

Essay No. 1

How Culture Really Works

Improving Your Culture in Ways That Drive Results

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“Essay,” from the French *essayer*, meaning to try. An attempt, an effort, an exploration of something worthwhile, designed to achieve clarity and inspire change.

Introduction

There is something interestingly perplexing about workplace culture.

On the one hand, leaders talk about it a lot. When I do keynotes about culture, people often come up to me after my talk almost worried about my work-life balance. Every leader they know is talking about culture, they explain, so I must be crazy busy. Believe me, I'd love to be that busy.

But I'm not.

The perplexing thing about culture is that leaders care deeply about it—they believe it's very important to organizational success—yet they ignore it. They give it the same level of attention they give to the software user agreements to which they blindly agree 23 times a day.

[Side note: when you have an hour to kill, go ahead and read one of those user agreements in its entirety. You'll realize that if anything ever should go even the slightest bit wrong while you're using the software, not only will the software company not be required to do anything about it, you may end up having to marry off your eldest child as compensation for their trouble.]

Culture matters to leaders, yet at most of the moments when they have an opportunity to do something about it—to shape culture intentionally, and to create a work environment that employees flat-out love—they just do the equivalent of clicking “agree,” and they move on to something else. They don't take action, even though they know they should.

The problem here is that leaders just don't know how culture really works. They don't know what it can do versus what it can't do, they don't know how it gets created or shaped, and they don't know how or why culture impacts organizational results.

Without that knowledge, they feel paralyzed, and their culture ends up plodding along, evolving organically in ways that typically frustrate employees, reduce engagement, and drive turnover. These kinds of cultures are the ones that drive the “work sucks” sentiment that is so prevalent.

Here's the good news: culture isn't that mysterious. In fact, it's tangible and measurable, and you can start changing it simply by changing a few processes. And if you're disciplined about it, managing your culture on an ongoing basis can have a tremendous impact on just about every organizational metric you care about. **Culture is essentially a secret weapon that is hiding in plain sight—we just don't know how to pull the trigger.** That's been true forever, by the way, but it is especially true right now, as I am seeing the balance of power shifting over the last ten years or so toward employees (and employees REALLY care about culture). Ignoring culture didn't hurt you much ten or fifteen years ago. I don't think that's true today.



In 2013, before Maddie Grant and I had even started our culture consulting business, I wrote an ebook called *Culture That Works* (which became the name of our company a year later). That ebook included my now standard definition of culture (more on that below), and in it I tried to push past the hype around things like core values and present culture as a tangible business tool.

But that was a different time. The business world was newly infatuated with culture in the early 2010s, thanks to the attention garnered by the cool kids like Zappos and Netflix, but we hadn't developed the body of practices, metrics, and culture management strategies that we have today, quite frankly. So I figured it was time for a refresh.

I am now calling my digital long-form works "Essays" (see the last page for my explanation), and this one will cover some of the same ground as the earlier ebook. Despite the overall growth of the culture field, there are still plenty of people who don't have a good handle on even the basics of culture. When I'm chatting with the person next to me at the airport bar and tell them that I work on culture, they often respond with details about their last holiday party or the new fun committee, as if perks and parties were at the heart of culture (they're not!). Of course, the world of the airport bar is one where drinking a 20-ounce beer at 07:00 is considered completely normal, so perhaps it's not the best place for me to gather data.

Still, I decided to go over the basics again in this new rendition, including my definition of culture and a short conversation on how to do core values right. Then I'll jump right in to a simple model for managing your culture in a way that will get you positive organizational results. The model includes understanding what your culture really is, and in that section I'll give you some advice about culture assessments. Then I'll cover how to prioritize your culture change efforts, because if you don't prioritize, it dramatically reduces the impact of the change. Finally, I'll go over how to create a playbook of culture change action items that will move the needle, and then close with some advice for each layer in the hierarchy, because culture change MUST happen from both the top down and the bottom up at the same time.

