

THE CULTURE CONVERSATION GUIDE

John O. Burdett



TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

John O. Burdett



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THE **CULTURE** **CONVERSATION GUIDE**

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WHAT IS CULTURE?

At one level, culture is a myth. It only exists in the minds of those who are immersed in it.

At a different level, culture is a multifaceted, interdependent system that will change whether those involved want it to or not.

Finally, culture can be seen as the interconnected beliefs, values, symbols, story and artifacts that, when managed with purpose, meaning and measurement support (i) the organization's inward-looking (why work here?) and (ii) the outward-facing value proposition (why buy from us?).



INTRODUCTION

When speaking at a major international conference, I asked 100+ CEOs to score (on a 1-10 scale) how important culture was to their organization. The response was a consistent 9 or 10. I then asked, “Using the same scale – and compared to the time invested on strategy – how much time do you spend on culture?” The most common response was a 3 or 4.

It’s not that leaders see culture as purely a secondary issue. Indeed, as organizations strive to become flatter, faster, more focused and better able to foster innovation, culture moves to center stage. The problem? Culture is, all-too-often, portrayed as an esoteric, delegate-it-to-HR, piecemeal project. The problem? Executives need to know how to have the culture conversation.

What follows is a simple guide focusing on the culture conversation. It draws on “hands on” work undertaken by the author on culture for some of the world’s largest organizations; work that encompasses five continents.

The A-Z format is merely a convenient way to package the ideas and suggestions outlined. There is no intent to suggest a priority or hierarchy of ideas. That will, of course, differ from organization to organization.

Each letter of the alphabet introduces: (i) a brief explanation of the suggested subtheme; (ii) a great question; and (iii) a thought-provoking quote. Several of the quotes have a compelling origin. Having worked with indigenous people in Australia, the US and Canada, I have been struck by how deep and meaningful their appreciation of culture is. What we lost amid the mist of time, our indigenous cousins have kept alive. What we see as someone else’s problem, they view as a natural extension of who they are. They are their culture. And although we don’t always realise it, so are we!

John. O. Burdett



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THE CULTURE CONVERSATION GUIDE



***“Know that what got you here,
won’t get you to where you need to be.”***

Approach Culture from the Outside-in



- Where cultural initiatives are defined/managed from the inside-out, few, if any, organizations succeed. Kodak, Nokia, the record industry, Blockbuster, and BlackBerry come to mind.
- On any intended work on culture, it is a business imperative that the emerging competitive, social, economic and political landscape be fully understood.
- The culture will change whether we want it to or not. The challenge is to get ahead of the curve; to address culture before you have to ... when it's, invariably, too late.
- Here we need to factor in that since the turn of this century there has been an undeniable shift of power from the enterprise to the employee. Although union power in the US had to be reined in during the middle of the last century (Taft Harley, 1947), we need to go back to Europe in the Middle Ages for an equally dramatic societal realignment. When the plague wiped out whole communities, landowners had no choice but to replace "serfdom" with a wage economy.
- Today's reality? Stakeholders – all stakeholders – need to be heard as part of the culture conversation. Skew the decision-making to benefit one stakeholder over the others and expect the organization to stumble. GE's exclusive focus on shareholder value, at the turn of this century, being a case in point.

Key Question: "What do tomorrow's customers want to buy and how do they want to buy it?"

"Change without context is momentum without meaning."

– John O. Burdett

Be Aware of the Talent Pool



- Culture flourishes where what's needed and what's possible are aligned.
- You can source the seeds, irrigate the fields and market the potential harvest but if you don't have the right horses to pull the plow ... failure beckons.
- Leaders look predominantly for one of three things in their role: (i) making money; (ii) making a career; or (iii) making a difference. The leaders who will take people where they would otherwise not go are driven to make a difference.
- It's especially important to regularly assess the talent, capability and character of those in mission critical roles. That is, assess: (i) the organization's succession needs; (ii) the likelihood that the individual in question is a retention concern; and (iii) the culture the organization needs to create.
- It may cost as much as the annual salary to recruit a senior leader. A far greater cost, however, occurs when a key role is left open for an extended period.
- In that top talent is ever more difficult to find, working with a top executive search company to be on the lookout for specific areas of talent is a smart move (talent scouting).

Key Question: “Are all of those holding down mission-critical roles – starting with the CEO – equipped (competency + drive + character) for the cultural journey being envisaged?”

“Talent is a gift; character is a choice.”

– John O. Burdett

Culture Is A System



- Culture is a complex, interdependent system. Complexity + “the butterfly effect” means that a piecemeal approach to culture (common) is, at best, a mistake in the making.
- Working on the organization’s values, for example, without considering how those values support (or not) the organization’s cultural pillars invariably leads to unintended consequences.
- There are four (essential) cultural pillars: (i) purpose; (ii) diversity; (iii) speed; and (iv) brand. In a tech company technology should also be thought of as a cultural pillar.
- The right values “brace and strengthen” the organization’s cultural pillars. Purpose without the right values is a “what” without a meaningful “how.” Diversity without supportive values becomes a numbers game. Brand without appropriate values becomes manipulation. And speed not supported by the right values is an accident waiting to happen.
- In an unpredictable world, nothing about culture is written in stone. The cultural pillars, the values and the rest of the cultural system must be revisited regularly.

Key Question: “Is the ongoing dialogue on culture – especially at the top of the organization – firmly anchored in a systems model of culture; one that displays how all the elements that shape the emerging culture come together?” Without such a model, it’s difficult to see where any meaningful degree of consensus and/or collaboration is possible. **See Figure one.**

“Brand = Better Results And No Disappointment.”

– John O. Burdett



John O. Burdett.

Taken from the A-Z of
Organization Culture (2017)

