

# CRACKING YOUR CHURCH'S CULTURE



**Seven Keys to Unleashing  
Vision & Inspiration**

**SAMUEL R. CHAND**



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and Inspiration**

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## About Leadership Network

Leadership Network, an initiative of OneHundredX, exists to honor God and serve others by investing in innovative church leaders who impact the Kingdom immeasurably.

Since 1984, Leadership Network has brought together exceptional leaders, who are focused on similar ministry initiatives, to accelerate their impact. The ensuing collaboration—often across denominational lines—provides a strong base from which individual leaders can better analyze and refine their individual strategies. Creating an environment for collaborative discovery, dialogue, and sharing encourages leaders to extend their own innovations and ideas. Leadership Network further enhances this process through the development and distribution of highly targeted ministry tools and resources—including video, podcasts, concept papers, special research reports, e-publications, and books like this one.

With Leadership Network's assistance, today's Christian leaders are energized, equipped, inspired—and better able to multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives.

In 1996 Leadership Network partnered with Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, to develop a series of creative books that would provide thought leadership to innovators in church ministry. Leadership Network Publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, practitioners, and pioneering churches. The series collectively draws from a wide range

of disciplines, with individual titles providing perspective on one or more of five primary areas:

- Enabling effective leadership
- Encouraging life-changing service
- Building authentic community
- Creating Kingdom-centered impact
- Engaging cultural and demographic realities

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*To my wife, Brenda; my daughters, Rachel and Deborah; and  
my granddaughter, Adeline Joy—they all give up so much  
to make my dreams a reality. Because of them, I never lack for  
constant and consistent encouragement.*

# Cracking Your Church's Culture Code



# 1

## CULTURE TRUMPS VISION

Unless commitment is made, there are only  
promises and hopes . . . but no plans.

—Peter Drucker

A church in the Midwest grew rapidly, but the growth curve gradually flattened. In recent years, they saw almost no growth at all. In the early days of explosive growth, the senior pastor taught seminars and spoke at national conferences to instruct other pastors in how to grow their churches, but in the past few years, he received very few invitations to speak. When the curve began to flatten, he took his senior staff to hear noted speakers. Surely, he thought, they could learn something new and overcome stagnation. When that didn't fix things, they hired consultants to analyze the situation and prescribe a solution. When this strategy didn't effect the change they wanted, the senior pastor began "cleaning house." He hired and fired so many people that the offices needed revolving doors. Still, the church didn't grow.

Out of frustration, the pastor left the church. He moved his family a few miles away and started another church with about two hundred people who followed him there. Some would call this a church plant; I think it was a glorified church split.

At the original church, a new pastor came into the office full of fresh ideas and a clear vision of where the church could go; that's exactly why he was selected. After a long, grueling first eighteen months with the new pastor on the job, however, the church's growth curve had barely budged. When he called me, he was frustrated and tired. In our first meeting, he told

me sadly, “I don’t understand. We spent time and money to reenergize the congregation. We took our top staff on a retreat to instill the new vision into them. We hired more staff, and we reformatted our worship experience. We started plenty of new programs. We redesigned our stage set. We created a killer Web site, reconfigured our offices, redecorated to create a fresh ambience, and designed a new logo for the church. We even wrote a song about how great we are! But none of this has made a bit of difference. We haven’t gone backward, and I’m glad of that, but I thought we’d be way ahead of where we are today.” He paused for a second and then asked, “What am I missing?”

This senior pastor had done a lot of good things, but he failed to understand the impact of the existing organizational culture on his new, exciting vision for the church. It was like changing the engine on a sports car to make it faster, but it was spinning its wheels in the mud. Or to use a different metaphor, he tried to transplant a heart into a patient whose body rejected the foreign organ. No matter how perfect the new heart was, the patient had no chance at all unless the body accepted it.

Culture—not vision or strategy—is the most powerful factor in any organization. It determines the receptivity of staff and volunteers to new ideas, unleashes or dampens creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, and creates a sense of pride or deep discouragement about working or being involved there. Ultimately, the culture of an organization—particularly in churches and nonprofit organizations, but also in any organization—shapes individual morale, teamwork, effectiveness, and outcomes. In an article in the magazine *Executive Leadership*, Dick Clark explains how he took the pharmaceutical firm Merck to a

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*Culture—not vision or strategy—is the most powerful factor in any organization.*

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higher level: “The fact is, culture eats strategy for lunch. You can have a good strategy in place, but if you don’t have the culture and the enabling

systems, the [negative] culture of the organization will defeat the strategy.”<sup>1</sup>

To help you uncover the nature of your existing culture and identify the steps of change, this book examines the full range of cultural health, from inspiring to toxic, and describes the seven keys of CULTURE:

1. Control
2. Understanding
3. Leadership
4. Trust
5. Unafraid
6. Responsive
7. Execution

Insight is the first—and crucial—step toward change.

### **Looking at the Landscape**

In the past decade or so, dozens of books and countless articles have been written about the importance of corporate culture, but relatively few churches and nonprofit organizations have taken the arduous (but necessary) steps to assess, correct, and change their culture. First, we need to understand what we mean by the term *organizational culture*. It is the personality of the church or nonprofit. Like all personalities, it’s not simple to define and describe. Organization development consultant, speaker, writer, and filmmaker Ellen Wallach observes, “Organizational culture is like pornography; it is hard to define, but you know it when you see it.”

