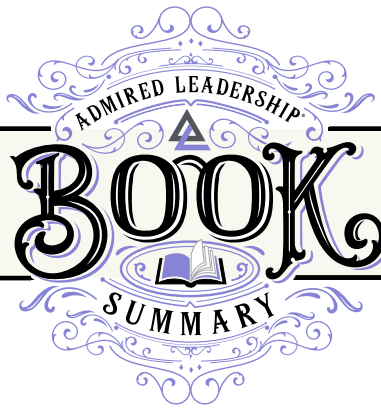




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



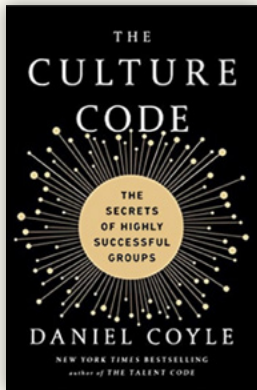
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# The Culture Code

The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups

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In *The Culture Code*, Daniel Coyle demystifies what makes some groups “greater than the sum of their parts.” He breaks down real-life examples to explain how leaders can create cultural excellence in groups by cultivating three important skills. When people think of highly successful groups such as Pixar, Google, Zappos, and the Navy Seals, they think of a culture of excellence. Often this kind of group excellence is believed to simply be a part of a group’s DNA rather than a skill that can be learned.

## Key Quote

“While successful culture can look and feel like magic, the truth is that it’s not. Culture is a set of living relationships working toward a shared goal. It’s not something you are. It’s something you do.”  
— Daniel Coyle

## Key Concepts

### SKILL 1: BUILD SAFETY

**The Good Apples.** Groups of all types thrive when they follow a certain set of established patterns that send a clear message to members that says, “We are safe and connected” (p 15).

**The Billion Dollar Day When Nothing Happened.** Diving into the example of Google and its early culture, it’s clear that when people in the group “fan the flames” of connection and belonging, members are empowered and freed to innovate and problem-solve. The belief is, “We are close, we are safe, we share a future” (p. 26).

**The Christmas Truce, the One-Hour Experiment, and the Missileers.** Stunning examples of positive group connection are described in the Christmas Truce of World War I, the large and successful WIPRO call center in Bangalore, India, and the Navy’s nuclear submarine community. These are contrasted with the anti-belonging culture found in the “broken” Air Force Minuteman missileers unit.

**How to Build Belonging.** Certain actions and words - and the idea that a group is primarily here to solve problems together - give members of a team a sense of belonging.

**How to Design for Belonging.** A group leader who wishes to create belonging understands the importance of organically bringing people together with other people. They don't over-engineer meetings, but they do understand that making connections between others should be a priority and should flow organically.

**Ideas for Action.** Building a sense of safety that leads to a sense of belonging should develop naturally as you interact, but there are particular strategies and methods that effective "culture code"-style leaders invariably use to foster safety.

## SKILL 2: SHARE VULNERABILITY

### "Tell Me What You Want and I'll Help You."

Cohesive groups utilize each member's skill-sets and use fluid, trusting communication to maximize overall group prowess.

**The Vulnerability Loop.** Leaders understand that "Being vulnerable gets the static out of the way and lets us do the job together, without worrying or hesitating" (p. 111).

**The Super Coordinators.** Effective leaders are vulnerable themselves, and they understand the potency of small teams "solving problems in a constant state of vulnerability and interconnection" (p. 133).

### How to Create Cooperation in Small Groups.


The story behind the success of Seal Team Six's capture of Osama bin Laden illustrates the power and effectiveness of a culture that identifies and welcomes the truth, whether spoken by leader or subordinate, and that isn't threatened by identifying problems that need to be addressed.

**How to Create Cooperation with Individuals.** Leaders who are good at creating the kinds of culture that foster success often do not "sparkle" or stand out in a charismatic way, as many would expect. In fact, they are often "polite, reserved, and skilled listeners" – people who have a depth of knowledge and ask the kinds of questions that stimulate new ideas and solutions (p. 148).


**Ideas for Action.** Several important strategies can help leaders build teams with good "habits of group vulnerability" - habits that, reinforced over time, will be embraced by the group even when the leader isn't present.

## SKILL 3: ESTABLISH PURPOSE

**Three Hundred and Eleven Words.** Leaders of effective groups work to permeate the team's culture with reminders of the team's purpose, "consistently creating engagement around it. What matters is telling the story" (p. 182).