*The emerging
context*

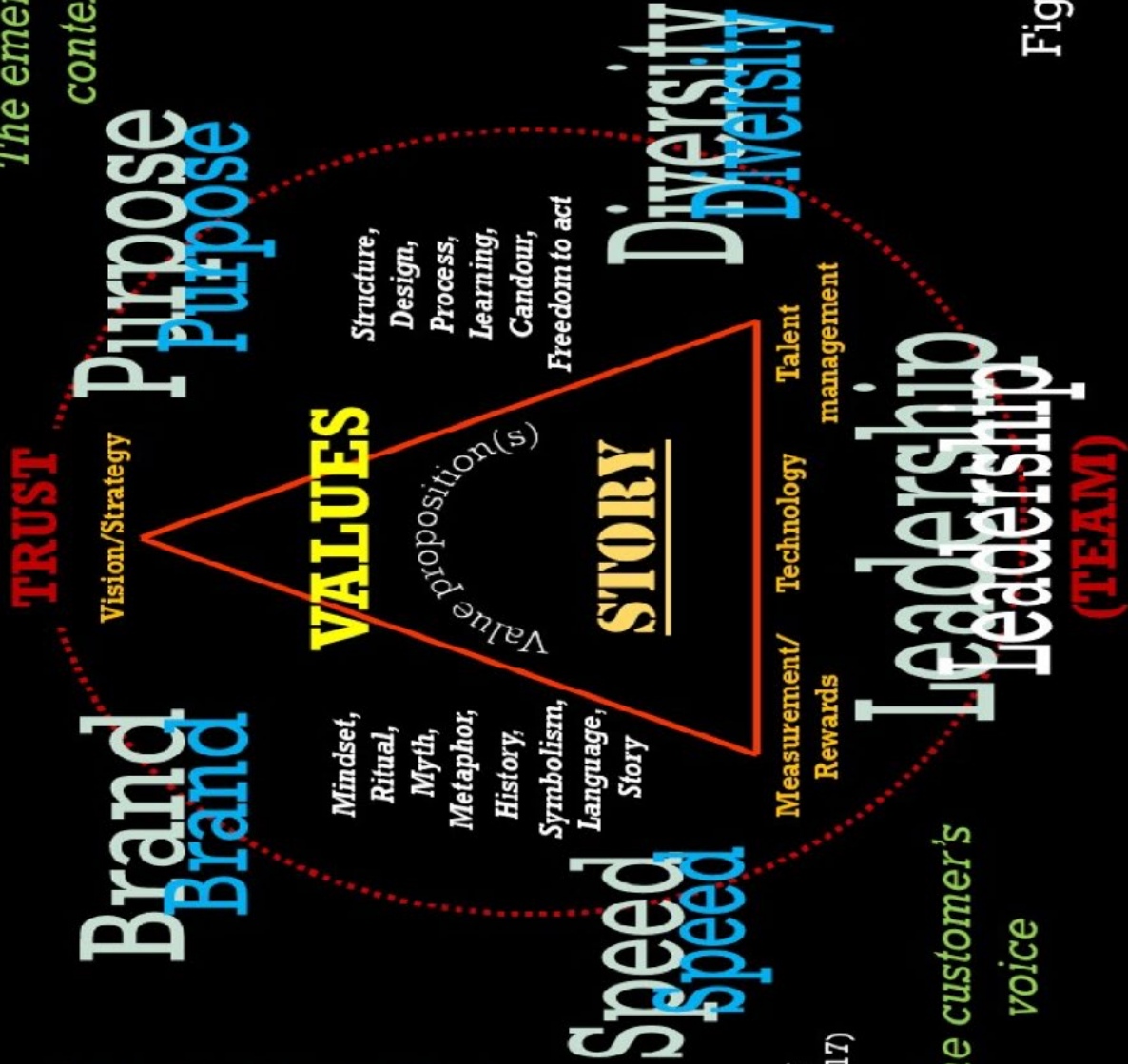


Figure one

Drivers, Enablers and Cultural Anchors



And the rest of the system? Managing the business from the outside-in + the culture anchors + values defines the context. The table is set. The work on culture can move forward. There are three cultural imperatives that the top team must get right.

- 1. The cultural drivers:** vision/strategy; what the organization measures and rewards; technology and the impact of talent management.
- 2. The cultural enablers:** structure; design; technology; process; psychological safety; the nature of engagement; and how people learn.
- 3. The cultural anchors:** issues if not addressed hold the organization back – imagery; myth; symbolism; ritual; mindset; story; language; metaphor; and the history the organization must move away from.

Culture matters! The above come together (synergistically) to support the organization's dual value propositions. Externally facing – Why buy from us? **See Figure two.** And the more important internally facing – Why work here?

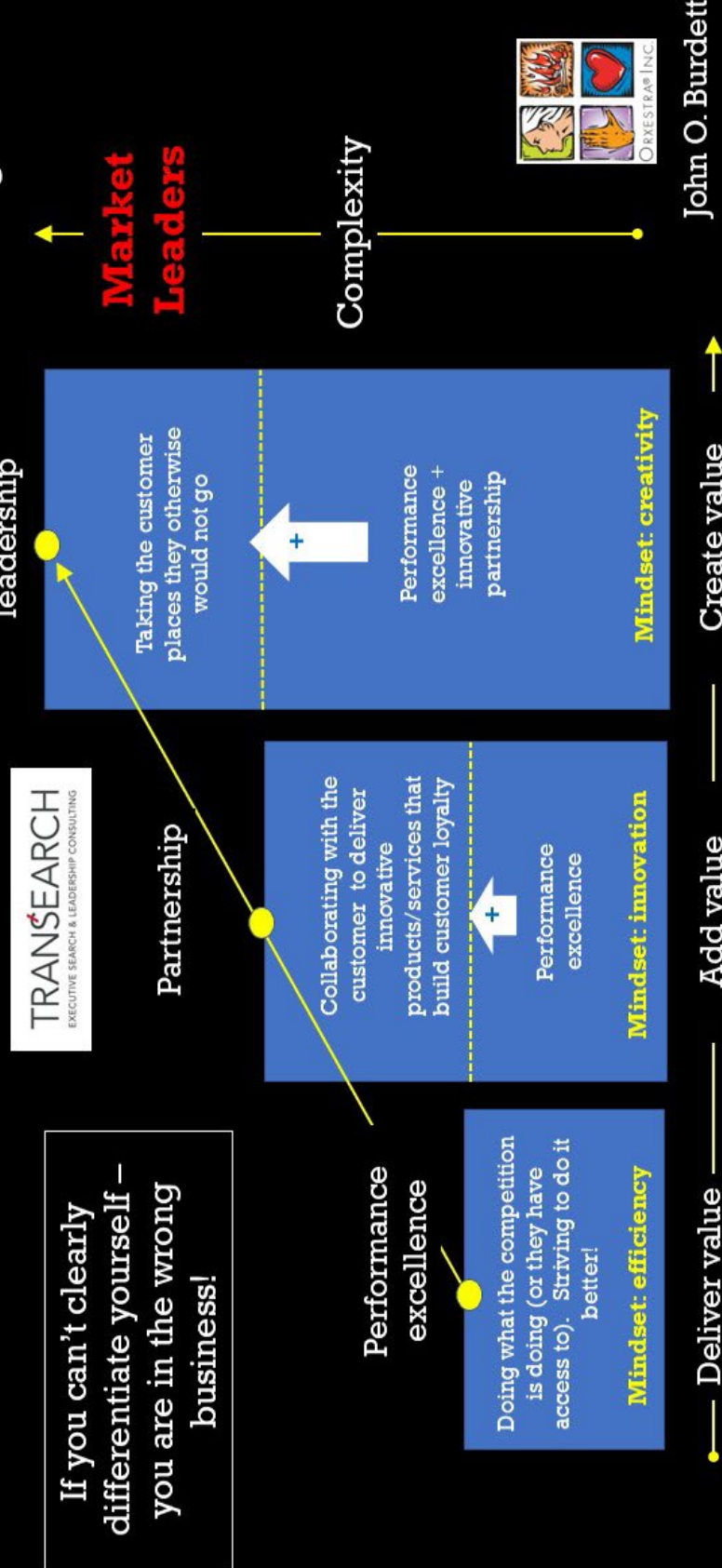
Nothing much happens, of course, without inspirational leadership. “Inspiration” comes from the Latin *spiritus* – to breathe life into. To lead is to breathe life into “needed culture” every day, in every single way.

Key Question: “Beginnings start with endings. Are those in key leadership roles truly addressing the cultural anchors?” If not, there is an emotionally charged “technical term” you will quickly run into: “We’re stuck!”

“A system can never be stronger than its weakest link.”

– John O. Burdett

Figure two



Business model: three stages of value

Establish Culture versus Strategy Early On



- Work on culture isn't a project, a short-term fix or a problem that belongs to HR. Culture is the organization's DNA. It's the platform that supports a winning value proposition. It's the clay that enables an inspirational leader to create/shape something special. It's how the organization reacts when the market changes. It's what a team leader does when a team member comes to them and says, "My youngest child is sick."
- With the above emphasis in mind, it's easy to understand why a virtual army of leaders have been quick to quote Peter Drucker's cultural tag line, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." It's provocative, informative and linguistically brilliant. The problem? It's wrong. We need both culture and strategy. You can be driving a brand-new Ferrari but if you don't know where you're going you are already lost.
- The water is further muddied by business school thinking that for five decades emphasised that strategy drives culture. Develop the strategy and build a culture that will allow the strategy to unfold. Appropriate in a steady-state world, it's a severely flawed philosophy when, at best, the strategy is a work in progress. You can't reinvent the culture every time you revisit the strategy.
- We need to get culture and strategy on the same bus. With culture at the front of the bus. If culture and strategy collide there will be only one winner – and it isn't strategy.