Organizational culture includes tangibles and intangibles. The things we can see are the way people dress and behave, the look of the corporate offices, and the messages of posters

on the walls. The intangibles may be harder to grasp, but they give a better read on the organization's true personality. The organization's values (stated and unstated), beliefs, and assumptions; what and how success is celebrated; how problems are addressed; the manifestations of trust and respect at all levels of the organization—these are the intangible elements of culture. Every group in society—family, town, state, nation, company, church, civic group, team, and any other gathering of people—has a culture, sometimes clearly identified but often camouflaged.

Many leaders confuse culture with vision and strategy, but they are very different. Vision and strategy usually focus on products, services, and outcomes, but culture is about the people—the most valuable asset in the organization. The way people are treated, the way they treat their peers, and their response to their leaders is the air people breathe. If that air is clean and healthy, people thrive and the organization succeeds, but to the extent that it is toxic, energy subsides, creativity lags, conflicts multiply, and production declines. I'm not suggesting that churches and nonprofits drop their goals and spend their time holding hands and saying sweet things to each other. That would be a different kind of toxic environment! A strong, vibrant culture stimulates people to be and do their very best

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*Vision and strategy usually focus on products, services, and outcomes, but culture is about the people—the most valuable asset in the organization.*

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and reach the highest goals. Spiritual leaders point the way forward, but they invite meaningful participation from every person at all levels of the organization. Together, they work hard toward their common purpose, and they celebrate each other's accomplishments every step along the way. Trust is the glue that holds the organization together and gives it the strength it needs to excel.

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The inputs into the “cultural system” include the stories that surround the staff’s experiences; shared goals and responsibilities; respect and care for people; balance between bold leadership and listening; and clear, regular communication. The outcomes include the reputation of the leader, the reputation of the organization, the attractiveness of the church or nonprofit to prospective new staff members, a measure of pride in being a part of the organization, and a positive impact on the entire community.

To see a few snapshots of a church’s culture, we might ask these questions:

- Who are the heroes? What makes them heroes? Who determines who the heroes are?
- When someone inquires, “Tell me about your church or nonprofit,” what stories are told?
- How much does the average staff member feel he or she has input into the direction and strategy of the church or nonprofit?
- Who has the ear of the top leaders? How did these people win a hearing with the leaders?
- What are the meaningful rituals? What message do they convey to those in the organization and those outside it?
- Who is rewarded, and for what accomplishments?
- What is the level of loyalty up and down the organizational chart? What factors build loyalty?
- What is the level of creativity and enthusiasm throughout the organization?
- When an objective observer spends an hour watching people interact in the offices, what mood does he or she pick up?
- How are decisions made, deferred, or delayed?
- Who are the nonpositional power brokers, the people who have authority based on the respect they’ve earned but who don’t have authoritative titles?

- Where are control problems and power struggles most evident?
- How is “turf” defined and protected?

The shape of an organization’s culture begins at the top level. The leader’s integrity, competence, and care for staff members create the environment where people excel . . . or not. In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni observes that trust is the most powerful trait in shaping a positive culture, and trust thrives on honesty. He writes, “When there is an absence of trust, it stems from a leader’s unwillingness to be vulnerable with the group,” and “leaders who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation of trust.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe that the role of senior pastor is the most glorious and at the same time most difficult in the world. These leaders have the incredible privilege of representing the King of kings, imparting grace and life to people, and creating environments in which God’s Spirit changes the eternal destiny—and the present relationships and direction—of men and women, boys and girls in the community. There is no higher calling. Yet senior pastors shoulder enormous burdens. They have to be “on” every time they speak, whether it’s to the entire congregation or to an individual. They feel the pressure of finances, deadlines, new visions and missed opportunities, the mistakes and sins of their staff, and their own flaws. But even as they face those troubles, they are expected to be the source of hope, peace, and wisdom for every person in their world. Like the Apostle Paul, senior pastors report either metaphorically or actually, “I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:27–29). Senior pastors are in a unique position to shape the culture of their teams and their churches,

but they can't do it alone. They need the support, wisdom, and commitment of every person on the team.

Let me give a couple of examples of the impact of organizational culture. A senior pastor who understands the importance of creating an inspirational culture has a church with five sites and about a dozen daughter churches. Throughout the organization—from the first interview of a prospective employee to large staff meetings and every team's interaction—staff members remind each other that they come to work each day to make a difference in people's lives. It's not just a job, and they aren't just killing time each day. The pastoral staff has an open-door policy, and they welcome creative suggestions from every staff member. Treating each person in the community and each other with the utmost respect is a high value. The senior pastor regularly carves out time to roll up his sleeves and work alongside the most humble employee at the church.

In an atmosphere of mutual encouragement, top leaders at the mother church, the sites, and the daughter churches are devoted to each other's success, so power struggles are minimized. The senior pastor goes to great lengths to celebrate accomplishments, rewarding not only the vigorous effort to pull off all the work of ministry at the church but also the selfless service to the community. As you can imagine, staff loyalty is through the roof! Staff members express tremendous pride in being a part of such a caring, supportive organization that values them even more than their production.

The senior pastor explained his philosophy of leadership: "I make it a priority to say or do something each day to speak to people's hearts and affirm their commitment to serve God. They work hard, and I want to bring them joy and relieve some stress in their lives. With this as a priority, I find innumerable opportunities to accomplish this every single day. I think about the lives of our staff members and volunteers beyond the walls of our church. They have interests, homes, and families. How they are treated here has an impact on every relationship and every activity in their lives. They need to know I care—and that