

MATT MAYBERRY

CULTURE

IS THE

WAY



HOW LEADERS AT EVERY LEVEL
BUILD AN ORGANIZATION
FOR SPEED, IMPACT, AND EXCELLENCE

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Author's Note

Some incidents, events, and dialogues are drawn from my imagination and are not to be construed as verbatim, even though they are all based on real people, results, businesses, conversations, and events. Some places and companies have been changed, and many of the names have been changed, along with some features and characteristics, to preserve their anonymity.

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CHAPTER 1

Is Culture Powerful? Ask a Football Coach

*Customers will never love a company
until the employees love it first.*

— Simon Sinek, author of *Start with Why*

Football was the first “team” that taught me about culture. As a football player at Indiana University, I first discovered the extraordinary power and capacity of culture. Terry Hoepfner, my head coach at the time, was one of the most remarkable individuals I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Coach Hep, as we called him, was a special, inspiring, and passionate man whom I wrote extensively about in my first book, *Winning Plays*.

We were the laughingstock of the Big Ten Conference for football when Coach Hep first arrived at Indiana. We were known more for throwing one of the best tailgate parties in the conference than for providing an electrifying atmosphere to watch Big Ten college football.

The energy and enthusiasm for the future of Indiana Football began to shift after Coach Hep arrived and took charge of our team. Coach Hep had an almost magical aura about him, and when people were with him, they felt an openness, kindness, and friendliness. He was convinced that our football program had the potential to be great one day, and he acted accordingly. He continually talked to us about changing the culture of Indiana Football and setting new expectations for us as players. Everything he did, whether it was sharing his favorite poems or quotes before every team meeting, constantly breaking down the program’s future vision, or encouraging and coaching us up at every opportunity, was geared toward changing the program’s old beliefs.

Coach Hep died from a lingering illness during my sophomore year. When he passed away, I don’t think there was a dry eye in Indiana because he was truly one of the greats. Everyone was left with fond, heartfelt memories and an indelible impression of him.

Our football team dedicated the upcoming season in his honor. We carried his passion, vision, and spirit with us on the field and ended up going to a Bowl game that year. This was our first Bowl game appearance in fourteen years. Yes, you read that correctly. *Fourteen years!* We didn’t have an extreme upgrade in talent. So, it wasn’t the talent on the roster that helped us break the

fourteen-year curse of making it to a Bowl game. And we had the same schedule of facing some of the best teams in college football, including perennial powerhouses like Ohio State and Michigan. So, it wasn't because of an easier schedule and weaker opponents.

Simply, it was due to the dedication and leadership of one man who worked diligently day and night to alter the perception and culture of Indiana Football. Coach Hep instilled in us a passionate culture with new mindsets, visions, beliefs, and behaviors that we carried over onto the football field. That is the power of a passionate leader who prioritizes culture-building and how it can have a profound impact on every aspect of our lives, whether in sports, business, society, or education.

Success Leaves Clues

I learned so many valuable lessons from playing the game of football. From the time I started playing as a little kid, all the way through high school, college, and eventually the NFL, the life lessons accumulated from the game have benefited my life in so many ways.

Over time, I realized that the same characteristics that distinguish the best football teams are also required to succeed in business. A strong commitment to excellence, an emphasis on teamwork, practicing like a champion every day, and perseverance in the face of adversity are a few of these traits. Those same characteristics have been invaluable not only in helping me build my own thriving consulting and speaking business, but also in transforming the organizational and cultural performance of many leading companies.

Adopting some of the key learnings from the game of football and implementing certain aspects of them in the business world is now a large part of the culture work that I conduct for organizations. I am very passionate about the idea that all business leaders should research their favorite sports coaches. Some

business leaders and managers clearly understand the power of culture, but most allow it to become a flavor of the month rather than developing the consistency required to build a great one. Even if you aren't a sports fan but currently lead or manage others, I believe there is tremendous insight to be gained from studying the best teams and coaches in athletics.