I'm biased, but I think culture is more important now than it ever has been. There are legitimate reasons that explain why leaders everywhere are talking about it, and why it's now covered regularly in publications like *Harvard Business Review* (which wasn't true a decade or two ago). But remember, talk is cheap. You can't take advantage of this secret weapon until you can figure out what to DO about culture. Let's get to it.



Part 1:

An Actionable Definition of Culture

For years people have been telling me that culture is too difficult to define. They argue that it's too complex, or it defies definition because it incorporates such a broad range of values, behaviors, beliefs, etc., exhibited across all levels of the organization.

But if you step back, you'll realize the complexity of culture is what gives it power. Besides, there are lots of things that are complex but still have clear definitions. Chess, for example, has nearly infinite strategic complexity, yet we know exactly what the game is.

Here's my concise, field-tested definition of culture:

Organizational culture is the collection of words, actions, thoughts, and "stuff" that clarifies and reinforces what is truly valued inside an organization.

Let's break that down. *Valued* is the key word. **Culture is about what's valued, because what is valued drives behavior.** That's why culture is so important, and that's why it eats strategy for breakfast (as Drucker so famously said). But note that I said "valued" and not "values," because those two things are not always the same. Enron's entire management team went to jail for fraud even though they had "honesty" as a core value. Being honest was a value, but making your numbers look good no matter what is what was "valued" there.

To really understand what's valued, though, you have to experience the culture fully, and that's where the words, actions, thoughts, and "stuff," come in. That's where culture lives (and it will also be where you change it), so you need to understand how those components work together.

Words — The language and stories (official or unofficial) that are used to communicate to people what the culture really is. Human beings make sense of the world through story, so pay attention to the words first. Get them right, and be as specific as you can. Avoid high level metaphors, like "our culture is like a family." Well, unless you think your culture is dysfunctional and kind of neurotic, because most families are.

Actions — All the behaviors in the workplace, which may or may not be consistent with the words that have been used (note: when behaviors are different from words, the behaviors win). Pay particular attention to the behaviors at the top of the org chart. That's where people look to define what the culture "really" is.



Thoughts — Deeper assumptions or beliefs about “why” we do things, often deeply rooted, sometimes unspoken, and rarely challenged. These are important because they can subtly impact the behaviors, so sometimes you need to bring them to the surface.

Stuff — The tangible aspects of work: the design of your office, the software and equipment you use, even the dress code. All these tangible things can make a statement about what is valued in your culture. Again, the key here is to make sure the stuff is consistent and supportive of what you say your culture is or want it to be.

I use this definition of culture because it facilitates action. Each one of those components (words, actions, thoughts, stuff) gives you levers to pull. They also make it easier to spot the inconsistencies, like when the words and behaviors don't match. In my recent research on hidden culture patterns, I found many organizations have competing commitments inside their cultures that prevent them from living their values fully or as intended, and the result can be patterns like “Awkward Collaboration” or “Lagging Transparency” that get in the way of success. I'll talk about these more below, but the words-actions-thoughts-stuff model will help you spot these patterns more easily. For example, while you say that you value collaboration (words), in practice your different departments will do end runs around each other in order to maintain control of a project (actions). Once you see the pattern, you can then focus your change efforts on things that will drive a change in that end-run behavior.

Part 2

Doing Core Values Right

Of course, once you realize you need to tell a clear story about what your culture is, you may naturally go down the path of trying to boil it down to a set of core values. Here's my contrarian advice on that:

Don't do it.

I understand conceptually where you're headed, believe me. A short list of key principles feels like it would be a good guiding force for your company. You can hold people accountable to them, right? I mean, if you have no values, then people will define what's important for themselves, and you could end up with chaos!

But you won't. **Remember: your people already know what's valued.** They know that through the existing combination of words, actions, thoughts, and stuff inside your organization. If you try to impose an abstract list of values that came out of people's intentions, wishes, and ideals, I can guarantee you the employees will mock it in the end. Nothing gets



mocked in the business world more than core values posters that either don't reflect reality or are so high level that they become meaningless.

For example, raise your hand if you have honesty and/or integrity in your core values. Note that if it is on your values list, and you're not raising your hand right now, you are literally violating your core values! And if your hand is up, I want to congratulate you for differentiating yourself from all those other organizations that value lying and deceit.