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**The Hooligans and the Surgeons.** In effective groups, members receive regular communication in everyday moments not just once, but through a regular stream of “ultra-clear signals that are aligned with a shared goal,” along with the key message that each individual’s particular role is important (p. 199). In the case studies of managing riotous English soccer fans in Portugal and effectively introducing a new surgical procedure in a metropolitan area, these two dramatic events demonstrate how groups can become high-purpose environments.

**How to Lead for Proficiency.** Leaders of high-proficiency groups manage to infuse teams with talk of their values, and this continues even when they are not in the room. They “focus on creating priorities, naming keystone behaviors, and flooding the environment with heuristics that link the two” (p. 213).

**How to Lead for Creativity.** Leaders of high-creativity groups understand that creativity is really about “building ownership, providing support, and aligning group energy toward the arduous, error-filled, ultimately fulfilling journey of making something new” (p. 226).


**Ideas for Action.** Successful cultures are often born in crisis situations. Building a high purpose team is “a never-ending process of trying, failing, reflecting, and above all, learning,” and a few strategic processes can help (p. 228).

## BUILD SAFETY


Effective leaders understand that the first step to creating an environment where all members of a group are positioned to do and give their best is to build safety. Successful groups understand the difficulty members experience in sharing ideas or contributing maximum effort if they feel threatened by rejection and ridicule. “Belonging cues” are the cues that humans provide to one another that signal safety and they are the single most important factor in building a strong group culture. These cues are behaviors that create safe connections in groups (p.10). Belonging cues let members know they can stop worrying and finally connect with those around us. “Belonging cues possess three basic qualities:

- 1) **Energy:** They invest in the exchange that is occurring.
- 2) **Individualization:** They treat the person as if they are unique and valued
- 3) **Future orientation:** They signal the relationship will continue” (p. 11).

Will Phelps, who studies organizational behavior at the University of South Wales in Australia, ran an experiment that found that in a team task, the members of a group almost inevitably reflected the negative behavior of even just one member and when they did, performance dropped. In his experiment, Phelps secretly injected an actor into teams tasked with brainstorming a marketing strategy for a start-up. The actor portrayed various negative archetypes from group to group: the Slacker, the Jerk, and the Downer. In each case, the performance of the group was reduced by 30-40 percent.



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Except this did not occur in one interesting “outlier” group, which did not take on the negative actions or attitude of the “bad apple.” The reason is that this one group had a member who was able to non-aggressively change the energy with a series of social cues, communicating that the environment is safe and warm. In this outlier group, the pivotal member reacted to the negative actor with warmth, deflected negativity, invited others into the conversation, and made a potentially unstable situation feel solid and safe. Ultimately, he diffused the situation created by the actor and created a safe place for others to perform. And they did (pp. 3-6).

Members of successful groups describe their relationships with the other members in familial terms. Many successful groups create names for their members (i.e., “Pixarians” at Pixar or the “Kippsters” at KIPP Charter Schools). It creates a sense of belonging, much like the surnames in a family.

The feeling of a familial group is described as “a rush, knowing you can take a huge risk and these people will be there to support you no matter what” (p. 7). A member of the international design group, IDEO Design, not only shares that the firm is a familial group but explains that the familial bond allows members to take more risks, give each other permission, and have moments of vulnerability that could never happen in a traditional business setting (p. 7).


Coyle observed that there was a distinct pattern of interaction in groups with a strong culture, such as a tendency to close physical proximity or sitting in circular arrangements. He noted high levels of mixing – as opposed to only talking to and listening to the leader – and he observed active listening, physical touch, humor, and small courtesies, such as saying “please” and “thank you” and holding doors.

## SHARE VULNERABILITY


Because they are places of belonging, effective groups are full of feedback and constructive criticism. With psychological safety being a major pillar of their culture, members can deliver direct feedback and criticism often. The difference between constructive criticism or feedback at companies like Pixar and those companies with ineffective cultures is that successful groups reinforce belonging cues to keep the environment safe, thereby encouraging feedback. Most of the successful groups – from Pixar to IDEO to KIPP Charter Schools to the Navy Seals – have regular meetings that encourage feedback and criticism among the group. Feedback is a critical component to strong group culture.

Greg Popovich, one of the most successful NBA coaches of all time, was described by his assistant coach as being direct and to the point with his criticism, and immensely loving afterward, once again tying to familial relationships in strong group cultures.

