



# ATTENTION BUSINESS LEADERS: **YOUR COMPANY CULTURE IS NOT CONTROLLABLE!**

If you lead a business unit—a team, a department or a corporation—you’ve thought about corporate culture. You’ve read about how having the right culture drives exceptional results. Get the culture right, the gurus say, and the rest will magically take care of itself. And you believe it if you’ve ever been part of a high-performing team. Everything just clicks, it’s fun, and the results flow. The problem comes when you try to take your current, not-too-bad-but-nothing-special team and change the culture. It’s tough, isn’t it? The gurus say, “write a clearer mission statement”, “align values”, and “overcommunicate.” Has that worked for you? I didn’t think so.



By  
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**Culture is not a controllable for a leader, but you do set the climate for your unit. Climate is an input, culture is the output.**

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Here’s why: culture is a bottom-up, day-to-day, individual-by-individual thing. It’s not a controllable for the leader. It is the dependent, not an independent, variable. Culture is a result, not an input.

## Think climate, not culture.

Oh. OK. That fits my observation of the real world. But then how do I take my current team to higher performance levels? Well, culture is not a controllable for the leader, but *climate* is. You set the climate for your unit. Climate is an input. What behaviors do you recognize and reward? What’s your energy level? Do your people feel you trust them? How do you model stress management and conflict resolution? How do you react to failure? (In fact, let’s not call it failure. Let’s call it “learning.”) The leader has enormous influence over the climate in her unit. The leader sets the tone.

## The leadership breakthrough ...

**Here’s the breakthrough: if you foster the right climate, you will get the right culture.**

Several years ago, I observed a young leader surrounded by a culture of reaction and panic. Although it was a publicly traded, billion-dollar company, it was essentially a family-run business. When the founder said, “jump!”—which was often—the culturally appropriate response was, “how high?” Financial fire drills were a very common event. Most mid-level managers would dash from a meeting where they were given a cost-cutting or profit improvement directive

and toss it at their subordinates: “Find a way to cut X-thousand dollars.” The young leader took a different path. He would take a few moments in his office, collect his thoughts and outline a plan. Then he would inform his team of the assignment, but he would also provide context, guidance and an approach. Most importantly, he changed the emotional landscape. He created a buffer and a small oasis of relative calm. Over time, the culture in his unit changed. Decisions, and the management of the business, became more collaborative. The subordinates learned how to think instead of just do. The young leader set the climate and changed the culture within his small area of influence. By the way, his unit also increased sales +19% and profits +46% over the prior year.

## Adult-to-Adult vs. Parent-to-Child

The same idea of setting a climate in order to change a culture was embedded in a recent speech by an expert on stimulating business innovation. He adapted Transactional Analysis concepts to the workplace, saying, “If you want to spark more innovation, you have to interact with your employees as adult-to-adult, rather than parent-to-child.” What a powerful idea and a clear metaphor. When you have a top-down, command-and-control, parent-to-child climate, what kind of culture usually results? Employees who, for the most part, color inside the lines and do what they’re told. A new mission statement probably isn’t going to change that. Re-aligned values might change that, but setting a new climate gives you the missing piece: *how* to do it.

I saw the same thing as a customer of a business that delivered great service and

played unusually well as a team. I was intrigued, so I talked with the manager of the unit. He explained that his predecessor had hired salespeople who had credit problems and drinking problems and “had to sell to eat.” That created a disconnect with the high-income target customers for the product and with the high-end marketing materials put out by corporate headquarters. The new manager made several changes to the climate of the unit, starting with hiring a different, more professional type of salesperson. He brought the marketing and selling processes into alignment with each other—and with the target customer. But he also tracked all the key performance measures, shared financial information and results freely throughout the unit, and modeled integrity and passion for the business. He had made tremendous improvements in the business results of his unit. But the more significant accomplishment was that he had set a new climate which resulted in a culture that impressed the customer. That’s rare. After talking with him and hearing his story, I was not at all surprised when he was quickly promoted to a much larger role at headquarters.

## The bad news, and the good news ...

Getting the culture right is critically important to achieving superior results, but culture is not a controllable for business leaders. However, culture is the result of climate, and leaders do set the climate for their unit. Setting a climate that produces a high performing culture is hard. It takes real leadership: *Creativity. Energy. Flexibility. Principles. Perseverance.* But it works. And it’s extremely rewarding. Good luck!!

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