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# Cultivating Culture

Culture matters. It's a core organizational asset.



The role of leadership is to build a strong organizational culture based on a nonprofit's purpose, mission, vision, and values. You want people at every level of your enterprise to have a clear sense of its purpose as well as its immediate and long-term goals, and to feel a sense of belonging and respect. An exceptional culture will attract great employees and volunteers, board members, and supportive donors who can propel your mission forward.

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## **A Values-Based Culture**

To lead a nonprofit through changing times, remember why the organization exists and what it stands for. Be conscious of the culture that you want and use every opportunity to create and nurture it.

Culture is built upon your nonprofit's values. Your staff and board must articulate and embrace those values. If you don't develop processes collaboratively by inviting input from all stakeholders, your culture may become plagued by simmering resentments. Many unproductive attitudes can infect an organization that does not pay close attention to its mission, vision, and values. A culture that promotes and rewards respect and trust will be healthy and productive.

To build an energetic environment and culture, you have to be explicit about the behaviors that you value. Reward the behaviors that reinforce the culture you're striving for, aligned with policies and practices. Seek a clear understanding of why staff and volunteers stay or why they leave the organization; and what this might say about your operation.

Your constituents' needs change, staff and boards come and go, new tools emerge, and economies shift. In a dynamic work environment, you will never be "done" putting management systems and processes into effect. But through it all, the quality of the workplace experience is defined by the consistency of the values that you consciously cultivate and communicate.

Your culture is also visible externally to all of your constituents, volunteers, donors, patrons, and government contract funders. Clearly communicating and promoting your nonprofit's impact and being transparent about the effective stewardship of



resources serve as inspiration for your supporters to engage with, contribute to, and advocate for your mission.

I like to think that at Applied Materials we hired the right people and listened to them carefully. We supported their efforts with the required resources and encouragement, even in tough, cyclical times. In return, all of those elements produced a culture where work was valued and where people worked hard for success.

When things are going well, it's easy to take your culture for granted. When things aren't going well, many managers will focus on some quality that they believe is deficient. They might suddenly decide, "we need to change the culture" or "we need to bring in a consultant." Catchy slogans are developed and printed on mugs and t-shirts, an offsite is scheduled, and the topic of "culture" is suddenly on the agenda of every meeting.

But you will never change an organization's culture just by telling employees that the culture needs to change. An offsite discussion might help you reach agreement about what is out of alignment, but it won't create permanent change. You must do something, take deliberate action. Make real changes and communicate them — not just once, but repeatedly and consistently.

If you want to build a certain kind of culture, or you want to rebuild a failing culture, you need the right structure, processes, and people. Analyze your operations for gaps or misalignment. Make sure your managers are accountable for prioritizing change, and that your team is as skilled and focused as possible. If you do these things properly, your culture will change over time. It's every team member's job to "walk the talk" and commit to building a great enterprise.

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## **Tone at the Top**

A board's responsibility includes the oversight of a healthy internal culture. While your board has limited exposure to your nonprofit's day-to-day operation, it must ensure that the chief executive is articulating the organization's values and cultivating culture at every level.

Boards should also be aligned with the values of the organization. When board members behave courteously and respectfully toward each other and management, they set an example for staff to emulate. The culture of the board is part of the "tone at the top."

As it's so often said, culture eats strategy for breakfast. Culture matters. It's your core organizational asset and establishes whether your nonprofit is just good — or if it becomes great.



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## Conversation Starters

### *For Chief Executives*

1. How do your actions and behaviors help to cultivate your desired culture? What three actions or behaviors can you commit to improving?
2. What processes do you have in place to seek feedback about your culture from all stakeholders? How do you address any misalignments between the real and perceived culture of your organization?

### *For Staff Team Members*

1. Describe your nonprofit's purpose and values; how do your daily actions and behaviors align with those values? What could help you bring them into greater alignment?
2. In what ways does your workplace reflect a healthy culture? (In what ways does it not?) What three ideas do you have that could strengthen your organization's culture?

### *For Board Members*

1. How does the board ensure that the chief executive is cultivating a healthy culture?
2. Thinking about the board's decision-making processes, actions and behaviors, how would you describe the culture of your board? How well does the board's culture align with the organization's broader culture and values?

### *For Individual Donors*

1. What can you tell about an organization's culture and values from looking at its website, annual report, promotional materials or donation appeals?
2. What impact might an organization's culture have on its ability to deliver on its mission?

### *For Institutional Philanthropies*

1. To what degree do the values of your grantees align with your institution's values? How could greater alignment benefit both you and your grantees?
2. How do you assess a nonprofit's culture? Why might it be important for you to consider that culture as part of your due diligence process?