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# **Cultivating Culture:**

*Leaders plant the seeds  
and make the weather*



# CULTIVATING CULTURE: LEADERS PLANT THE SEEDS AND MAKE THE WEATHER

*By InnerDrive*



## WHAT IS ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE?

Organisational culture is the invisible force that shapes how staff think, feel and behave at school. It is the shared values, beliefs and assumptions that guide daily actions, often without anyone needing to say a word. As Edgar Schein (1985), one of the foremost thinkers in this field, put it, **“Culture is to a group what personality is to an individual”**.

Culture is not just about mission statements or posters on the wall. It is about what gets rewarded, what gets ignored and how people behave when no one is watching. It is the tone leaders set, the stories people tell and the rituals that reinforce what matters most.


## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Seminal research has consistently shown that culture is a powerful driver of organisational success or failure. A common theme in the research literature is the idea that culture sits, often silently, behind the behaviours of its members.

Popular definitions of organisational culture include:

**“The way things get done around here”** (Deal & Kennedy, 1982)

**“The underlying values, beliefs and principles that serve as a foundation of an organisation”** (Denison, 1990)



Schein (1990) argued that culture operates on three levels: artefacts (visible structures and processes), espoused values (strategies and goals) and basic underlying assumptions (unconscious beliefs and perceptions). His iceberg model illustrates that while some cultural elements are visible, others become increasingly less apparent, residing as deeply ingrained assumptions. Deal and Peterson (2016) were instrumental in applying Schein's work to schools and argued that "Nothing is more important about a school than its culture." They also emphasised the key role that stakeholders have in its creation and how the first step to improvement is a deep understanding of its history.

## WHY IS CULTURE IMPORTANT?

Culture is often a foundational element in the success or failure of school programmes and should remain a key consideration for leaders for the following reasons:

**It shapes behaviour:** culture influences how people make decisions, solve problems and interact with one another and paradoxically those behaviours then cyclically affect the culture.

**It drives engagement and effectiveness:** a comprehensive evidence review by the CIPD (2020) concluded that culture is strongly linked to staff engagement, innovation and long-term performance.

**It supports change:** a strong culture can act as a stabilising force during times of transformation, helping staff navigate uncertainty. Kotter and Heskett (1992) found that organisations with strong, adaptive cultures significantly outperformed those with weak or rigid cultures.

**It provides a shared identity:** culture is the glue that binds people together, giving them a common purpose, aligned goals and a sense of belonging (Macionis & Plummer, 2012).

**Toxic cultures are destructive:** negativity, distrust, isolation, cynicism, resistance to change and a focus on blame or self-preservation can hinder learning and lead to burnout (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

## HOW CAN LEADERS CULTIVATE IT?

Although culture creation and cultivation is a key part of a leader's role, it cannot be achieved in isolation or by declaration. The best leaders collaboratively create the conditions for it to flourish and utilise the following five evidence-informed strategies.

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## 1. Deliberate Design

Culture begins with intentionality. Leaders must design systems, structures and symbols that reflect and reinforce the values they aim to embed and the behaviours they want to see. This “design and refine” process must be collaborative as school culture should be seen as the responsibility of everyone (Kaufman, 2012).

## 2. Model the Values

Culture starts at the top. Leaders must embody the behaviours they want to see. If collaboration is a core value, leaders should be seen collaborating. If integrity matters, they must act with transparency and fairness. As Schein (1985) noted, “leaders don’t just tell people what the culture is; they show it through their own actions and decisions.”

## 3. Tell the Story

Stories are powerful carriers of culture. Leaders should share narratives that highlight key moments, decisions and people that reflect the school’s values. These stories become part of the collective memory as “people are moved to act not by facts or theories, but by values communicated through stories.” (Ganz, 2011)

## 4. Create Feedback Loops

Culture is dynamic. Leaders should regularly seek feedback from across the school to understand how culture is experienced on the ground. Tools like anonymous surveys, focus groups and pulse checks can help identify gaps between espoused values and lived reality.

## 5. Celebrate What You Want to See

What gets recognised gets repeated. Leaders should spotlight behaviours that align with the desired culture, whether it is a team that collaborated across departments or an individual who showed resilience in the face of challenge.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Culture is not a side project; it is the ecosystem in which everything else lives. The success of school initiatives and improvement efforts can often be tracked back to an element of culture and so it is

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too important to ignore. Leaders must understand that while they cannot directly control culture, they shape it through every decision, conversation and action.

If you want to change the culture in your school, start by reviewing its impact, exploring its roots, designing a more compelling future and then changing people's actions. Because in the end, culture is not what we say; it is what we consistently do.

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## REFERENCES

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Articles

What Makes a Good School Culture? – Harvard Graduate School of Education (2018) <https://shorturl.at/f4SxN>

### Books

*The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* – Daniel Coyle (2019) <https://shorturl.at/RibG4>

*Building Culture: A handbook to harnessing human nature to create strong school teams* – Lekha Sharma (2023) <https://shorturl.at/WMo1x>

*Reconnect: Building School Culture for Meaning, Purpose, and Belonging* – Doug Lemov et al (2022) <https://shorturl.at/XKeeR>



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