Key Question: "When you take time out to develop the strategy, is the first phase of that work focused on the culture you need to create?" Need not want! An aspirational culture is a bridge to nowhere.

*"Companies that thrive don't have a culture;
they are their culture."*

– John O. Burdett

Fast, Flat, Focused, Flexible and Fertile to New Ideas



- Moving forward, four things can be stated with absolute certainty: (i) the organization, by way of design, that got you here will not get you to where you need to be; (ii) tomorrow's organization will be a team of teams; (iii) today is the fastest things have ever been but the slowest they will ever be; and (iv) tomorrow's structure will, of necessity, be Fast, Flat, Focused, Flexible and Fertile to new ideas.
- Assume an organization structure: (i) with virtually no hierarchy; (ii) where speed of learning and agility are a competitive advantage; and (iii) the capacity to self-organize is in full flower. And to make all this possible? Factor in an AI core (hub) that connects different parts of a diverse network in real-time – a hub that shares market information, ensures strategic clarity, captures success, stimulates innovation, facilitates community and enables collaboration to flourish.
- In imagining the next generation of organization design, it's essential to separate 20th-century cooperation and 21st-century collaboration. Cooperation is two or more people with a common purpose – where the resulting value/benefit is shared equally. Collaboration is two or more people with a common purpose – where the underlying assumption is that “your success is more important than mine.” Cooperation is essentially a transaction. Collaboration is anchored in altruism. In the innovate or perish world we are entering, the difference becomes the difference that makes a difference.

Key Question: “Has the way the organization is designed (structure) been retooled to take advantage of the ongoing and potential advances in AI?”

*“Being nimble isn’t new software,
an improved process and/or a better plan;
it’s the competitive drive that inspires new questions.”*

– John O. Burdett

“Growth” Without Growing the People in the Business Is an Illusion



You know you are growing the people in the business when:

- Measuring culture involves different stakeholders: top managers, customers, middle managers, employees, and representatives from the capital markets.
- The investment in people is informed by the culture the organization needs to create.
- Roles are structured such that capability and opportunity are aligned.
- Individual success is defined by meaningful boundaries, clear objectives and role-specific competencies.
- It is recognised that if you can't coach, you can't lead! To that end, coaching is alive and well – especially with those who hold down mission-critical roles.
- Affirmation and “catching people doing it right” is a way of life.
- The succession process is the envy of the competition.
- The performance management process eschews the traditional normal distribution curve, a rating that reinforces mediocrity and a philosophy that means only one or two people on the team can be adjudged to be operating at a level of excellence. In its place, a process that fully recognises the discretionary role of the team leader and their value as a coach ... not as a judge.

Key Question: “Does the organization’s investment in people – hiring, training, coaching, teamwork, leadership development, succession – support the needed culture?”

“Things which do not grow and change are dead things.”

– Louise Erdrich of the Chippewa Tribe

Hire with Tomorrow's Culture in Mind



Who you hire and promote today dictates what's possible tomorrow. A successful talent acquisition process builds on six essential building blocks. **See Figure three.**

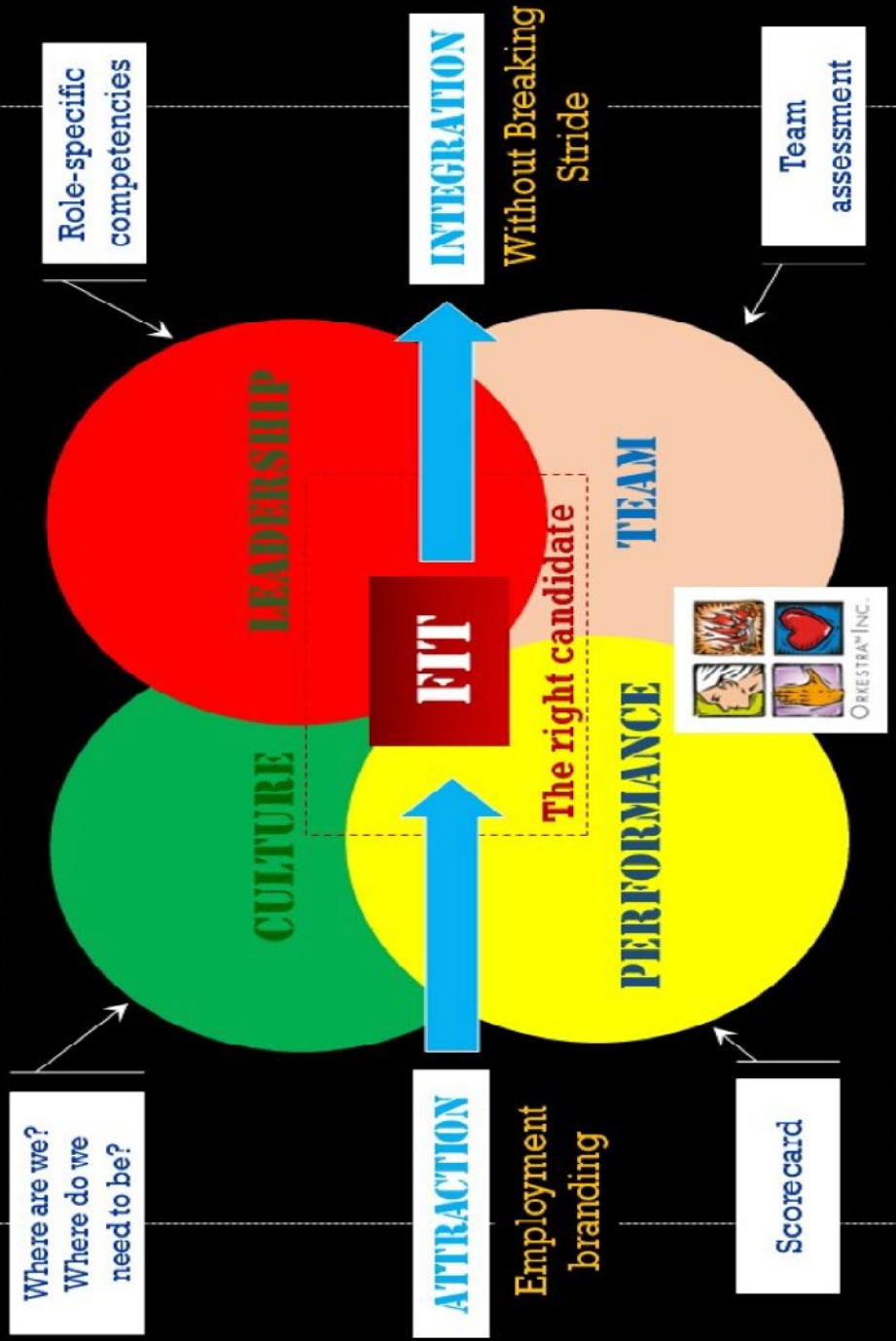
1. You can't hire who you don't attract. The organization's hiring value proposition is significantly enhanced when it is fully recognised that what keeps the best, attracts the rest.
2. Success in the role is defined by an in-depth understanding of (i) today's culture; and (ii) the culture the organization needs. This means a proven approach to culture measurement.
3. The delivery criteria implicit in the role are defined by a finely honed scorecard that captures four dimensions of value: strategic, operational, people and societal.
4. Role-specific, future-oriented leadership competencies for the position are a given. No less important, the competencies are set within a proven leadership model. (See "Leadership Balance" on page 12.) If not, it's highly likely that the success criteria for the role will overly reflect the skills and capability of the hiring manager. "In that I am successful, we need someone just like me."
5. Team "fit" is enabled by an in-depth assessment of how the candidate will contribute (or not) to the team – leadership + results + relationships.
6. A highly lauded integration process allows the successful candidate to hit the ground without breaking stride.

