

# Cultivating the Best Culture—and Training for It

The best cultures have foundational elements that enhance connection. The challenge is helping people understand this and develop behaviors that boost connection. **BY MICHAEL LEE STALLARD**



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“**C**ulture training” sounds like something you might hear in conjunction with “mind control” or “brainwashing,” both of which I abhor. Nevertheless, experiences in my life made it clear that culture—by which I mean the social environment one lives and works in—has a profound effect on our health, happiness, and productivity. Left to itself, culture will drift or settle in a bad direction, so we can’t afford to ignore the area of culture in the workplace.

The first clues that culture matters came out of my work life. There were times I felt eager to get up in the morning; the hours flew by while I was immersed in what I was doing; and by the end of the day, I didn’t want to stop working. Then there were other times when I didn’t want to get out of bed; time passed slowly; and by the end of the day, I felt exhausted. It wasn’t that I had changed, so clearly something in the environment, or culture, of the workplace was having that effect on me.

Working on Wall Street, I observed many mergers that looked promising on paper but stumbled in reality because the cultures of the merging companies clashed, sabotaging post-merger performance. This made me wonder: *Is there a best culture?* In 2002, I decided to leave Wall Street to research and write a book on what it takes to cultivate the best culture.

## **A FAMILY CRISIS AND UNEXPECTED INSIGHT**

I knew from experience that factors such as being united around and inspired by an organization’s vision, truly valuing people, and giving them a voice mattered to individual and organizational performance. What I didn’t see clearly yet was the specific effect these factors had on people. A crisis in our family brought that into focus.

In late 2002, my wife, Katie, was diagnosed with breast cancer. A year later, she faced a diagnosis of advanced ovarian cancer. Her chances of survival at the time were less than 10 percent. The thought of losing my beloved best friend, our 10- and 12-year-old daughters losing their wonderful mother, and

Katie not seeing the girls grow up made me feel anxious, stressed, and, at times, depressed, although I did my best to hide my feelings.

I remember dreading our second-opinion consultation at Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK). As we approached MSK’s entrance, the doorman locked his eyes on Katie, smiled, and greeted her like a returning friend. Making eye contact with passersby is very unusual in New York City, so this caught me by surprise. Then I surmised he recognized Katie was wearing a wig and he was reaching out to welcome her. The receptionist called everyone “honey,” also very unusual in Manhattan. The security and administrative people we met were friendly and attentive. Our oncologist was upbeat and optimistic. She told Katie she was not a statistic (so don’t look at them) and women do survive this disease. Although I had been expecting MSK would have a culture of death and dying, I experienced a culture of life and living where people were inspired by MSK’s mission to provide “the best cancer care, anywhere” and where they valued one another, their patients, and the caregivers. By the end of the day, I was optimistic that, with this great medical team alongside us, Katie would survive.

Earlier this year, we celebrated Katie’s 15th year of being ovarian cancer free. Connection with our medical team, family, and friends helped get us through a stressful season. (And by the way, the doorman became a personal friend of ours, and he continues to warmly greet Katie each time she walks through the front door.)

Less than a year later, a friend of ours was diagnosed with cancer. I begged her to go to MSK, which she eventually did. Because she had a different type of cancer than Katie’s, she went to a different part of MSK, located in a different building. Her experience was not at all like ours. She said she felt alone and unwelcome. She was angry about it and swore she would never return. This, too, was an important clue.

### IS THERE A “BEST” CULTURE?

These personal experiences, along with the array of research we were reviewing and our own research, crystalized three truths about culture:

1. It's the social aspects of culture—how we interact with each other—that affect people the most.
2. Cultures that connect people help them thrive; cultures that are disconnecting, and foster loneliness and social isolation, have a negative effect on people.
3. Every organization is made of a variety of subcultures, so the challenge for organizations is to help people, and leaders in particular, develop and maintain subcultures of connection throughout the organization.

A person who works in a culture that is controlling or where people are indifferent to one another will be less engaged than a person who feels like a valued member of the team. While the culture of a particular organization, department, or group will be shaped by the tasks to be done (for example, a medical practice versus a manufacturing plant), the best cultures have foundational elements that enhance connection.

Connection matters; it's the lens through which culture should be assessed. The challenge we have today is helping people understand this and develop behaviors that boost connection.

### THE SUBSTANCE OF CULTURE TRAINING

When my colleagues and I conduct culture training workshops, we spend time on the science of culture, so people understand that connection is more than just a nice idea. Human connection is, as neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman says, a “superpower that makes us smarter, happier, and more productive.” Our research has found that connection is a superpower for organizations, too, because it boosts employee engagement, strategic alignment, quality of decision-making, innovation, and adaptability, which, together, add up to a powerful performance and competitive advantage.

Disconnection, which is anything less than a positive bond of connection, is the norm in workplace cultures today. Two-thirds of people report they don't feel connected at work. Research from Cigna last year found nearly half of Americans are lonely to the point that it has become a public health crisis. Disconnection most likely will get worse in the years ahead as Artificial Intelligence goes mainstream and we interact more with machines and less with human beings.

To counteract the trends that are increasing

social isolation and loneliness today, including in the workplace, we who are in the training vocation can help people understand that the need for human connection is hardwired into our nervous systems, and we are ill-equipped to cope with stress without the support of meaningful relationships. As I describe in “Connection Culture,” absent meaningful human connection, our bodies go into a state of “stress response,” which makes us feel sickly, lethargic, anxious, and/or depressed. When feeling poorly, we typically turn to addictive substances and behaviors that make us temporarily feel better or numb the pain (e.g., food, alcohol, and drugs, or excessive work, exercise, Internet use, shopping, etc.). Research has found that nearly half of Americans have one or more addictions that have serious negative consequences for their health.

Having reinforced the “why,” we move to the “what” and “how” of developing and maintaining cultures of connection. In training managers, it has to be simple, memorable, and actionable. They are too busy for anything else. Over the last 15 years, we have developed a framework called Vision, Value, and Voice that managers like. We describe it this way: If you communicate an inspiring vision, value people, and give them a voice, they will thrive and so will your team, department, or organization.

We use case studies of a wide variety of inspiring examples of leaders and organizations that have cultivated cultures of connection, including Jim Sinegal leading Costco; Frances Hesselbein leading the Girl Scouts of the USA; Anne Mulcahy leading Xerox; Alan Mulally leading Ford; Chancellor Victor Boschini leading Texas Christian University (TCU); Bono leading rock band U2; Tricia Griffith leading Progressive; Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Vern Clark leading the U.S. Navy; and Lin-Manuel Miranda leading the cast and crew of the award-winning Broadway musical, *Hamilton*.

To get them started on how to be more intentional about cultivating connection in the subcultures they are responsible for, we provide 100 examples of attitudes, uses of language, and behaviors we have seen leaders use to connect people. Then we help managers identify actions they can put into place immediately.

Our industry has much more work to do in training managers to develop cultures of connection. We've barely scratched the surface. Because of today's connection crisis, our work as trainers and coaches has never been more important. ■