



What Culture Are You Building?

5 responsibilities leaders have for intentionally shaping the culture of their business

Every business has a culture. You have one whether you intentionally created it or not. Culture is how people treat each other when things get difficult. It is what happens when someone makes a mistake. It is whether people tell you the truth. It is what gets rewarded, tolerated, confronted, or ignored.

In a founder-led business, much of that culture starts with **you**. Employees pay attention to what the leader says, but they pay even more attention to what the leader does. If you want to build a company that lasts, culture cannot simply be something you hope develops among good people. **It is something you have to intentionally lead.**

1 Decide what you want your culture to be

Culture should not begin with words on a wall. It should begin with a simple question: **What kind of company do we want to be?** How should people treat customers and each other? What does taking responsibility look like? How should people respond when something goes wrong? You do not need twelve corporate values. You need a handful of expectations people can understand and recognize in everyday behavior.

ASK YOURSELF: If I asked five employees to describe what we expect from people here, would they give me roughly the same answer?

2 Understand that your behavior sets the standard

Founders sometimes underestimate how closely people watch them. If you expect managers to admit mistakes but become defensive when someone questions you, they notice. If you talk about respect but lose your temper under pressure, they notice. **Your behavior gives employees permission.** What you consistently model becomes part of the culture whether you intended it or not. You cannot ask the organization to live by standards you are unwilling to submit yourself to.

ASK YOURSELF: If everyone in this company behaved the way I behave under pressure, would I like the culture we created?

3 Lead with enough vulnerability to tell the truth about yourself

Leadership can create pressure to always appear certain. But strong leadership does not require pretending you are always right. Sometimes one of the most powerful things a leader can say is, **'I got that wrong.'** Or, **'I don't know.'** Or, **'I didn't handle that the way I expect us to handle things here.'** Vulnerability paired with responsibility creates permission for other people to tell the truth too.

ASK YOURSELF: What happens when someone in my company tells me something I do not want to hear?



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4 Protect the culture through what you tolerate

You can talk about values every week and still destroy your culture through what you tolerate. A high producer who treats people terribly, a long-time employee who avoids accountability, or someone who bends the truth because it helps close a deal all teach the team something. **What leaders tolerate becomes part of the culture.** Healthy cultures need grace and room to grow, but leaders also have to protect the culture when behavior repeatedly contradicts what the organization says it values.

ASK YOURSELF: What behavior am I currently tolerating that contradicts the culture I say I want?

5 Build the culture into how the business actually operates

Culture becomes durable when it moves beyond the founder's personality. Your expectations should show up in who you hire, who you promote, how managers lead, what gets recognized, how mistakes are handled, who receives more responsibility, and sometimes who can no longer remain in the organization. If integrity matters, do not promote someone you do not trust simply because they produce results. These decisions tell people far more than a list of company values ever will.

ASK YOURSELF: Where do our stated values actually show up in the decisions we make about people?

Culture Is Caught Before It Is Taught

Leaders sometimes think their job is to communicate the culture. That is only part of it. **People experience your culture before they can describe it.**

They experience it in how you respond to bad news, who gets promoted, what happens after an expensive mistake, how you act during a bad month, and how you treat the person who cannot do anything for you.

"The leader does not have to perfectly embody the culture. The leader does have to be willing to be accountable to it."

That requires **integrity** - alignment between what you say matters and how you actually lead. And when that alignment breaks, as it sometimes will, it requires enough **vulnerability** to acknowledge it, take responsibility, and correct it.

THE CULTURE TEST

EXPECTATIONS - Have I made it clear? Do people know the behaviors and standards we expect from one another?

EXAMPLE - Am I living it? Would the way I personally lead reinforce the culture I say I want?

ACCOUNTABILITY - Am I protecting it? Do our hiring, promotion, recognition, coaching, and difficult people decisions reinforce those expectations?

When those three align, culture becomes part of how the organization operates - and something capable of lasting beyond the founder.

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AgStrat helps founders think beyond simply growing the business toward building organizations characterized by strong leadership, healthy culture, responsible stewardship, and enduring impact.

Leadership | Culture | Stewardship | Legacy