Key Question: "To what extent are the above factored into the hire decision?"
A best guess is a poor substitute for doing the work.

*"The hiring challenge is to hire the right ...
not simply the best candidate."*

– John O. Burdett

STRUCTURED HIRING



THE SIX ESSENTIAL DIMENSIONS OF FIT

John O. Burdett

Figure three

If You're Not Managing Your Culture, Someone Else Is



- Power moves into a vacuum. If you're not managing your culture, someone else is – a militant trade union, a predatory supplier, a private equity group with short-term goals or even a group of top leaders whose perceived best interest lies in maintaining the status quo.
- Work with, not against, the grain. To that end, get middle managers back in the game. If middle managers don't buy in, little will change. Language is everything. The term "change," for example, carries a lot of baggage. For far too many middle managers it simply means – "more work."
- In survey after survey, middle managers are the least engaged group. Move beyond the thinking of the watchmaker (fixing what's broken) and adopt the mindset of the potter (reshape the future?).
- Move quickly. Keep your eyes on the prize! Focus on what matters. The customer doesn't want a better mousetrap – just because it's a better mousetrap – they want to work with a provider who has a faster, environmentally friendly, more efficient, safe, innovative and cost-effective way to deal with their mouse problem.
- If what you need to become isn't already working, even if only part of the time in some places, you can't create it. Affirm and reinforce success.

Key Question: "In the quest to create tomorrow's culture today, are middle managers leading the change?"

*"Only those who can see what others cannot see ...
can do what others say cannot be done."*

– John O. Burdett

Justice and Fairness Loom Large in Every Employee's Belief System



- A malevolent and uninformed trend has surfaced in certain political quarters. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion have become a lightning rod for many of the ills in society. Diversity, in particular, is being positioned as the enemy of meritocracy and shorthand for the more controversial aspects of LGBTQIA+.
- Diversity has little to do with suggested preferential hiring practices that reflect reverse bias. Diversity is the handmaiden of innovation. A team that reflects the customer base asks informed questions. Cognitive diversity improves decision-making. When developing young leaders, diversity ensures that we are taking advantage of the true depth of the talent pool. And then we have the “magic third.” A Board where at least one-third of members are women tend to have higher return on equity, sales and invested capital compared to all-male Boards.
- Homo sapiens are not the only hominid that “go ape” when lack of fairness enters the picture. As it is with our great ape cousins, equity is deeply embedded in our identity. It’s part of our collective belief system. Rooting out bias in hiring practices, for example, is not only the smart thing to do, but without such due diligence we are hampered in our capacity to build great teams.
- Inclusion is to ensure that all employees contribute to the extent of their capability, that they are heard and that the culture builds a sense of belonging for everyone. Fifty years ago, we would have been describing “employee morale.”

Key Question: “In pursuit of greater diversity, how do you ensure that essential skills, capability and/or competencies are never sacrificed?”

