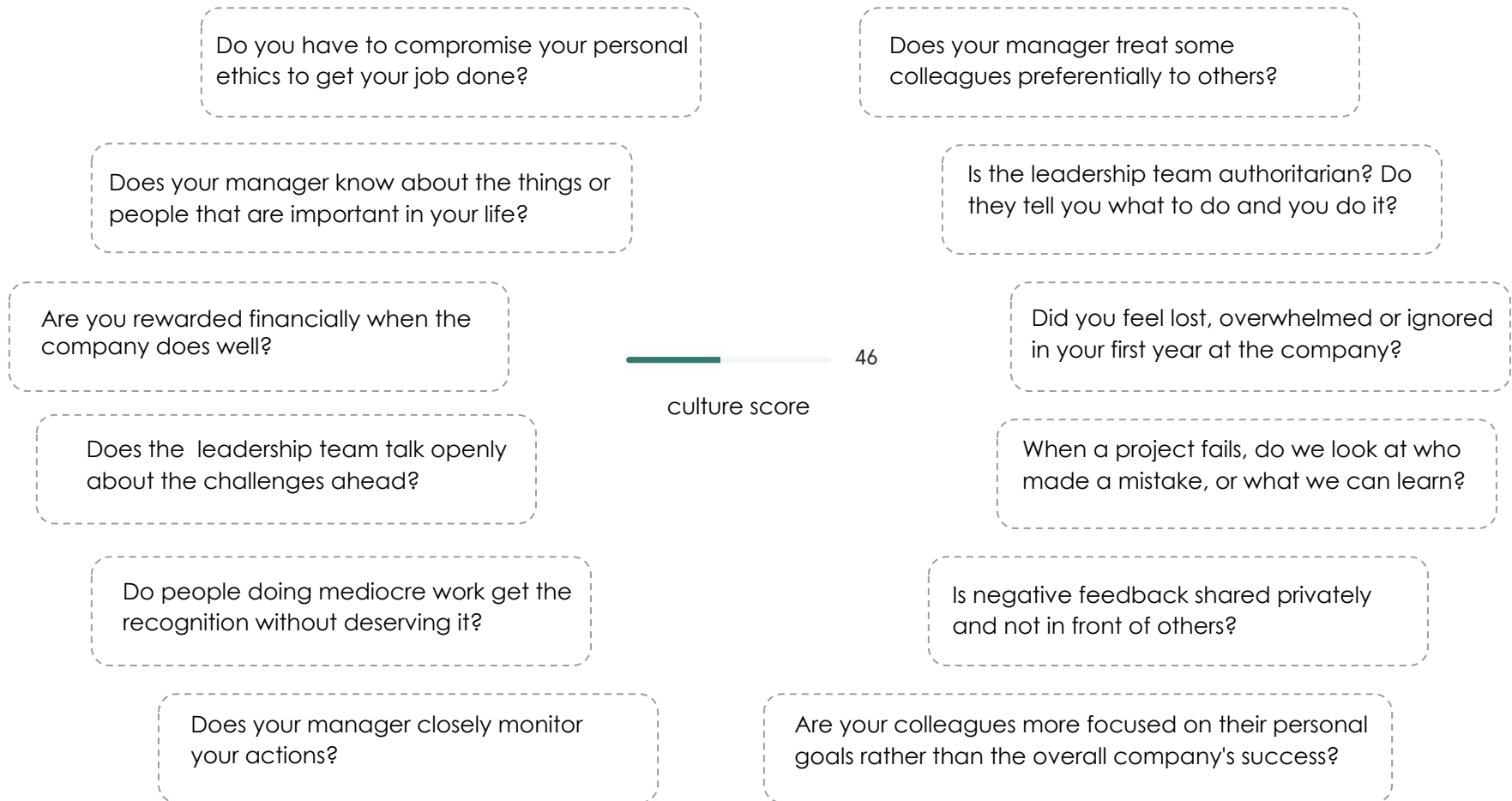
honest feedback

88

own our mistakes

75

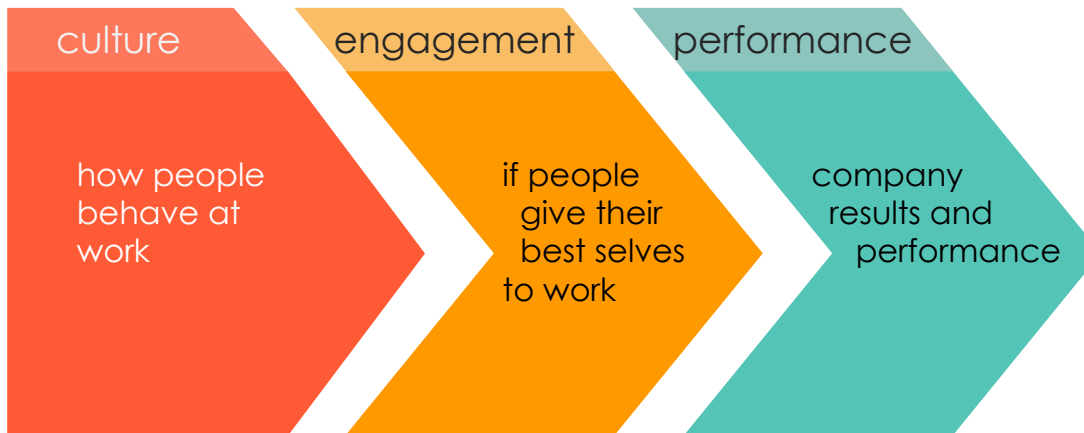
# Shared, observable behaviours = the **unit** of culture



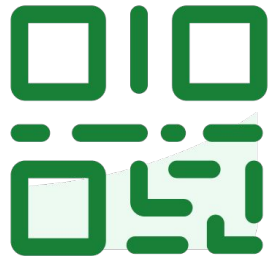


# Culture drives engagement

Engagement is a **lagging** indicator of culture







**Join at [slido.com](https://slido.com)  
#1106629**



**Which part of culture can make the most impact in your organization, if improved?**



How do you build **trust** and **recognition**?

#trust



## How do you build **trust** in your teams?

- How can you turn mistakes into learning moments?
- How do you help people become vulnerable, together?
- How do managers know when to manage and when to coach?
- Are managers aware of the many levels of delegation?
- Are managers accidental diminishers or intentional multipliers?

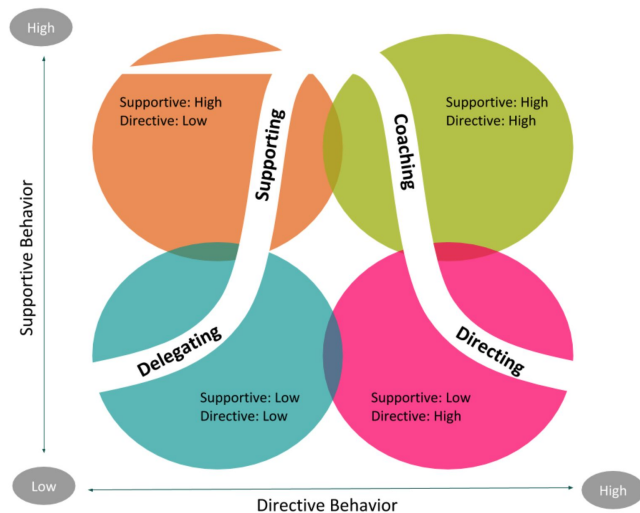
“**Vulnerability is power**”

Brene Brown



#culture\_playbook

# Situational leadership



Micromanagement can often be addressed by setting clear expectations between managers and team members. One effective approach is using the situational leadership model from Ken Blanchard's "One Minute Manager."

In situational leadership, the delegation style depends on the **confidence** and **experience** level of the individual in specific tasks.

For example, a front-desk employee might excel in customer interactions but be inexperienced with spreadsheets. When the manager meets with the employee, they should **align expectations** on which tasks require a delegating leadership style (like customer interactions) and which need a more directing style (like spreadsheets).

It's crucial that both the team member and the manager agree on the competence level for each task and **decide together** on the most appropriate leadership approach.



## How do you build **confidence** in leadership?

- Is your management is saying one thing and practicing another?
- Does your leadership talk about the company's direction?
- Does your leadership admit its challenges?
- Do you publicly recognise staff who embody the company's values?
- Does your leadership listen to employee feedback?
- Do you involve staff in decision making? (e.g. hybrid work or moving to a new office space)

## Leadership communication strategy



Put in place a communication plan for major decisions and changes in the company, that prioritises transparency, trust and psychological safety.

**For positive news, use a top-down approach**—start at the leadership level, then cascade the information through to teams, allowing employees to celebrate together, ask open questions, and find shared belonging and purpose.

Time the positive news announcements so that they are **spread over time**, to compound the excitement and staff engagement as more positive news arrive.

**For negative news** or changes that may cause concern, adopt a **bottom-up and all-at-once approach**. Start by communicating directly with individual employees, then move on to team discussions. Deliver all the relevant information simultaneously to everyone involved to prevent rumors and misinformation from spreading.

Addressing individuals privately respects their feelings and gives them space to process the news before discussing it in a group setting. After individual conversations, hold team meetings to provide additional context, answer questions, and outline support measures. This approach helps maintain trust, as employees feel they are being treated with care and honesty during difficult times.