Great coaches understand the power of culture better than anyone else. In June 2021, *The Athletic* magazine published an excellent article about how some of the best coaches prioritize building a strong team culture and just how important it is to their team's success.¹

Joe Smith, an *Athletic* staff writer, spoke with Golden State Warriors Head Coach Steve Kerr, Alabama Football Head Coach Nick Saban, Tampa Bay Buccaneers Head Coach Bruce Arians, and Los Angeles Angels Manager Joe Maddon. Smith wrote in the article, "Turns out, *culture* isn't a buzzword to them. It's bedrock."

There is no telling what could happen if more business leaders had the same perspective on culture as some of the greatest sports coaches. Not only do I believe we would build more workplaces that don't struggle to attract top talent, but I also believe we would see more companies play a significant role in making the world a better place and positively shaping every aspect of their employees' lives.

Let's examine three key lessons from great sports coaches that business leaders at all levels can apply as we move forward on the culture-building journey.

1. Develop a burning desire to improve culture.
2. Generate and bring positive energy daily.
3. Don't just *manage* people, *coach* your people.

Develop a Burning Desire to Improve Culture

I have never yet met a great coach who did not have a burning desire to improve their team's culture. Whether the team had a

fantastic or a terrible season the previous year, their passion and desire for cultural improvement never wavered. It's something I've always admired about the great coaches I've had throughout my football career. Every day, they poured everything they had into building the culture. They linked it to every teaching point, whether it was on the recruiting trail, during a game, in practice, or even while watching film.

You can't just be interested in creating a great culture. Leaders who are committed outperform leaders who are only "mildly" interested. Most coaches are obsessed with culture because a mentor or another coach taught them its value. For example, Nick Saban, the head coach of the Alabama Crimson Tide and one of the greatest college football coaches of all time, said that he learned about the importance of culture from Bill Belichick, the legendary head coach of the New England Patriots.

Make it a priority as a leader to learn from other leaders who are exceptional builders of culture. Whether those leaders are from within or outside of your industry, study them, and become fanatical about following the way they utilize cultural best practices.

Generate and Bring Positive Energy Daily

As a leader, you are directly responsible for generating energy and setting the tone for the rest of the organization daily. I am continually astounded by how many leaders vastly underestimate the value of the energy they convey to their workforce on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. I'm not suggesting you change or modify your personality, but this is something that all great sports coaches understand and intentionally practice. The daily energy you inject into the organization either fuels the execution of your culture or impedes the growth and development of your efforts.

There are going to be many things that happen throughout the course of a day that you will have no control over. Don't let a *controllable event*—something we do have control over—be up

for questioning. Building a healthy, positive, and thriving culture is extremely hard work. There is nothing easy about it. If you are going to alter the mindsets, behaviors, and attitudes of those whom you lead, it is going to demand a certain level of bold, positive energy from you as the leader of an organization.

When Coach Hep began to gradually alter the culture of the football team, it was his daily demonstration of positive energy, rather than the words that came out of his mouth, that had the greatest impact. He cared, and it was obvious. For successful change initiatives not only to work, but also to keep going forward, positive energy must be generated throughout the whole organization.

Don't Just *Manage* People, *Coach* Your People

You must lead the way, manage the process, and then relentlessly coach your people. Ask any current or former athlete about the best coach they've ever had. Chances are that they will tell you that their best coach did a whole lot more than establish the team's vision or oversee the day-to-day operations of the team. They will almost certainly tell you that their lives were profoundly changed, both personally and professionally, because of how that coach brought out the best in them. That coach was probably tough on them, but it was only because they wanted the best for their team and the player.

Their toughness and drive for excellence were never misinterpreted as micromanagement or toxic behavior because the players knew their coach genuinely cared about them as individuals. The best coaches in sports, as well as the most effective business leaders who successfully drive transformation across entire organizations, devote a significant amount of time to coaching. They are out in the market showing, leading, and coaching the way forward.

Coaches on the best athletic teams teach and coach their players not only on the techniques necessary to win on the field or court, but also on the behaviors and mindset needed to advance

the culture. Even though when you watch a sporting event on television you may see the coaches screaming and constantly yelling, behind the scenes they spend more time listening than talking.