One of the reasons that successful groups may have a high level of mixing or interacting with all members of the group is because their leaders lead with vulnerability. Whereas leaders of groups with weak group culture are typically reticent to admit mistakes or reveal their areas of weakness or ignorance, leaders of successful groups jump at the opportunity to share their vulnerability,



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encouraging all the group's members to do the same. The beauty in vulnerability is that it fosters an environment where every member feels empowered to contribute and focuses less on obtaining the perfect image and more on complementing the team.


A great example of the payoff of vulnerability in groups is the remarkable incident concerning United Airlines Flight 232 in July of 1989 from Denver to Chicago. Led by Captain Al Haynes (known for his low-key and amiable manner), first officer Bill Records, and flight engineer Dudley Dvorak, the flight took a dramatic turn for the worst when the explosion of one of the tail engines damaged the hydraulic control lines and knocked out the ability to control the plane. An off-duty pilot trainer, Denny Fitch, happened to be aboard the flight and offered to enter the cockpit to help. As soon as Fitch entered, rather than attempt to lead, he asked where he could be of service. Once he realized that he could not safely land the plane on his own, Haynes was the perfect example of a vulnerable leader. He asked the team for ideas, and they worked together seamlessly to land the plane successfully – with 185 survivors. The group beat the nearly impossible odds for this type of mishap by avoiding a power struggle, acting quickly and efficiently with short bursts of communication referred to as “notifications,” and, most importantly, sharing vulnerability. Supporting the experience of the team of Flight 232, studies show that vulnerability encourages cooperation and trust, and hence, performance (pp. 91-97).

Another commonality in strong group cultures is people that Coyle refers to as the “spark plugs” of the company’s culture. These people are exceptional listeners, polite, reserved, and easy to talk to. They offer an even safer place for members to bounce ideas around while asking questions that encourage the members to dig deeper in thought, action, or creativity. They may not be the person who takes the credit for the most innovative ideas or breakthrough solutions in the group, but they are typically the person that most of those people spend a great deal of their time with every day. The spark plug is the inspiration and resource for much of the top talent in a group.


## ESTABLISH PURPOSE

Once group members feel safe and connected, it is vital for each member to understand why the group exists. More than just posting a mission statement, successful groups engage with their mission statement on a regular basis. It becomes their “why,” and therefore guides their work and their interactions.

In 1975 James Burke, the president of Johnson and Johnson, held a meeting with 35 of the company's senior leaders to discuss “the Credo,” which is the mission statement that the company was founded upon. It appeared to Burke that most people in the company did not care about the document or paid it very little attention. Burke challenged the managers to thoroughly discuss each value in the document and decide if the company should get rid of it altogether. But the idea of getting rid of any of the company's founding principles really fired up most of the managers. They dissected it and became more familiar with the document than before, and they ultimately decided to keep it. Burke continued to conduct these meetings regularly at all levels of the company to keep the group engaged in the mission.




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Several years later, in 1982, Johnson and Johnson experienced a major crisis resulting in six people dying from Extra Strength TYLENOL capsules that had been laced with cyanide. The FBI suggested the company not order a national recall of the product because they believed it was isolated to a specific area. However, after considering their crisis against the words of their Credo, the company ultimately decided to order a national recall at the cost of 100 million dollars. The first line of the Credo read, "We believe our first responsibility is to doctors, nurses, and patients" (p. 171). This decision helped the company not only to improve its products and salvage its reputation but also retain its identity.

To establish purpose, Coyle concludes with a list of action items for groups and leaders that he expresses as follows:

- Use Artifacts
- Name and Rank Priorities
- Measure What Really Matters
- Focus on Bar-Setting Behaviors
- Embrace the Use of Catchphrases
- Be Ten Times as Clear About Your Priorities as You Think You Should Be
- Figure Out Where Your Group Aims for Proficiency and Where It Aims for Creativity (pp. 229-235).



*Building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing purpose are vital to strong group cultures because these behaviors tell a story that resonates with each member. In an environment that is constantly evaluating safety and belonging, where all signals indicate that it is safe, members are valued, and where the future is clear, our brains exert less energy on those obsessive concerns and more on contributing to the greater purpose of the team.*



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Successful groups have mastered the art of meeting their members' basic psychological needs while placing them as valuable characters in a story much greater than the sum of their parts.

Coyle, D. (2018). *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*. New York: Bantam Books.

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