Honesty is completely useless as a core value, because (a) no one would ever disagree with the concept, and (b), people don't always tell the full truth, nor do you want them to. "Wow, Bob, you've gotten fat in the last few months" is honesty that serves no purpose in the workplace. When values don't help people figure out what behaviors they should be doing or not doing, they're useless.

But I can't ignore the fact that something like 90% of organizations have core values, so if you're going to do them, despite my contrarian advice, at least work on making them more effective.

If you want your organization to actually *live* its values, they must be:

- Specific enough to shape behavior.
- Tied directly to what drives performance—not just what sounds nice.

This is why I wrote about Zappos and Netflix in my original 2013 ebook. They didn't have "perfect" values that you should copy, but they were crystal clear and they worked hard on clarifying the *behavioral* definitions of those values. Here's a simple structure for writing up core values

Name. Give each value a name people can remember. "Collaboration" is okay, but something like "We are fierce collaborators" or "Collaboration gets us from good to great" are better.

Description. Write a decently long paragraph that explains what this value really means in your specific context. If cross-departmental collaboration is the most important aspect for you, then mention it here. Also make it clear *WHY* this value is so important—how it contributes to the employees and the organization succeeding more.

Behaviors. Then write up a list of at least 7 bullet points that describe the behaviors that are expected when living this value. You can even give examples of behaviors that show you what *NOT* living this value looks like. Make it concrete and real so your people have no doubt what behaviors are expected of them.

By the way, I want you to remember this structure, because it also works when you are prioritizing your culture change, which I'll talk about in the next section on the culture change model.



A Simple Model for Culture Change

Conventional wisdom tells us that people generally resist change, but I'll tell you right now that's not true. **People don't resist change. They resist doing things they think are stupid, and they resist doing things that they think work against their best interests.** Think about it: when the pandemic hit, nobody resisted buying toilet paper from restaurants, did they? That was a huge change, but we jumped on it once the grocery stores started tackling people for trying leave with more than four rolls. But if restaurants had tried to push this change two years earlier, we absolutely would have resisted. "50% off a roll of scratchy toilet paper with every tiramisu!" No thank you. That change wouldn't have made sense to us, and we would have resisted mightily.

So as we move into a model for culture change, I am pre-emptively rejecting your objection that culture change is hard or will always be resisted. It just doesn't have to be that way.

More accurately, it CAN'T be that way. Change is always happening—to your market, employees, competition, and now, with the exponential rise of AI, possibly to the nature of work itself. This context of continuous and rapid change has important implications for your culture: **as your environment changes, so must your culture.** Remember, your culture is designed to drive the specific behaviors that are necessary for your organization to be successful, and while some aspects of your culture can be enduring and stable in the middle of all this change, others will need to adapt to the changing environment. Culture change is a necessity if you want to thrive in today's environment.

The good news is, I've got a simple model for culture change that is all you need to get started. There are four basic steps:

1. understanding "what is,"
2. prioritizing your culture change efforts,
3. using a "playbook" approach to changing culture, and
4. setting up your culture management infrastructure.

1. What Is

Here's some more contrarian advice: don't spend time defining your ideal culture. Ideal cultures are fine, but if they are too disconnected from where you are now, you'll never get there. Instead, invest time developing an *honest* understanding what your culture really is. I emphasize "honest" there, because most people aren't 100% honest about their culture. They say that their culture is committed to agility, collaboration, transparency, or innovation, for



example, yet they are not acknowledging the specific parts of their culture that literally work against those ideas.

I see this all the time. Most cultures have a commitment to the **concepts** of innovation (creativity, future focus, etc.), but do not have that same commitment to the **practices** of innovation (experimentation, beta testing, etc.). That generates a pattern I call “incomplete innovation.” You’re talking the talk, but not walking the walk, and your innovation efforts end up producing disappointing results. Seeing patterns like that is critical to determining what you need to make your culture stronger.