The Larger Room

Whenever I arrive in any city to speak at a major conference, whether it's in front of hundreds or thousands, I like to prepare by acquainting myself with what I deem as the "larger room." The evening before my talk, or predawn, I will often go to the conference room where my keynote is being held and step out onto the stage. I look out at the empty audience, chairs organized in rows or around tables, a table set up in the back of the room where my books will be featured, and I envision the throngs of people who will be in the audience and start thinking deeply about the impact that I want to create.

I have already spent hours researching this company's culture, so I'm prepared to connect with them and deliver meaningful value to help them exactly where they are.

I walk around the stage, encompassing as much of it as I can. Then I imagine the audience enthusiastically clapping, because I believe they will be inspired to enter their own larger rooms to take their organization's performance to the next level.

As a leader and manager of people, each morning you should be awakening in a larger room, too. This larger room is simply a more expansive vision and heightened perspective of opportunity.

If you close your eyes, you will see in that larger room an open space that is big enough to fill an expanded set of organizational excellence possibilities. Things like:

- Revenue and profit growth.
- Market share increase.
- Trust among stakeholders.
- Profitability.

- Customer satisfaction and fulfillment.
- Employee commitment and loyalty.
- Inspiring and collaborative leadership.
- Purpose.
- Innovation.
- Alignment.
- Revolution. And a lot more.

At first, this larger room might feel too big, too void of business syntax, too overwhelming, too empty, but think of it this way. It's providing you with an open space for envisioning, creating, and developing innovative ways to move forward in your company and with your teams in a constantly changing business world. So, you can become and achieve *more*.

Let's face it. The pace of business is accelerating, and leaders must remain cognizant of the ways to succeed in a new world of work and the new opportunities for growth and change. Instead of fighting the tides of change, we must embrace them. After all, do you want to be stranded in an outdated set of possibilities that houses an old, myopic, smaller way of thinking and doing, or do you want to eagerly step into a bigger, brighter room that presents a more profitable future?

I'd like to remind you that when you wake up and enter this larger room of expanded possibilities, take with you all that you have learned in the past, but remain open to new, extraordinary ways to lead and make an impact as a leader.

There is no doubt in my mind that culture is the way to move forward in this larger room.

Let me briefly explain. Since 2020 and the Coronavirus pandemic, we have experienced new challenges and have seen rapidly changing environments that have dislodged us from our stagnant ways of thinking and behaving. Our former beliefs about business culture, how we care for our employees, how we work, and how we lead will most likely not serve us today as we move forward in the pursuit of continued growth and excellence.

All leaders and people managers face an arduous array of fluctuating challenges. They face trying tests like creating and building organizations that can sustain economic downturns, potential world wars, pandemics, AI, and legislative uncertainty, all the while maintaining long-term viability and gaining a competitive advantage.

When I talk about waking up in a larger room, this is what I mean. In spite of all the challenges, this larger room offers an expansive and enduring vision that allows us to see endless opportunities.

Leading Boldly into the Future

We must face facts. It's a bold new world that requires bold new leadership.

Only 20% of global workers are actively engaged in their work. The global economy is driven by the workers making up this global minority. They add tremendous value, not only to the organizations for which they work but also to the communities in which they live. The other 80% are merely going through the motions. In some instances, those that fall into the 80% may even despise their current workplace and the manager they report to.²

Companies of all sizes have an extraordinary opportunity to change the narrative right now. And each time the narrative is altered for the better, the world is more susceptible to transformation and advancement. I realize this is a bold claim. I mean, when was the last time we thought of companies as having the power and potential to not only do good in the world, but also make the world a better and improved place?

Many of you may not have given much thought to improving the world through better leadership and creating better workplace cultures. For the past few years, however, I've been convinced that this stance is beginning to shift. Organizations can and do have a positive effect on the world around them. Leadership and managers at every level can make a significant contribution to making the world a better place.

As you will learn throughout *Culture Is the Way*, it all starts with the organizational cultures that leaders build and how boldly they lead into the future. With each bold step forward, we can transform not only business performance but also the world around us and the communities that we serve.

