

Build Your Culture Strategy

A framework for defining what your culture actually looks like in practice

THE IDEA

In “Life or Burnout,” I talk about the difference between the culture a company says it has and the culture people actually experience. You can say you value work-life balance, family, psychological safety, or A players all day long, but the subtle, between-the-lines messages people receive from leaders are what really define the culture.

A cultural strategy makes those messages intentional. It goes beyond Mission, Vision, and Values to define what you will do, what you won’t do, and what you want your clients to experience as a result.



How to use this resource: Use this example as a starting point for creating your own cultural strategy. Define your organization’s **We Wills, We Won’ts, and What Our Clients Will Experience**, then make each statement specific enough to guide actual behavior and decisions.

PART ONE We will

The behaviors and commitments we choose

BUILD A GREAT TEAM

- ◆ Hire A players and people with creativity, curiosity, and initiative.
- ◆ Hire before we’re in dire straits.
- ◆ Hire for potential before anything else, not just what someone has already done.
- ◆ Hire for maturity, acumen, experience, and skills.
- ◆ Promote from within for 60% of our roles.

DEVELOP GREAT LEADERS

- ◆ Provide new managers with a solid mentor and exceptional training.
- ◆ Provide leaders with executive coaching.
- ◆ Leave ego at the door, especially at the highest levels of leadership.
- ◆ Move away from the player-coach model and bring in full-time managers as soon as it makes sense.

CREATE A HUMAN WORKPLACE

- ◆ Audit our team regularly to ensure kindness, humanity, and good intent.
- ◆ Create a sense of belonging for every team member.
- ◆ Empower individual contributors to fail safely and make decisions whenever it's appropriate to do so.
- ◆ Recognize, not just appreciate, exceptional contributors.

REWARD PERFORMANCE FAIRLY

- ◆ Use a performance-based meritocracy for promotions and compensation rather than a tenure-based, assumptive-raise model.
- ◆ Make compensation decisions through a compensation committee rather than inconsistently.

WORK AT A SUSTAINABLE PACE

- ◆ Target a pace of efficient-and-effective-but-not-killing-ourselves.
- ◆ Target fewer than 40 hours per week for individual contributors.
- ◆ Target fewer than 50 hours per week for leaders and executives.

PART TWO We won't

The behaviors and tradeoffs we refuse to normalize

SACRIFICE PEOPLE FOR THE WORK

- ◆ Contact people after hours (after 6 p.m.) unless something is truly urgent. We'll use digital scheduling to send anything else later.
- ◆ Contact people while they're on vacation or holiday.

- ◆ Make promises to clients that require unrealistic hours or deadlines from ourselves or other team members.
- ◆ Create unrealistic goals and then berate team members for not meeting them.
- ◆ Require burnout before we recognize someone as an exceptional contributor.
- ◆ Judge or make derisive comments about someone taking a lunch break, PTO, or leave.

ALLOW BAD BEHAVIOR TO BECOME CULTURE

- ◆ Foster or allow passive-aggressive behavior at any level of the organization.
- ◆ Allow favoritism or clique behavior.
- ◆ Let initiatives die because no one followed through.

PART THREE

Our clients will experience

What all of that should feel like from the outside

- ◆ A team that assumes good intent.
- ◆ A cohesive team.
- ◆ A team that supports our clients collectively through exceptional handoffs and project management.
- ◆ An incredible product.
- ◆ A product driven by user experience, not our own agenda.
- ◆ A team fiercely protective of the client experience.
- ◆ A team that isn't driven by ego, including our executives.
- ◆ Humanity in every interaction.