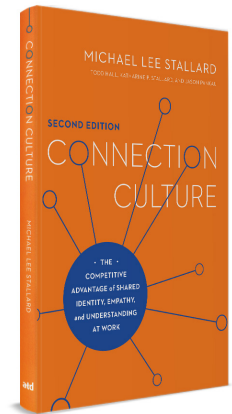


Connection Culture

The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy, and Understanding at Work

by **Michael Lee Stallard**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

What makes a company culture effective? Is it a strong core of well-paid leaders, or perhaps a workforce that's expected to do their work and keep quiet about it? Neither—the key to a company culture that makes employees and leaders happy and leads to financial success is connection.

In *Connection Culture*, Michael Lee Stallard draws on data and research from the world's most successful company cultures to find out exactly what makes them so effective. The answer? Connection—between people, between teams, and across the organization as a whole. So why do so many individuals and organizations fail to create cultures of connection? Stallard explores the answers, then sets about the task of guiding leaders toward more effective connection. He shares insights into some of the world's best cultures and how they maintain such a high level of connection. And he shows the many risks of poor connection within organizations, and how it can completely derail a company's potential.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The three types of company culture, and why a culture of connection is the only path forward.
- How to use the Vision, Value, Voice model to assess and improve your company's culture.
- The superpowers of connection and the dangers of disconnection.
- A plan for taking action to make your company culture a culture of connection.

A New View of Leadership and Organizational Culture

If a leader's sole focus is on seeing that tasks are accomplished, then success will be unsustainable. Leaders must create an environment where people thrive. What does it take for you to thrive at work, and what is the role that culture plays in whether or not you are able to give your best effort?

There are seven universal human needs required for people to thrive at work and three types of culture everyone should know about, including the type of culture that best promotes the health and productivity of individuals and organizations. You'll learn these in the following sections, as well as a vocabulary of culture and a simple, memorable, and actionable model to create the best culture. This knowledge will help you understand what type of culture you need to thrive, and it will begin to equip you to cultivate a workplace culture that brings out the best in the people you are responsible for leading or whom you lead through your influence.

The X Factor

Is there a 'best' team and organizational culture? Is there an X factor in culture that brings out the best in people and propels the success of groups?

Scholars are finding that organizations comprise a web of relationships best capture by theories of complexity. Meanwhile, effective leaders care about people and foster positive relationships. Connection is cited as an emerging general theory of leadership and organizational culture that integrates these trends.

Applying a one-size-fits-all culture isn't realistic in today's increasingly diverse and global working world. That said, organizations that have sustainable high performance will have common elements to their culture that enable them to be their best. Although the tasks will differ depending on the industry, when it comes to the relational aspects, there is a best culture: a culture that has a high degree of human connection.

Reflect on a time when you were energized by your work. What factors were present that contributed to your energy? Next, reflect on a time when your work felt draining. What factors were present that contributed to your fatigue or your feelings of being burned out? How would you describe the current culture you're experiencing? Does it draw you in and connect you with your colleagues and organization, or does it push you away and leave you feeling disconnected?

Connection Culture provides a new way of thinking about leadership and organizational culture. In the sections ahead, you will learn about this new approach and discover how to tap into the power of human connection.

Connection, Control, and Indifference

You can decode a culture by looking at the predominant attitudes, uses of language, and behaviors. As we explore what it takes to establish and strengthen connection cultures, it is instructive to understand how cultures differ in ways that affect the health and performance of individuals and organizations.

There are primarily three types of relational cultures: cultures of control, cultures of indifference, and cultures of connection.

In cultures of control, people with power, influence, and status rule over others. A culture of control breeds an environment in which people fear making mistakes and taking risks. It is stifling—killing innovation because people are afraid to speak up. Employees feel left out, micromanaged, unsafe, hyper-criticized, or helpless. Cultures of control tend to exhibit a number of common attributes. They're often hierarchical and formal in nature, with an inner circle that develops and is comprised of favored individuals who have the most power, influence, and status and receive the most recognition, responsibility, and compensation.

Cultures of indifference are predominant today. In this type of culture, people are so busy with tasks that they fail to invest the time necessary to develop healthy, supportive relationships. Some leaders don't see value in the relational nature of work. Whether they voice it or not, their attitude is, "You are being paid to do a job. I don't care how you feel or if you have friends here. All I care about is your work." People in cultures of indifference often come to feel like they are thought of and treated as mere means to an end rather than as human beings who are valuable in and of themselves. They may feel like a cog in a machine, unimportant, underappreciated, uncertain, or invisible. Many struggle with a lack of connection.

Leaders may have good intentions, but suffer from blind spots. This leads to a lack of organizational focus and workloads for those under them that are unreasonable and may cause people to feel overwhelmed. To achieve sustainable superior performance, every member of an organization needs to intentionally develop both task excellence and re-

relationship excellence. A culture of connection produces task and relationship excellence.