*“There is a clear correlation between
diversity and business performance.”*

– McKinsey

Know that How People Learn Is More Important than What They Learn

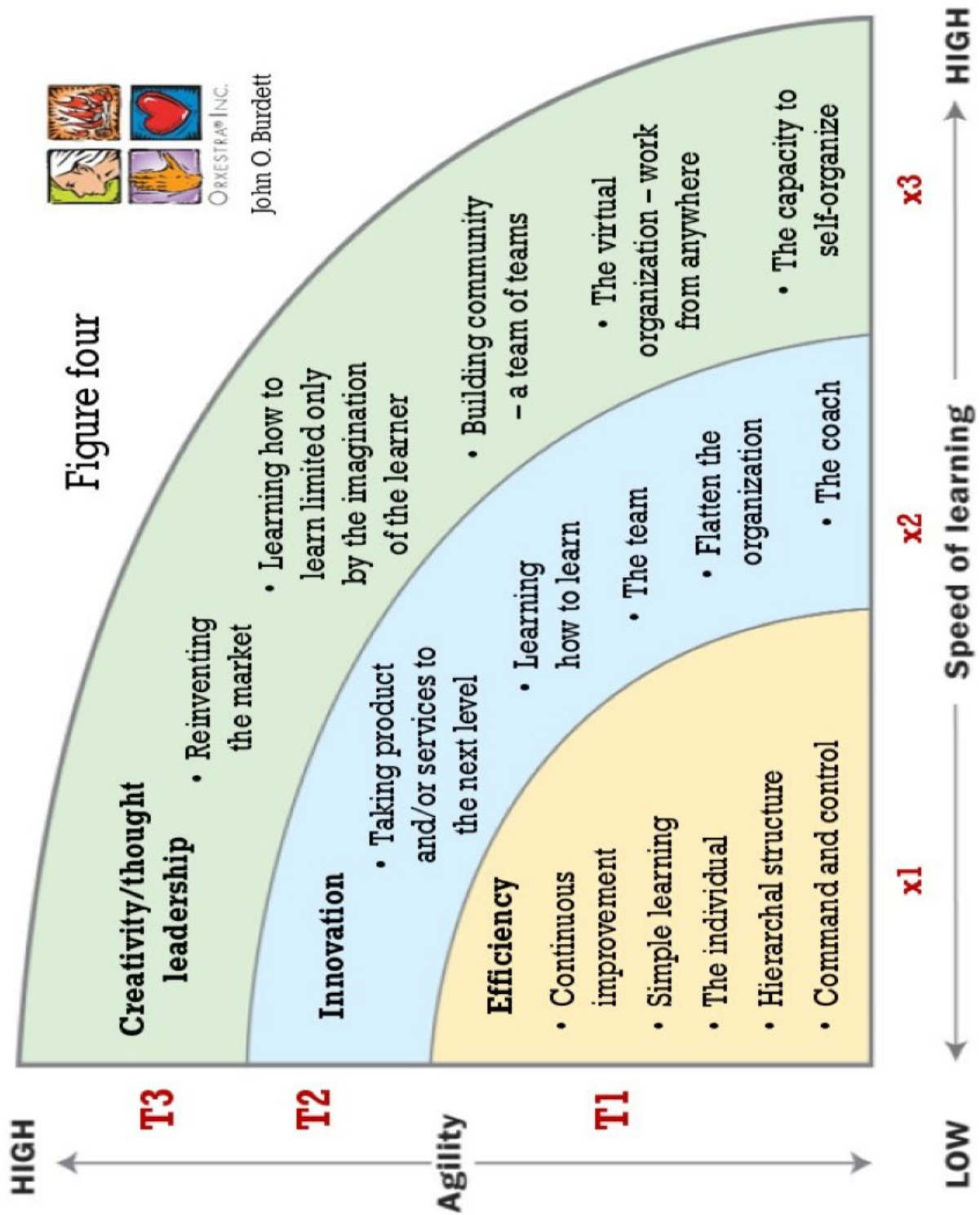


- Today's winning value proposition is tomorrow's commodity. The competitor you need to be most concerned about is a start-up you have never heard of. Amidst today's competitively corrosive business environment there is only one way to build a sustainable competitive advantage – how quickly you learn! **See Figure four.**
- There are three dominant ways to learn. **Territory one:** simple learning. Theme: Efficiency. Continuous improvement. **Territory two:** learning how to learn. Theme: Innovation. Taking the product or services to the next level. **Territory three:** learning how learn limited only by the imagination of the learner. Theme: Creativity. Reinventing the market.
- Imagine buying a piece of IKEA furniture. Assembly reflects how you learn. You can follow the instructions (efficiency); ignore the instructions (innovation); or use the material to build something entirely different (creativity).
- The three learning scenarios are woven into virtually every facet of life. Consider three very different artists: (i) Canaletto – simple learning, the viewer sees a detailed rendering of life exactly as it is; (ii) Vincent van Gough – innovation, the viewer can find something different every time they access the painting; (iii) Jackson Pollack – creativity, the visual experience draws heavily on the imagination of the viewer.
- We are also describing three very different leadership cultures: **T1** Command and control; **T2** Coaching; and **T3** Instilling the capacity to self-organize.

Key Question: “When and how does the conversation on culture explore how the organization learns?”

*“If you can’t differentiate yourself,
you are in the wrong business.”*

– Peter Drucker



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Leadership Balance



The higher the position in the organization a leader attains, the greater the need to deliver results through the actions of others. Paradoxically, delivering sustainable results isn't the outcome of a laser-like focus on "the numbers." The numbers are merely the tip of the spear. And a spear without a strong shaft has little utility. To consistently deliver results you have to move beyond doing things right ... and also do the right things. Sustained success is, thus, not simply about results but about displaying "leadership balance."

See Figure five.

- **The Head (direction):** the big picture, strategy, market/branding savvy, the right technology. The numbers. Cognitive intelligence.
- **The Hand (deliver):** customer focus, business development, speed of action, value chain excellence, clarity of goals/role. The results. Practical/kinetic intelligence.
- **The Heart (development):** listening, coaching/mentoring, empower the team, sharing stories. Learning. Interpersonal intelligence.
- **The Spirit (day-to-day dialogue):** authenticity, humility, empathy, connect to the virtual workforce. Caring. Intrapersonal intelligence.
- To the four dimensions of intelligence outlined we must add a fifth: ecological intelligence. Here we are describing a way to think and act that fully recognises the footprint we leave on our planet.

Key Question: "Does the organization's approach to hiring, leadership development and coaching recognise the need for leadership balance?"

"Our first teacher is our own heart."

– Cheyenne Tribe



“Leadership Balance”

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Figure five

Measure, Measure, Measure



- Less than one organization in five actively manages its culture. The rest are caught up in what I refer to as “cultural drift.” The assumption that if we don’t invest the time needed on culture we will, somehow, end up where we need to be. Good luck with that!
- There are two seminal pieces of research on organization culture. The first by Harvard Professors John Kotter and James Heskett (*Corporate Culture and Performance*, 1992). In a study of 207 large US companies, they found organizations with a strong and agile culture realised 12x the stock price growth of organizations that lacked that discipline. A more recent study by Carolyn Dewar, Martin Hirt and Scott Keller (“The Mindsets and Practices of Excellent CEOs,” October 2019) found that CEOs who insist on rigorously measuring and managing all cultural elements that drive performance more than double the odds that their strategies will be executed. And over the long term, they deliver triple the total return to shareholders that other companies deliver.
- A meaningful measure of culture assesses the current and needed culture using easy to understand business terms. If the assessment looks and sounds like it belongs in a third-year psychology class – it belongs in a third-year psychology class.
- The annual engagement survey doesn’t measure culture. Only about 15% of the factors that make up culture appear in the traditional engagement survey.
- It’s difficult to understand how executive recruitment, succession, coaching, mentoring and developing a great team can flourish without knowing the culture you need to instill.

Key Question: “How do you ensure that you have a clear and business-oriented measure of the culture you have ... and the culture you need?”

“If you measure it, you can do it.”

– Peter Drucker

Nothing Is More Important than Mindset



The research suggests that we make between 33,000 and 35,000 decisions each day. By accessing oft-rehearsed mental routines – based on what worked in the past – the vast majority of these decisions we make on “autopilot.” The brain seeks to save energy. We act without thinking. Were that not the case, at lunchtime you would still be analysing the best way to get to work. The problem? In a world where the only thing that is certain is uncertainty, doing what we have always done is, at best, a mandate for mediocrity.

To thrive in a world of change we need to move away from the comfort of what worked in the past. We need to know how to introduce a new mindset. In that emotion (not facts or information), ultimately, drives our behaviour, the following are easy to access mindset tools:

- Imagery. When you imagine it, you are already well on the way to doing it.
- New language. Same old language, same old behaviour. The most powerful language we can access is a new metaphor and/or a great story.
- To experience successful best practice from elsewhere.
- To deliberately change established patterns of play. Drive to work a new way. At meetings, have team members move out of their “established” seat. Celebrate success in a unique way – take the team to the opera.
- Catch people doing it right. People don’t learn from getting it wrong; they learn from getting it right.

Key Question: “Is mindset central to your culture conversation?”

“It takes a different mindset to do different things.”

– Henry Mancini

Overlook the Informal Organization at Your Peril



- Under the term “culture” there are two organizations. The formal organization – how the organization is supposed to operate as outlined on the organization chart. The informal organization – the conversation taking place in the cafeteria.
- There are two key insights here. One: The only time the formal organization has primacy is during the afternoon on 29th February. Two: If you tried to run the organization as outlined by the organization chart, chaos would result.
- Those in a leadership role live in a goldfish bowl – their actions are magnified. The higher in the organization, the greater the magnification. The implications for the informal organization are profound. One: If those in key roles don’t live the values, essentially, you have no values. Two: In a survival mentality that goes back 40,000 years, we are primed to look for danger. So much so, that when we are not sure of what’s going on we are compelled to make it up. Three: Important as a compelling purpose is, the closer the role is to the customer, the more important purpose becomes. Four: If those who represent the organization don’t keep their promises, people will remember. The informal organization has the memory of African elephant. They will remember 10, even 20, years down the road. Five: Acts that lack caring, display questionable integrity. Anything that even hints at a lack of fairness become the rocks that a floundering vessel becomes shipwrecked on.

Key Question: “In the culture conversation, do you spend at least as much time on the informal as you do the formal organization?”.

“Relatively few organizations craft the culture they need. Mostly, they come face to face with the culture they deserve.”

– John O. Burdett

Peer Coaching Is an Invaluable Discipline



In work on culture, little is as valuable as when team members start to coach each other. Respect is enhanced, collaboration is enabled, learning is shared and resilience becomes a joint, rather than a solo, project. For peer coaching to take off, however, there is a need to coach the coaches. Peer coaching draws on the following principles:

- *Cheering works.* Ongoing affirmation and catching people doing it right builds a platform where coaching flourishes.
- *What the coach believes is what the coachee perceives.* As a coach, you've got to believe that the agreed-to-coaching actions will (not could) happen. And if you don't believe? You've got to believe!
- *Have a beginner's mind.* Knowing is the enemy of enquiry.
- All relationships are about power. To that end, there are four common forms of team interaction: (i) *power over* (tell and listen); (ii) *respectful power over* (tell and sell); (iii) *power with* (problem-solving); and (iv) *power to* (coaching).
- *To coach is to ask great questions.* Probe without pushing, challenge without eroding trust, enquire without intruding.
- *Listen like you have always wanted to be listened to.*
- *If it isn't written down, it won't happen.* The coaching conversation has to be translated into specific actions. Follow up!