#recognition



## How do you make your people feel **heard** and **seen**?

- Do people have regular opportunities to recognise each other in their weekly interactions?
- Are wins recognised publicly?
- Is criticism communicated privately and with care?
- Do you recognise wins, both big and small?
- Do you celebrate failures?
- Is the company taking action on underachievers?



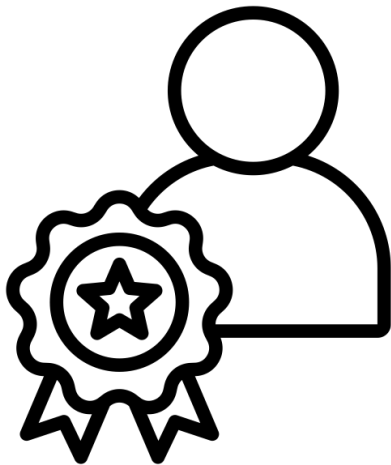
In the first 100 days in most organizations, employees feel overwhelmed. They feel unconnected. They feel **unseen, unheard, unappreciated**.

Joey Coleman





## Peer recognition



Create a system where employees can recognize each other's support - for example a **“High Five” 2-minute agenda item** at every team meeting as practiced by Simon Sinek and his team, where staff members are encouraged to high five a colleague in recognition of their support.

Zappos call center employees can **nominate each other for a \$50 bonus**, handed out at the end of each week, based on peer nominations.

If you have remote or hybrid teams, consider an **online “Kudos Board”** where coworkers can post notes or virtual high fives for each other. Tools like Slack or Microsoft Teams can also feature dedicated “recognition channels” so appreciation is visible to the whole company.

**Be careful of “employee of the month” schemes** where management gets to call out who is the winner, as it can easily be suspect to bias.



How do you rethink compensation & growth?

#fair compensation



## What is your **compensation** achieving?

- Do your financial incentives drive individual performance or teamwork?
- Do they drive mediocrity or excellence?
- Do they help people use their intrinsic motivators?
- Do they create an us-vs-them mentality or accountability & transparency?
- Do they create welcome surprises or entitlement?
- Do they align with the profitability of the company?
- Do you have a compensation philosophy that drives your decisions?

#personal growth



## How do you help people **grow** to their **full potential**?

- Do you focus on the past (performance) or the future (potential)?
- Do people a plan for how to evolve and how to get there?
- Are all high performers promoted to managers?
- Do managers offer timely feedback to their reports?
- Are people working on tasks that give them energy?
- Does work challenge your people to grow?

## Grow people to their fullest potential



Develop a personal development plan for each employee, reviewed annually. This plan should assess:

- Where they are **today**: Evaluate their current role, skills, and experience.
- Where they **want to go**: Identify their career goals in terms of roles, skills, or responsibilities.
- How to **get there**: Create a specific action plan to achieve these goals.

The action plan is crucial. **Define clear, actionable steps** like books to read, courses to take, conferences to attend, or other relevant learning resources. Keep employees accountable by having them report back regularly on what they've learned and how they're applying it at work. You can ask them **how they prefer to be held accountable**—for example, reviewing the action plan with their manager monthly or sharing key insights from courses and books. This ongoing process not only builds their skills but also empowers them to own their development, demonstrating the company's commitment to their growth.



## Grow people to their fullest potential



In the first part of the personal development plan (assessing where they are today), include an **energy audit**. Ask employees to list their work tasks and identify which ones energize them and which ones drain them. This helps tailor their development path to align with their strengths and interests, making their career progression more meaningful and motivating.

Develop clear **career pathways** that outline how roles evolve and what is required for promotion (e.g. from Engineering Lead to Engineering Manager). Specify the skills, experience, and achievements needed for advancement to the next role.

It's important to provide **career pathways for individual contributors** who may not want to become managers or may not have managerial skills, so that you can avoid the "Peter Principle". Recognize their increasing responsibility and contribution, even if it doesn't include people management. For example, tech companies often use titles like "Fellow" or "Distinguished Engineer" for technical experts who advance without taking on managerial duties.



How do you build ownership & autonomy?

#ownership

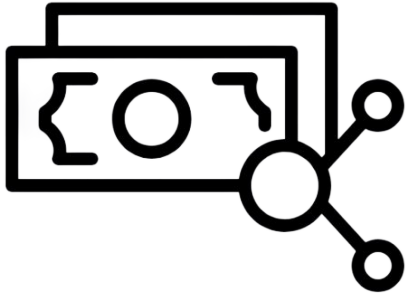


## Do your people think like **workers** or as **owners**?

- Do people understand what it takes for the company to make profit?
- Do people know which metrics they can influence that can eventually lead to profit?
- Are people rewarded when the company is profitable?