This is where culture assessments come in handy. While it's not necessarily a requirement, most companies who are serious about leveraging culture have completed some kind of culture assessment, whether qualitative or quantitative. Maddie and I created the WorkXO culture assessment back in 2016, and I also have a free “culture pattern quiz” that you can take as an individual (see <https://jamienotter.com> for more information).

2. Prioritizing Your Change

Seeing your culture patterns is the first step to prioritizing what parts of your culture should be addressed in your culture change work. The second step is understanding which patterns are actually messing with your success, because not all culture patterns are a problem.

I worked with the Field Museum of Natural History years ago, and their culture assessment data indicated the existence of some really strong and rigid silo boundaries (something many organizations complain about). But for them it was not a problem—they needed those rigid lines to protect the integrity of the extensive research that was happening behind the scenes at the museum. On the other hand, they also noticed a challenge in cross-functional communication, and for them that was a problem. There was no reason to not share the cool research being done in different areas with everyone, which would improve employee engagement (and results), so that’s the piece they focused on in their culture change. They didn’t prioritize “silos” because “silos are bad.” They focused on the information flow across the boundaries in order to improve results. That kind of prioritization is critical for effective culture change.

Make sure the areas you prioritize are the ones that tie directly to your organizational success drivers. **Success drivers are discrete factors, either inside your organization or out in your environment, that have a disproportionate impact on your ability to get the results you want.** They do not encapsulate every single factor required for an organization to succeed. Some will be internal—a concept, or a process you created that sets you apart or drives productivity. And some will be external—a strategic opportunity for leverage or a new expectation your market has for you at your stage of development. When you do culture change, don’t just shoot for a generically good culture. Prioritize a culture that actually makes you more successful.



As I said above, the same components that go into writing up a core value are the ones that go into writing up a clear culture priority. You need a description that describes what the priority is and WHY it will make you more successful, and then you want bullet points with the specific behaviors that you want to see more of inside your culture (this will be really helpful later when you're measuring the impact of your culture change efforts).

3. Writing a Playbook

One of the biggest stumbling blocks I've seen when it comes to designing an effective culture is simply putting one foot in front of the other when implementing the change. Leaders become paralyzed. They either want everything too perfect (so they don't start on anything), or they make the change effort into some mammoth initiative that takes years to complete.

The way around this is to view the culture change process as running plays in a playbook. I devote an entire chapter to this model in *Culture Change Made Easy*. A "play" is simply something you do or change inside your organization that generates the behaviors and approaches that will improve the areas of your culture that you prioritized. Plays can take a variety of forms, but the three biggest categories are Process, Structure/Design, and Technology plays.

Process

Process plays include changing the way you run meetings internally, changing your budgeting process, changing your social media management, or establishing new roles for decision making. Change processes that force people into the new behaviors you're looking for. Want people to run more experiments? Start measuring it and reporting it on a dashboard. That's a process play.

Structure/Design

This can refer to changes in organizational structure (reporting relationships, cross-functional teams, decision-making authority) as well as physical design (office space or facility design and layout). Both can have a big impact on behaviors. Want better cross-functional collaboration? Create some cross-functional teams to work on common problems. That's a structure play.

Technology

This category of plays refers to how you apply technology tools (intranets, idea management software, internal collaboration tools, etc.) to the culture patterns in your workplace. Want more transparency across departments on your new AI efforts? Create a channel on teams for reporting out experiments. That's a technology play.



4. Starting to Do Culture Management

So once you have clarified the “what is” about your culture, and narrowed your focus to a few culture priorities to work on, and then written up a playbook with a good mix of action items, you’re ready to start changing your culture! Running the plays, however, isn’t always easy. You’d be amazed at how quickly the culture change work can slide onto the back burner. Everyone is busy, so if one of your plays, for example, is to build out a project management system (in order to enable better transparency and more effective cross-functional collaboration), you might find that the work of rolling out new software and training people on how to use the new system is being overshadowed by immediate priorities and customer demands. Suddenly your culture change is stalled.