Key Question: “In that how those at top behave sends a hard to ignore signal, to what extent does coaching mastery thrive in the C-suite?”

*“When we show our respect for other living things,
they respond with respect for us.”*

– Arapaho Proverb

Question Not What You Have Achieved ... But the Legacy You Will Leave Behind



- Culture is a multifaceted system (different stakeholders view it differently) that, when successful, results in (i) a winning value proposition; (ii) a way to be that attracts and retains top talent; (iii) ordinary people doing extraordinary things; and (iv) the needs and aspirations of tomorrow's customer to be fulfilled.
- Although it is a term commonly used, you can't "change" culture. You can delete, overwrite, shape and/or cultivate the new but you can't change it. That said, culture will change whether you want it to or not.
- Delivering short-term results is essential, but the overriding role of leadership in culture is to ensure the long-term survival of the business.
- This speaks to leaving a legacy. After the leader in question has moved on, are their footprints still clearly outlined in the sand? Is it a heritage that has survived the highest tides and the biggest storms? A leader's legacy is evident in:
 - The values that they instilled
 - The brand's reputation
 - The language, metaphors and stories they introduced
 - The teams that they built
 - The leadership succession that they put in place
 - The culture that they created

Key Question: "As you look across the organization at those who hold down a mission-critical role, how many will truly leave a legacy?"

"We will be known forever by the tracks we leave."

– Dakota Tribe

Resilience



- Resilience isn't limited to human emotions. To thrive in a harsh business environment, the organization itself must learn how to become resilient. Survival = resilience.
- Of the qualities (competencies) that describe 21st-century leadership, none is more important than resilience.
- Unfortunately, the dictionary definition of resilience uses terms that relate to “bouncing back.” Resilience has to be far more than reverting back to the status quo. A more valid definition embraces (i) the forces that are bringing about change; (ii) stepping back to learn from experience; and (iii) adding new behaviours in line with the emerging challenge.
- Leaders develop resilience in others by displaying their own resilience. Leaders also recognise the need to sow the seeds of resilience. Take, for example, the relationship between inspiration and resilience. To “inspire” is to make tomorrow’s culture come alive in the room today. Meanwhile, if you can imagine it, you can do it! Passion is to pass-inspiration-on.
- There is a reason it’s called leaderSHIP. Delivery is never optional. In a rapidly changing world, resilience and results are obverse sides of the same coin.

Key Question: “Where and how is resilience woven into work around succession, integral to how leaders self-assess their learning needs, central to ongoing coaching and a fundamental building block in the organization’s ongoing leadership development agenda?”

*“It is better to have less thunder in the mouth
and more lightning in the hand.”*

– Apache Tribe

Storytelling



- We explore the world through metaphor and learn through stories.
- Organizations are full of stories. Unfortunately, most of them are negative. The problem? You can't get rid of negative stories by trying to get rid of negative stories. Efforts in that direction merely amount to yet another negative story. If you want to move the culture in a new direction overwrite the old, non-supportive stories with new, more compelling stories. Remember, negative stories can inform but only positive stories inspire.
- A great story has five building blocks: (i) the context; (ii) the dilemma; (iii) the hero; (iv) the hero's struggle; and (v) the outcome and what we learned. The story can unfold in different ways, but we need all five elements.
- If you want to sell an idea, a product, a service or even yourself, share a success story. The greater the extent to which the listener can see themselves in the story, the more impactful it is.
- A great story changes the listener's brain chemistry. Their brain is flooded with oxytocin. Sometimes called the "love drug" and the chemistry that bonds mothers to their newly born child, oxytocin makes the listener far more empathetic to a new idea.
- The most appropriate response to a question at a townhall meeting is "let me share a story." In similar vein, what people remember from a great presentation isn't the speaker – it's the stories.

Key Question: "How can you become a storytelling organization?"

*"The world was made of stories, nothing else,
just stories, and stories about stories."*

– Tommy Orange

Trust is Everything



Earlier it was established that culture is a system – in many ways, a system within a system. The questions become “What is the behavioural glue that binds the various parts of the system together?” “What is it that fills the white space on the 21st-century organization chart?” The answer? Trust. Indeed, without trust you ain’t got much. Establishing trust involves:

- **T**he ability to build rapport. Rapport is established, or not, in the first few moments of the conversation. Eye contact, body language, tonality, pacing and listening – especially listening – are the currency of rapport.
- **R**espect. We can’t respect others until we first respect ourselves.
- **U**nderstanding the other point of view. This speaks to empathy, asking great questions and listening such that the listener will always remember.
- **S**hared values. Values aren’t rules. They give people permission to act. They establish what has priority. Values shape our perception of the world around us. The dilemma? It’s difficult to trust someone who has a different view of reality. When values are misaligned, caring takes centre stage.
- **T**he commitment to do what you say you are going to do.

Key Question: “How is trust evident in the way you seek to win support from the informal organization?”

*“Trust is like owning a greenhouse.
It takes a long time to build
but a single brick can destroy it.”*

– John O. Burdett

Understand that Every Business Has More than One Culture



- There are two distinct approaches to managing widespread or different businesses. The first is a portfolio approach where each business is, literally, an entirely separate entity. The second is an integrated approach where, it is assumed (and often difficult to realise), that synergy = value.
- All this gives rise to the recurrent question, “One culture or many?” Unless you are a very small family business that makes key decisions over Sunday lunch, every business has more than one culture. The problem? In a multinational business, common terms don’t always mean the same thing. Teamwork in Korea is very different to teamwork in Sweden. Very different!
- The challenge? How to be both different and the same. Here we are helped by insights drawn from African drumming. A group of drummers will often contain individuals who are playing very different drums and different rhythms. What brings them together, what integrates the different drums into a syncopating “oneness?” The single base and dominant drum.
- The “dominant drum” in organizational terms is the consistent message that emanates from the centre. An inspirational message that might well be expressed as (or a mixture of) a common story, a compelling purpose, shared values, succinct guiding principles and/or a proven leadership model. The key? “The message” has to be unambiguous, consistent and also resonate with customers.

Key Question: “In the culture conversation, where and how is to be different and the same introduced as a central theme?”

*“If schools would teach drumming, that would realise
the power of the drum to mobilise people.”*

– Babatunde Olatunj

“Values” Introduce Unhelpful Ambiguity



- Employees don't resist change ... but they do resist “being changed.” To that end, involving employees as much as possible in the change process is essential.
- Involvement doesn't mean that those so involved make the final decision, however. Work on values is a good example. There are some decisions that remain, and should remain, the prerogative of the top team. Ask for input, validate and fine tune with those who have to live the values but don't let the crowd decide. If you do, your values will look like everyone else's, lack strategic impact and may or may not be aligned with tomorrow's customer.
- The term “values” prompts the question, “Are we describing personal or organizational values?” In a multinational community, where there is a plethora of personal values, it's nigh impossible to ask that every employee's personal values be at one with the values being espoused by the organization. The answer? Move away from the term “values” and substitute “guiding principles.” As for the hiring process – where it's often suggested that alignment between the individual's and the organization's values is an imperative – ensure that a successful candidate buys into the organization's guiding principles. It's simpler, more realistic and more effective.