## Instilling ownership



One of the widely adopted methodologies for instilling ownership in an organisation is based on the Great Game of Business book by Jack Stack

1. Create **awareness of financial health**: Educate staff on how do e.g. \$10 of sales translate into key cost areas and net profit.
2. Showcase the **levers of financial health**: identify the critical numbers (e.g. profit, total expense, number of sales calls). Each critical number must directly affect net profit, must be a leading not a lagging indicator (ie be predictive of profit), and must be influenceable by staff decisions. Make sure each critical number has a single staff owner who tracks and reports back to the team. Track critical, influenceable numbers weekly or monthly in team calls
3. Create a **tiered reward** (profit sharing) **system**, that kicks in when sufficient profit is reached (e.g. 5%), scales with the profit margin (more profit, more % of profit paid into bonuses) and is proportional to staff salary.

#autonomy



## Do your people have the freedom to **innovate**?

- Can people set their own goals?
- Are people encouraged to be accidental leaders?
- Can people make their own decisions or purchases?
- Do people have the ears of the leadership?



People are responsible **adults** at home. Why do we suddenly transform them into **adolescents** with no freedom when they reach the workplace?

Ricardo Semler



## Pre-approval with accountability



To give pre-approval with accountability, shift from requiring approval to expecting accountability, and shift from policies to guidelines.

Employees don't need a green light for every decision, but they **must be prepared to justify their choices** to their manager and peers. For decisions with a small impact, like travel expense claims, give employees pre-approval to make these decisions, as long as they are prepared to justify their choices - which you can do by **making all expense claims transparent** to all staff.

For example, Netflix eliminated detailed travel and expense policies, allowing employees to spend company money like it's their own as long as they "act in the best interest of the company", and knowing that everyone's expense claim is visible to all.

You can give pre-approval not just to expense claims, but other low-impact decisions such as buying work-related software, hiring short-term contractors, booking trainings or conferences, and offering customer discounts or refunds, all within the limits set by the guidelines.

## Pre-approval with accountability



The benefits of pre-approval are multiple.

Firstly, it **reduces bottlenecks and frustration**—employees no longer waste time waiting for unnecessary approvals, allowing them to act quickly on small but important decisions.

Secondly, it fosters a culture of **trust and responsibility**—when employees are given pre-approval within set guidelines, they feel valued and respected as professionals capable of making good choices.

Third, it helps employees develop **better judgment and decision-making skills**—since they must justify their choices to their peers and managers, employees learn to evaluate decisions carefully, balancing cost, impact, and business objectives. It's a win-win for both employees and the business. For more on pre-approval read Henry Stewart's Happiness Manifesto



Next steps for **culture** leaders



## Next steps for culture leaders

1. Measure your “small c” culture
2. Build trust initiatives based on vulnerability
3. Build recognition systems based on peers
4. Instill ownership through transparency and inclusive decision making



# We help leaders build a high performance culture



"It's **eye opening**. We saw **what's really happening** behind the scenes in our culture."

Spiros Spirou, **CEO, Golden West Seed, Greece**



"Culture Health Score has illuminated the nuances of our company culture with **crystal clarity**... **we've set precise priorities for each department.**"

Thomas Dietz, **Founder & CEO at Woop, New Zealand**



"The Culture Health Score gave us clear, actionable insights that **would have taken months to uncover on our own**. We now have the **clarity** to track progress and make meaningful changes."

Wojtek Szwajkiewicz, **CEO Droids on Roids, Poland**



"we never imagined there would be **so many valuable insights**, especially as we've grown with many new teams and countries that are culturally **black boxes** to us."

Marilaura Cambanis, **Head of People and Culture, Hellas Direct, Greece**





Podcast

# Rethink Culture

Andreas Konstantinou

Following

...

3 seasons, 45 episodes published

## All Episodes



S02E09 Culture needs to meet strategy for breakfast, lunch, dinner and the after party, with Spencer Harrison

Rethink Culture

"The best organizations will win the battle for talent by creating cultures that allow people to be their best more frequently. And that means one of your..."

8 Mar · Played ✓



## About

Rethink Culture is the podcast that shines the spotlight on the leaders who are rethinking workplace culture. Virtually all of the business leaders who ma

... **Show more**

5 ☆ (3)



S02E08 No leader should lead alone, with Sandy Hall

Rethink Culture

#rethinkculture



get a copy of the slides:



andreas@**rethink**culture.co

or book an online meeting:



[calendly.com/andreasco/30](https://calendly.com/andreasco/30)