The solution to this is to start building an **infrastructure for culture management**. It can be relatively informal and flexible at first, but you’ll need to establish some processes, roles, and the beginning of a budget for the work of culture management as you start designing your culture at this level.

For example, at least one person in your organization needs their job description revised to put them in charge of the culture management process. Someone needs to be keeping an eye on the plays, making sure they are making progress. If a play is not working as planned, someone needs to have the authority to stop the play and bring in a new one in its place. Eventually they will need to coordinate some measurement activities—are these plays having the desired outcomes with behavior changes? This person should be coordinating with the senior management team on a regular basis to keep them in the loop. While you may not initially have an official “culture budget” you will start spending money on this work, because the plays themselves often cost money (hiring consultants/trainers, investing in technology, etc.).

If the idea of having budget and job descriptions devoted to culture management seems foreign to you, that’s okay, but it does reflect you are at a relatively low level of organizational maturity related to culture. Essay No. 2 is on the culture management maturity model that Maddie and I developed a few years ago. The “managed” level (where budgets and roles are in place) is level 3 out of 5, so you may need to do some work to get there.

Part 4

Pro Tips for Implementing Culture Change

Let’s review where we are:

- I gave you a clear definition of culture,
- I gave you concrete tips on creating core values that help your people live your culture



- And, finally, I gave you a rock-solid model for doing culture change.

Before I send you on your way to start (or continue) building an amazing workplace culture that your people flat-out love, let me leave you with a few pro tips you'll want to bear in mind as you do your culture work:

1. Spread the culture work out. It can't only be top-down.
2. **Prepare in advance for the roadblocks.** They're inevitable, but you can get past them.
3. **Maintain a bias toward action.** NOT doing anything is the #1 cause of culture change failure.

Tip 1: Spread the Culture Work Out

This work isn't just for CEOs or HR. If you're reading this as a manager, team lead, or even an individual contributor, you can influence your team's culture through small, targeted actions. Massive transformation projects are overrated; small plays, repeated, scale quickly (especially now, where tech lets distributed, cross-functional teams test and share what works).

Here is my take on what's in store for each level of the organization when it comes to culture work:

Executives

One important truth is that employees look "up" the hierarchy when it comes to evaluating the behaviors that define a culture, and that gives Executives a lot of power here. Don't squander it. Make culture a higher percentage of your job function than it is right now. One COO that I worked with was devoting 50 percent of his time to culture and was achieving significant business results in the process, results he attributed specifically to the culture work. I don't know what the right percentage is for you, but I'm guessing it will be higher than whatever it is right now. And for CEOs, I know you have a lot of power here, but remember that you don't have to equate your power with control. It need not be exclusively up to you to define, set, and enforce the culture. Involve and empower others to work with you in defining the culture. Regardless, though, it is critical for you to visibly make culture work a priority for the organization, or it will take a long, long time.

Middle Managers

I am assuming that as middle managers, you've come to terms with the fact that you're not in charge, but that does not mean you should underestimate your power when it comes to culture change. Some recent research reported in Harvard Business Review found that middle management's role was one of the key factors in determining the success of a transformation initiative. Managers in the middle have a significant amount of influence over processes, so focus your efforts there. If the executives have given you a clear direction for the culture, then consciously retool processes to support the effort. If they haven't given you the guidance, then



don't wait. Proceed until apprehended, and start retooling processes with desired culture in mind. If you can get some new processes to actually show results, then it will become a much easier pitch to the executives to start working on culture.

Front-Line Employees

Front line employees often tell me that they are powerless to change culture, and that's simply not true. Yes, your power may be limited—you can't change the whole organization with a wave of your hand—but I give you the same advice that I gave the middle managers: proceed until apprehended. **The one thing over which you will always have control is your own behavior.** Culture lives through everyday behavior, so be disciplined in yours. Choose carefully to support the desired culture, whether the higher-ups have articulated it or not. And learn how to effectively give feedback to your peers (and your supervisors, frankly) that helps them focus on their behavior and the impact it's having on the system. Don't give up. If you're rubbing against the grain when it comes to culture, keep trying to elevate that conversation, even if it means finding people outside of your immediate network to help you.