Key Question: “Although involving employees in the change process is essential, have you defined the strategic/competitive/cultural decisions that must be made at the top of the house?”

“In work on values (guiding principles), if you are the conductor, don't let the third violinist grab the baton.”

– John O. Burdett

Why Do Your Best People Stay?



It is suggested that every system has leakage. In Keynesian economics leakage is when money is withdrawn from the economy, thus reducing the national income. Minimal levels of leakage can be beneficial. Conversely, even a reasonable amount of leakage can be problematic. Cultural leakage occurs when top talent moves on. To plug the leak, you have to know (really know) why your best people stay – that way you can do more of it! The research highlights the following as being why top talent stays with the organization:

- **Hiring the right people in the first place.** In that many managers have a somewhat superficial approach to talent acquisition, this is not an easy fix.
- **A sense of belonging. See Figure six.**
- **A leader who cares.** See “Leadership Balance” above.
- **Values that people believe in and that top leader’s practise.**
- **Fit with the role.** Capability and opportunity are fully aligned.
- **Choice around blended employment.** A 20th-century mindset means to be wedded to the traditional workplace. The dilemma? The employees who the organization needs the most will demand a degree of choice.
- **Personal growth.** When people stop growing, when they feel that they lack currency in the job market, looking elsewhere becomes inevitable.

Key Question: “Do you really know – not think you know – why your best people stay?”

*“Everything on earth has a purpose
and every person a mission.”*

– Mourning Dove, Salish Native American

Figure six



A SENSE OF BELONGING

John O. Burdett

Xceptional Leaders Build Great Teams



Developing a great team draws on:

- Being fully wired into the context. That is to say, the culture the organization is seeking to create, the customer's voice, the strategy of other key teams, the adoption of appropriate technology and knowing how to thrive in a network organization.
- Knowing that when you add a team member you have, essentially, created a new team.
- The reality that in a world defined by complexity and the need for collaboration, the leader works for the team.
- The primacy of psychological safety.
- Clear goals – operational and strategic.
- Both the functional and team roles are clear. **See Figure seven.**
- Success criteria that defines, specifically, when the team will be successful. Criteria that the team revisits, validates regularly, and utilises to improve team performance.
- Awareness that conflict over strategy, process and priorities is healthy, whereas conflict between individuals must be addressed quickly.
- Team members coaching each other.
- Work on a successor is ongoing.

Key Question: “Specifically, what needs to happen for your team to move to the next level?”

*“I have seen that in any great undertaking,
it is not enough for a man to depend simply upon himself.”*

– Lone Man (Isna-la-wica), Teton Sioux

THE SIX ESSENTIAL TEAM ROLES 	 Visionary ☐	 Explorer ☐	 Pioneer ☐	 Warrior ☐	 Navigator ☐	 Maverick ☐
Team role	Outlines tomorrow's possibility	Commercial savvy	Source of breakthrough ideas	The drive to deliver	Provides the map for the journey	Challenges the status quo
Unique contribution	Identifies patterns in the marketplace others miss	Insight into how the business makes money	Moves the team beyond "the problem"	Generates revenue	The "soft" issues in culture	Not just someone who complains. Has valid suggestions
Mastery	Inspires a deep-rooted commitment to the journey	The art of the deal	Intuitively knows what works	Builds lasting relationships	Excellence in coaching others in how to coach	Asks truly great questions
Dominant leadership trait	Visual language (imagery)	Shapes the winning value proposition	Driven to reinvent what's possible	Durability	Bridges the "thinking" organization with the "doing" organization	Mental toughness
Critical leadership skill(s)	Builds meaning for those involved	"Street smart"	Keeps it simple	Maintains high energy level	Judge of talent; knows when and how to confront those in power	Candor
What you notice first	Authenticity	Knowledge of the marketplace	Is quick to accept and build on the ideas of others	Undeniable passion to win	Use of language, metaphor, storytelling	A willingness to discuss the undiscussable

John O. Burdett

Taken from: *Leaders Must Lead!* (2005)

Figure seven

Yesterday Was About Knowing, Today It's Asking Great Questions



- A great question breaks the listener's natural rapport and flow. Like an electric shock, it's a jolt of reality. It penetrates the veil of "knowing the answer." It interrupts the conversation the listener is having with themselves.
- A great question makes the silence louder (Zen proverb). It asks for what you want and not what you don't want. Meanwhile, silence is often the best question of all.
- A great question surfaces in the moment, when:
 - It draws on the questioner's authentic self and is framed by the questioner's ability to build rapport.
 - Brief is better than bombastic. Clear beats convoluted. Relevant trumps rousing. Outcome outweighs objection. Meanwhile, "why" questions promote defensiveness.
 - Language = cultural software. The most meaningful language utilises terms and ideas that match the listener's level of abstraction. It's also helpful to ask different kinds of questions. Open-ended rather than closed. Second-phase questions such as "tell me more." Funnel questions – a series of rapport-building questions that open the door to the breakthrough question.
 - It is understood that hypothetical questions are rarely helpful. Conjecture may enrich the conversation but does little to promote decision-making.

Key Question: "Describe a great question **you** asked recently?"

*"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.
The important thing is not to stop questioning."*

– Albert Einstein

Zoom and Its Peers Usher in an Era Beyond Management-By-Walking-Around



- The COVID-19 pandemic irrevocably changed the workplace. Despite significant push back and demands to the contrary, we can't ignore the fact that working from home part of the time has entered the employee's psyche.
- When one thing changes, a host of other things are impacted. The dilemma? In the case of the hybrid workplace, we are being asked to move the hands on the cultural clock back. A reframed environment demands new actions. Where to start?
- In a hybrid environment, have regular one-on-one sessions with each team member – Zoom or otherwise. Coach the team. Make psychological safety a way of life. Move beyond the era of management-by-walking-around. It's yesterday's solution to a world that no longer exists. Learn to delegate. Really delegate. It's an overlooked skill. Provide the resources (especially up-to-date technology) needed.
- Put trust-building at the centre of everything you do. Make coming to the office a joyful experience. Use in-house time together – ensuring that everyone on the team comes to the office on the same days – to cultivate curiosity, encourage difficult questions and foster collaboration. Tell people the truth as soon as you know it. Beyond all that, pay attention to people's mental health.

Key Question: “To take advantage of the opportunity that a hybrid workplace represents, what do you need to stop doing, start to do and do differently?”

“It does not require many words to speak the truth.”

– Chief Joseph

THE **CULTURE** CONVERSATION GUIDE



SCORECARD



CULTURE ASSESSMENT

*“Great things in business are never done by one person.
They are done by a team of people.”*

– Steve Jobs

The assessment that follows assesses the degree to which the culture conversation is alive and well in your organization. It is not a measure of culture. That said, if the culture conversation is found wanting, developing the culture you need is going to be problematic.

The scorecard is organized by 26 statements drawn from the A-Z Culture Conversation Guide. Think about each with the critical eye of a knowledgeable third person. Then circle the appropriate score for each statement.

Culture will change whether you want it to or not. The challenge is to get ahead of the curve; to manage culture rather than to discover the culture you have is managing you.

The time spent on this simple exercise is very worthwhile. The research is very clear, organizations that manage and measure culture deliver significantly better results than those that get trapped by cultural drift.

Paradoxically, where organizations stumble isn't because of a lack of interest or desire regarding culture. The shortfall, all-too-often, is how to have the conversation. Although you may feel that the culture conversation is present in your organization, it does not mean that you cannot take it to the next level. Remember, without reflection there is no learning.

