Stewarding an organization's culture is a core responsibility of every leader. Weak culture can bury the strongest strategy and vision. But a strong culture will put even a mediocre strategy on steroids.
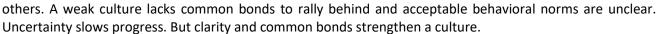
Culture-fit can get distorted into an unhealthy form. Unhealthy culture-fit looks something like this:

- We all share common background, experiences, and perspectives
- We only hire people who will always agree so we can move fast without debate
- Expressing contrary opinions makes you an outcast

You don't have to look very hard to see how that list stifles innovation and growth.

The Case for Strong Culture

A culture can be *strong* or *weak*, and by that I don't mean *good* or *bad* – which might also be true of a strong or weak culture. A strong culture is one that is well defined and will tend to be polarizing – the characteristics of the culture will appeal to some and repel others. A weak culture lacks common bonds to rally behind and acceptable behavioral norms are unclear. Uncertainty slows progress. But clarity and common bonds strengthen a culture.

Wait a minute – are we arguing for or against common ground and shared thinking? Uniformity will quash innovation, but diversity will have our wheels spinning in the mud? Right! We have to know where to stand and where to yield to build a strong, healthy culture.

Cultural Clarity

Healthy cultures have non-negotiables but also have clarity about the boundaries of those non-negotiables. We need to hold fast to those things that define us and hold everything else more loosely. But a healthy culture won't shutdown questions even about the non-negotiables. It will embrace questions to bring clarity.

Values are the cornerstone of a culture. Not everyone in an organization will embrace all the organization's values as their own. But they should be able to connect the dots between their personal values and the organization's. And no one should work for an organization whose values conflict with their own.

Behavioral norms also define a culture. It's not only what we do but how we do it that determines our influence. Innovation will be lost if the innovator is not attuned to how to pitch their ideas effectively in this culture.

Clarity about behavioral norms and how values get applied equip staff to make consistent decisions when the boss isn't around. Too often the boss assumes "everyone knows" and then stops trusting others when they fail to execute on his unspoken expectations. Building a strong, healthy culture takes continuous, intentional effort.

We all have personal biases that blind us to some of our own cultural realities. So we need honest input from others – especially those we lead – to see clearly.

A thriving culture is not made with a cookie-cutter. But diversity that is blind to culture won't drive innovation.

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