Tip 2: Prepare Yourself for Some Challenges

I've been deliberate in making culture change accessible here, but I don't want to sugarcoat it, either. It's going to be hard work at times, and like anything important and worthwhile, it's not always going to be fun. It's important to know that going in. Below are some areas you should be preparing for.

You Have to Manage Multiple Cultures

Throughout this Essay, I have been referring to culture in the singular form, as if there is only one, single culture at your organization. That's not true. There are always multiple cultures, even in very small organizations. Most departments have their own cultures, and sometimes individual team will as well. The reason for this is different departments often do very different work, so the behaviors that make them successful will vary (thus their cultures will vary). You want your marketing team to be creative, but you don't want your accounting team to be creative (creative accounting is also known as "fraud"). That said, you also have to know what the "non-negotiables" of your culture are, because subgroups are not allowed to vary on those issues (e.g., Zappos and customer service). You also have to make sure department leaders aren't using the "we're different" as an excuse for flat-out bad management.

You May Need to Fire Some People

In organizations today there is a distinct bias towards stability in employment. There is an unspoken ideal that everyone should work at the same organization forever, or, at least, we consider such loyalty a sign of organizational health. I think that is misguided. I think the future of work will not look like that, particularly as we come to realize that the workplace is an acceptable venue for pursuing personal growth and development, not just making stuff and



pocketing profit. And that fits with culture work, because as you get clear on what constitutes a powerful culture, you will realize that some of the people you have on board now are inconsistent with that direction. Sometimes individuals who used to be a good fit will grow and develop in ways that makes them not a good fit. And we have to be okay with those people leaving. Do it well. Support them. Heck, help them find a new job, as one of my clients did with one of its employees who was unable to support the culture. But I think we need to become more comfortable with separations in our organizations, particularly once we get clear on our culture. In the end, if you're changing your culture and people aren't leaving, you're doing it wrong.

Culture Work is Fragile

There are some change processes in your organization that are fairly sturdy and somewhat predictable. You can map them out, and push through implementation, and when the effort is clearly a priority, the change happens. Culture change is not one of those processes. It is disappointingly fragile. Even when it's a priority, it seems like a few stubborn individuals can derail the effort. Or, some external driver will generate an almost about-face among employees who had previously been making great progress in creating a new culture. I find it's better if we just accept this reality and work through it. Because of the complexity of culture, derailments are going to happen. So part of culture work that we need to accept is the work we do getting it back on track. This is one reason why you need some staff (usually at a senior level) who will devote a significant amount of time to creating and sustaining culture.

Tip 3: Inject a Bias Toward Action

I remember in the early days of social media, someone described it as a "practicing art." You could only learn so much about it by reading about it in the abstract—you had to go do it. Don't read any more about blogging, just start posting and commenting. I think AI, by the way, operates the same way. By all means get as much education as you can about how it works, how to write good prompts, etc., but you're not going to really "get it" until you open up a tool and start having conversations with the AI.

Culture change is also a practicing art, so you need a bias toward action. Reading this Essay will help you (I hope), but you won't really "get it" until you start running some plays and measuring your culture change. Unfortunately, because culture change is typically a new effort, rather than an established one, there is a built in bias toward inaction. I've seen leaders do three of the four steps in the culture change model really well (what is, priorities, playbook) and then completely drop the ball on implementation. They get distracted by other priorities, or they run a few plays that don't work out like they planned, so the change gets put on hold. It's very easy to fall back into the rut of doing nothing about your culture. Here are some suggestions for overcoming that challenge:



Run Continuous “Quick Wins”

When you’re doing culture change, you should make sure your playbook includes a good mix of “big ideas” (plays that take significant effort, time, and/or money) and “quick wins” (plays that can be accomplished quickly, easily, and visibly). You need both types for the change to stick, but the quick wins serve a specific and important purpose: making the change visible. They may not transform your culture, but they show everyone that you are intentional about it, which is crucial. As soon as one of your quick win plays is complete, pick another one and start it. By continuously running these relatively easy plays, you’ll maintain momentum

Review Culture Change Quarterly

I mentioned this above, but I can’t say this one enough: every three months, review and adjust your culture change efforts. Start each quarter by mapping out what you plan to do in your culture change efforts over the next three months, and end each quarter by evaluating what worked, what didn’t and why. Then make adjustments to your next three-month plan as needed. This is a smart approach to planning in general, if you ask me, but it also makes sure that you maintain an action bias.