Note: To better understand the thinking behind any of the questions, refer to the appropriate alphabetical descriptor (A-Z) in the Culture Conversation Guide.

Suggestion: Go through the assessment as a team.

“Your culture will change whether you want it to or not.”

– Anon

The following describes the culture conversation in your business:		Not at all		Some of the time		Most of the time		All the time			
A	We are exacting in the way we manage all aspects of culture from the outside-in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
B	We regularly assess those in mission-critical roles against the culture we need to create	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
C	We act on the belief that culture is a system that should never be addressed piecemeal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
D	We invest as much time on the cultural issues that hold us back as we do on those things that move the culture forward	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
E	In that culture has primacy, we define the culture we have and the culture we need before getting into the weeds regarding strategy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
F	We are designing the emerging structure with five key criteria in mind: Flat, Fast, Focused, Flexible and Fertile to new ideas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
G	We recognise, and fully act on the belief that you can't grow the business without growing the people in the business	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Score for this page

*“Take it as a given, what got you here
won’t get you to where you need to be.”*

– John O. Burdett

The following describes the culture conversation in your business:		Not at all		Some of the time		Most of the time		All the time			
H	We believe that all managerial and leadership hiring is strategic. To that end, we make key hiring decisions with the culture we need to create in mind	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I	Our conversation around culture always reinforces the reality that if we are not managing our culture, someone else is	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
J	There are clear site lines between our decisions around DEI and business performance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
K	We fully recognise and clearly act on the belief that the only truly sustainable competitive advantage is how quickly we learn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
L	Leadership balance dominates our thinking about what it means to be a successful leader	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
M	We measure the culture we have and the culture we need. Note: the engagement survey assesses less than 20% of the issues that should be measured.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
N	We recognise that it’s emotion and not facts that ultimately drive change. As a result, those in key roles work on how to reframe mindsets	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Score for this page

“If you can measure it, you can manage it.”

– Peter Drucker

The following describes the culture conversation in your business:		Not at all	Some of the time	Most of the time	All the time						
O	We spend at least as much time on the informal culture as we do on the formal one	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
P	Mastery in coaching is alive and well at every level in the organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Q	Leadership success is viewed not just by today’s results but, and perhaps more importantly, by what the leader will leave behind	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
R	We need resilience, we preach resilience, we measure resilience. As a result, it is a central feature in coaching and leadership development	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
S	Storytelling is, invariably, part of how we approach change – especially at the top of the organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
T	Trust and trust-building is apparent in everything we do	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
U	We can say with pride that we are both one culture and many	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Score for this page

*“If you are not managing your culture,
someone else is.”*

– John O. Burdett

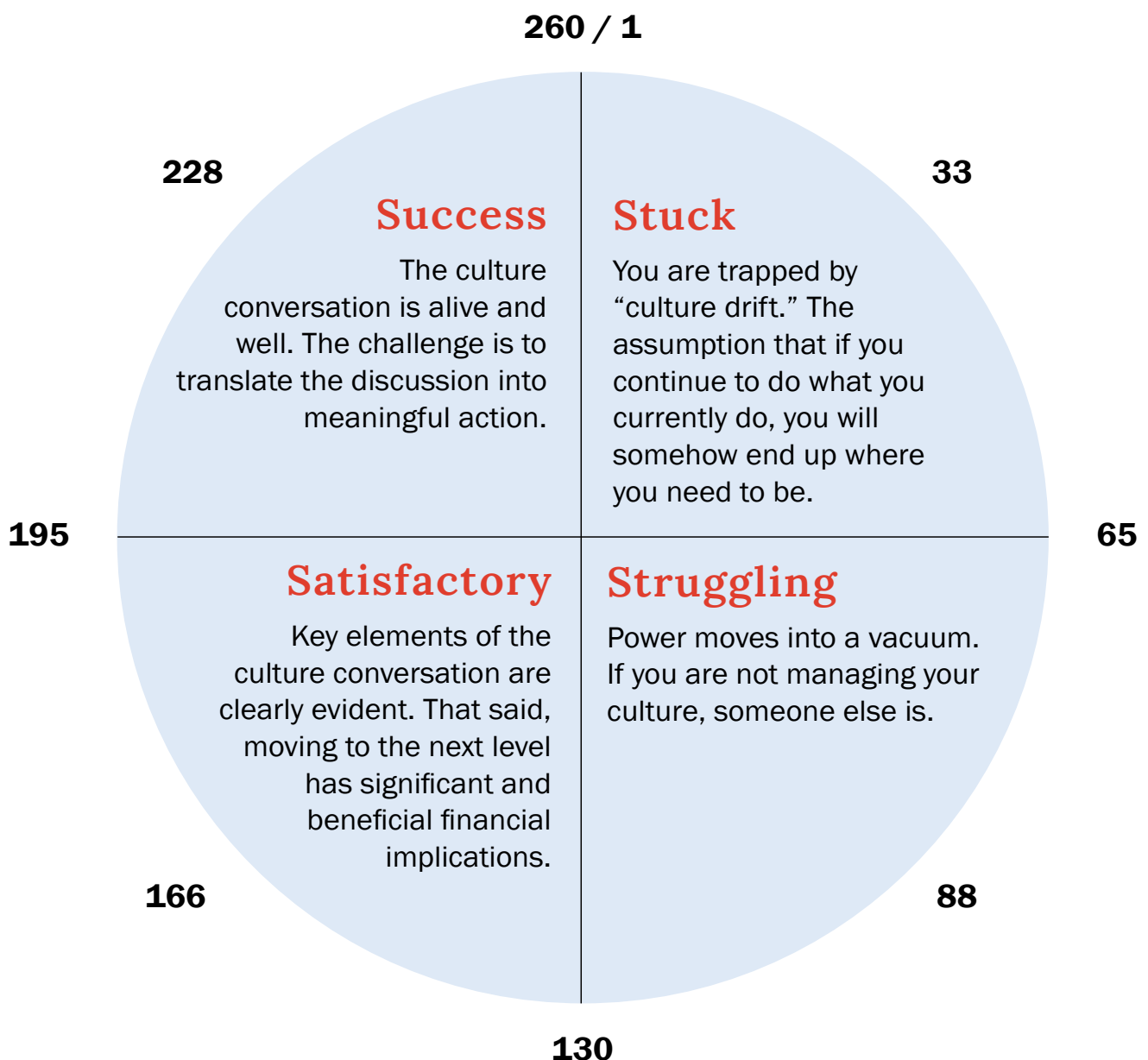
The following describes the culture conversation in your business:		Not at all	Some of the time			Most of the time			All the time	
V	Although involving employees in the change process is clearly essential, ultimately, our values were developed and are owned by the CEO and the top team	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 10
W	We use a proven assessment to understand why our best people stay	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 10
X	We take pride in the way we transform good teams into great teams. It's a feature of our success supported by ongoing assessment of what it means to be a great team	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 10
Y	Beyond what might normally be expected, the performance conversion addresses two critical issues: the ability to ask great questions and listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 10
Z	Work from home has irrevocably and beneficially changed the philosophy and practice of management in our business	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 10

Score for this page

ARE YOU MANAGING YOUR CULTURE?

Go through the assessment and (1) add up your score on each page; (2) produce the total score from all 26 questions; and (3) transfer your total score to the simple feedback diagram below. What is the one thing that, were you to take action as soon possible, would make the greatest difference?

Total Score





John O. Burdett

*"Tomorrow
will be different;
will you?"*

- J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