In a connection culture, people care about others and care about their work because it benefits other human beings. They invest the time to develop healthy relationships and reach out to help others in need. They embrace that every individual has something to bring to the table based on their experiences and background, and that a diverse marketplace of ideas and perspectives is a strength. This bond of connection helps overcome the differences that historically divided people, creating a sense of community and unity that is inclusive and energized, and spurs productivity and innovation.

The Vision + Value + Voice Model

The first element of a connection culture is vision. It exists in a culture when everyone is motivated by the mission, united by the values, and proud of the reputation. When people share a purpose or set of beliefs, it unites and motivates them. Vision is more than identifying and articulating a mission. It also includes understanding how an organization goes about accomplishing its mission. In other words, vision encompasses the organization's values or beliefs about what is right and, by implication, what isn't right in how it conducts its business. An organization's mission and values, including how it lives up to them or doesn't, produces the reputation that employees are proud of, indifferent to, or embarrassed by. When employees are proud of their organization's reputation, they feel more connected.

The second element of connection culture is value. It means that people are truly valued as individuals, not merely for what they produce. Value exists in a culture when everyone understands the needs of people, appreciates their positive unique contributions, and helps them achieve their potential.

The third element of a connection culture is voice. It exists when everyone seeks the ideas and opinions of others, shares opinions honestly, and safeguards relational connections. In a culture in which voice exists, decision makers have the humility to know that they don't have a monopoly on good ideas, and they need to seek and consider the opinions and ideas of others in order to make the best decisions.

When people's ideas and opinions are sought and considered, it helps meet the human needs for respect, recognition, and belonging. Being in the loop makes people feel connected to their colleagues, whereas being out of the loop does the opposite.

The Superpower of Connection and Dangers of Disconnection

Connection is a 'superpower,' a turbocharger, that makes people 'smarter, happier, and more productive.' At least, that's how UCLA neuroscience professor Matthew Lieberman, author of *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, has described it.

Most people don't yet recognize connection as a superpower that can protect them and propel them forward, therefore, they miss out on its benefits. In their defense, they may be living and working in cultures that have conditioned them not to see, feel, or experience connection as much as they should to live the most productive and enjoyable lives possible. People thrive when they experience connection, as it impacts everything from confidence and curiosity to social skills, enthusiasm, persistence, and ability to cope with stress.

Disconnection, meanwhile, has a ripple effect. When people feel disconnected, they are vulnerable to stress. And as the pace of change speeds up and competition increases in today's hyper-competitive global marketplace, stress levels will naturally rise, too.

In summary, human connection matters to the health, happiness, and productivity of individuals. Disconnection sabotages human flourishing by increasing a host of negative outcomes including ill health, anxiety, depression, addiction, and suicide. For our own sake, and because of the impact we have on those around us, each of us needs to make sure we have sufficient connection in our lives.

Taking Action: Connecting Through Vision, Value, and Voice

What follows is a set of 15 building blocks, a collection of actions for building and maintaining a connection culture—five for each of the three connection culture elements of vision, value, and voice.

Vision

This element is present when everyone is motivated by the mission, united by the values, and proud of the reputation.

- Develop an inspirational identity phrase that connects.
- Set the top five annual priorities.
- Identify and establish core values that connect.

- Continuously reconnect people to the inspiring identity.
- Hire, develop, and promote for competence and connection skills.

Value

This element is present when everyone understands the needs of people, appreciates their positive unique contributions, and helps them achieve their potential.

- Make and encourage connections that are personal.
- Get people in the right roles.
- Create personal development plans.
- Provide training and mentors to support personal development.
- Help people develop connection skills.

Voice

This element is present when everyone seeks the ideas of others, shares their ideas and opinions honestly, and safeguards relational connections.

- Create forums for organization-wide communication.
- Hold knowledge flow sessions for decision input and idea development.
- Conduct knowledge flow sessions to evaluate events and activities.
- Provide training to safeguard relational connections.
- Maintain staff connection and development.

The Five-Step Process to Operationalize a Connection Culture

Developing a connection culture involves changing from cultures of control or indifference. Effective lasting change takes effort and consistency. The following are five essential steps to developing and maintaining a connection culture:

Step 1: Develop a connection mindset among the members of your group.

Step 2: Cultivate vision, value, and voice by intentionally developing habits of attitude, language, and behavior that connect.

Step 3: Measure connection in each subculture to identify connected leaders, connected members, and individuals who need help connecting.

Step 4: Mentor and coach individuals to become connected members and connected leaders.

Step 5: celebrate and disseminate acts of connection (both stories and practices).

Like the great organizations, be intentional and action-oriented about developing a connection mindset, connection skills, and connection character—both within yourself and your organization. Start local, and see how it grows from there.



Michael Lee Stallard, co-founder and president of E Pluribus Partners and Connection Culture Group, offers keynote speeches and workshops on leadership, team and organization culture. He also wrote, *Fired Up or Burned Out: How to Reignite Your Team's Passion, Creativity and Productivity*. He has spoken or taught at many leading organizations, including Costco, Google, Johnson & Johnson, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Memorial Sloan Kettering Center Center, and NASA Johnson Space Center.

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