Do business leaders always get it right? Of course not. There will be plenty of challenges on the journey ahead, and mistakes will be made. Priorities will change, but the pace of business will not slow down. Our attention span will most likely fluctuate, and we will continually be pulled in a million different directions. However, when our organizational values are deeply meaningful and paired with wisdom, purpose, and action, when they are embedded into daily behaviors, we move one step closer to creating a thriving culture, and when we do so, we bring our entire workforce into that larger room of greatness.

When we lead boldly into the future and develop those within our organizations to become a more well-rounded and better version of themselves, we move one step closer to making a bigger impact, and our room expands to an even *larger* room of possibilities.

Let me give you another example of why I am certain of this. In a survey conducted by the public relations firm Edelman Trust Barometer, survey participants said that they have more trust and faith in their employers than they do in their governments.³

That means there is more hope and opportunity for leaders and organizations around the world than perhaps ever before. We can debate the survey results for hours, but the truth is that leaders and organizations have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rewrite history and create a much bigger and better future.

Many people don't view companies as being responsible for positively shaping the lives of employees. In fact, most employees are reminded of what their parents and grandparents used to preach: "Get a great education, get a job to pay your bills, and work hard." Sure, this still rings true to a certain degree, but it's becoming more stagnant every day because the workforce has changed in the twenty-first century and a new set of competencies and capabilities are required to have a career that prospers.

On the enterprise side, most organizations have been known to only care about increasing profits, building a sustainable business model, and delivering exceptional results every year for customers and shareholders. While these general assumptions are not wrong, there is certainly a lot more that is needed to win in the constantly evolving dynamics of business.

Employees demand more from their employers now than at any other time in history. And if employers do not deliver, employees are ready to leave. We've all seen signs in front of local businesses, restaurants, and factories: "We're hiring!" "Help wanted!"

We've wondered how there can be so many open jobs when nearly every employer seems to be offering better pay, benefits, and even handsome signing bonuses. The government's employment report reveals what has occurred: In the latter half of 2021, well over 20 million people quit their jobs. Some have been referring to it as the "Big Quit," and others have called it the "Great Resignation."⁴

What impact does culture have on talent? When it comes to attracting new and aspiring top talent, a company's culture is critical. In a survey conducted by Glassdoor, 77% of respondents indicated that the company's culture would play a significant role in their decision to apply for a job. Millennials in the United States said that work culture is more important than salary (65%) compared to those aged 45 and older (52%). A similar pattern was seen outside of the United States in the United Kingdom (66% vs. 52%). Some 89% of adults polled said it was vital for employers to have a clear mission and purpose. Glassdoor's research shows that a company's pay and benefits are not the only factor in attracting talent, and that the company's culture may be just as important, if not more so.⁵

"A common misperception among many employers today is that pay and work-life balance are among the top factors driving employee satisfaction," said Dr. Andrew Chamberlain, Glassdoor's chief economist. "We find little support for this notion in Glassdoor data. Instead, employers looking to boost hiring and

employee retention efforts should prioritize building strong company culture and value systems, amplifying the quality and visibility of their senior leadership teams, and offering clear, exciting career opportunities to employees.”

Not only does culture matter when it comes to attracting talent, but it is also important when it comes to retaining talent. According to the same survey, 65% said their company’s culture was the major reason for staying.

With competition intensifying in nearly every industry and external threats increasing daily, enterprises will struggle to compete and win by doing what they have always done in the absence of a new focus on culture.

The Power of Culture

Overall, culture wields enormous power. It is the deciding factor that not only can create an incredibly dynamic, innovative workplace but also drive extraordinary levels of execution in the marketplace. Culture is the way forward if we are to embrace this expanded set of possibilities and build an outstanding organization that serves a purpose greater than just profit. And one more thing. When I say culture, I don’t mean company perks like unlimited vacation time or sleep pods on every floor of the company’s headquarters or some cute phrase that leaders throw around every now and then in the hopes of making employees or shareholders happy. In the following chapters, we will define culture in depth and examine how it can help an organization succeed.

When it comes to culture, one of the most glaring issues is that far too many leaders do not recognize it as one of their greatest competitive advantages. And for the leaders who do see it as a competitive advantage, their daily actions often contradict this. Culture should not be an afterthought that is left to the HR department or a separate project that will be taken care of when business slows down.