Overcommunicate the Change Work

Culture change and internal communications go hand in hand (if you’re big enough to have an internal comms team, then you would do well to have them working directly with HR on the culture change). Tell people about the culture change work you’re doing on a regular basis. At one level, this is just an accountability tool—if you know you need to report out on the change, you’ll be more likely to make sure the change activity is happening. But it also helps with keeping the change visible to your people, which, as stated earlier, helps with momentum.

Conclusion

Let’s Make Culture Management a Thing

I’ve given you everything you need to get moving on making your culture more effective. You have a clear and actionable definition of culture, a simple and effective model for culture change, and real-world tips to help you implement the change.

In Part 3 on the change model, I closed with a sub-section focused on setting up your culture management infrastructure, and I want to draw your attention back to that. I wrote this Essay to help any leader who is thinking “Hey, I need to work on culture” to get started. But in the end, I don’t want leaders to just think about culture—I want leaders to manage culture like the legitimate business function that it is.



No one says “Hey, I need to work on Finance this year,” or “Hey, maybe this is the year we should try to manage IT.” Culture is an important business function, and it should be continuously managed just like the functions of Finance and IT. It may not require as much effort, headcount, or expense as some of the other functions, but this isn’t a competition. I just want every leader to realize that you are either managing the culture function, or it’s managing itself, and that rarely works out well.

This Essay is resource #1 for starting to make culture management a thing in the business world, and Essay No. 2 is a companion piece (mentioned in Part 3 as well) that presents a comprehensive culture management maturity model.

The payoff here is huge. Culture is directly correlated with employee turnover, which costs organizations \$1 trillion every year (according to SHRM research). Even tiny organizations can see six-figure savings if they do culture right (Essay on that topic coming soon!). Now is the time to start doing culture right, and now that you know how culture really works, you have no excuse!

Resources

My Online Resources

Website: <https://jamienotter.com>

Newsletter: <https://jamienotter.substack.com> (I post some of my Essays to the free subscription here, but paid subscribers will get access to all of them)

Culture assessments: <https://jamienotter.com/assessments/>

Books I’ve Written (with Maddie Grant):

Culture Change Made Easy (2024)

The Non-Obvious Guide to Employee Engagement (2019)

When Millennials Take Over (2015)

Humanize (2012)

Good Culture Books from Others

Delivering Happiness, by Tony Hsieh (the Zappos story)

Powerful, by Patty McCord (The Netflix story)

Joy, Inc., by Rich Sheridan (the Menlo Innovations story; they were a case study in *When Millennials Take Over*)

Corporate Culture and Leadership, by Ed Schein (best academic coverage of culture in my opinion)



About Me

I am a speaker, author, consultant, and culture scientist (not to mention amateur comedian). My career spans 30 years, with more than a decade of research and practice in the culture field, as well as deep experience in areas like conflict resolution and generations. I desperately wants to make work suck less for everyone, and I've co-authored four popular business books, including the award-winning *Non-Obvious Guide to Employee Engagement*, and my latest release, *Culture Change Made Easy*. I hold a Master's in conflict resolution from George Mason and a certificate in Organization Development from Georgetown, where I have served as adjunct faculty.

About My Essays

I love writing. I caught that bug back in 2005 when I started blogging, and six years later when Maddie and I wrote our first book, *Humanize*, I knew it was permanent. But in between posts and books, there is a long-form structure that I really love: the Essay. In the early days I'd call my long-form documents white papers or ebooks, but I think "Essay" works better. The word comes from the French *essayer*, which means "to try." They are attempts, tests, explorations designed to help everyone advance their thinking. I hope they help you advance your workplace.

