

# Culture: From Word of the Year to a Driver of Sustainable Results

**Tim Kuppler**

Director of Culture and  
Organization Development,  
Human Synergistics

“Culture” was the Merriam-Webster Word of the Year for 2014, but it remains an elusive topic. Culture is a hot subject for good reason since it impacts every major strategy or plan and is the key to delivering sustainable results (profitability, growth, customer experience, employee satisfaction, etc.).

The good news is that the interest in workplace culture is growing fast after 15 years where many organizations focused on the highly visible measure of employee engagement. This focus on engagement did yield results for some organizations. Unfortunately, Gallup’s Employee Engagement Study has shown the number of employees engaged at work has bounced up and down from 26 to 31.5% over the course of the last 15 years.

We’re now flooded with information about how to build the culture of our dreams, yet Strategy& has found 96% of people still feel culture change is needed in their organization. Culture has been avoided by some due to perceptions about it being a very deep, complex, and even soft topic. Others oversimplify the topic with a focus on disconnected tips and keys. It’s time to get clear about not only the behaviors that distinguish effective organizations, but also the roadmap to building a constructive culture with a sustainable impact on results.

## CULTURE FUNDAMENTALS

The number one culture change fundamental is that results or consequences are necessary for any new cultural attribute to take hold. When positive results are attributed to a change in behavior, it increases the chance

that those behaviors will be sustained and spread within the organization. In fact, research on thousands of organizations using the *Organizational Culture Inventory*® (OCI®) has shown a positive relationship between constructive cultural norms (that is, an expectation for members to behave constructively in order to “fit in”) and financial performance, quality, external adaptability, teamwork, motivation, and reduced stress.

These constructive “norms” include:

**Achievement**—Members are expected to set challenging goals, establish plans to reach those goals, and pursue them with enthusiasm.

**Self-Actualizing**—Members are expected to enjoy their work, develop themselves, and take on new and interesting activities.

**Humanistic-Encouraging**—Members are expected to be supportive, constructive, and open to influence in their dealings with one another.

**Affiliative**—Members are expected to be friendly, cooperative, and sensitive to the satisfaction of their work group.

These expectations may sound good, but the reality is that the expectations that prevail in most organizations support aggressive and passive behaviors. Unfortunately, the current expectations in organizations are very powerful, and our behavior is driven by these often unspoken cultural rules. Leaders need a roadmap to directly connect their efforts to developing constructive cultures and improving results.

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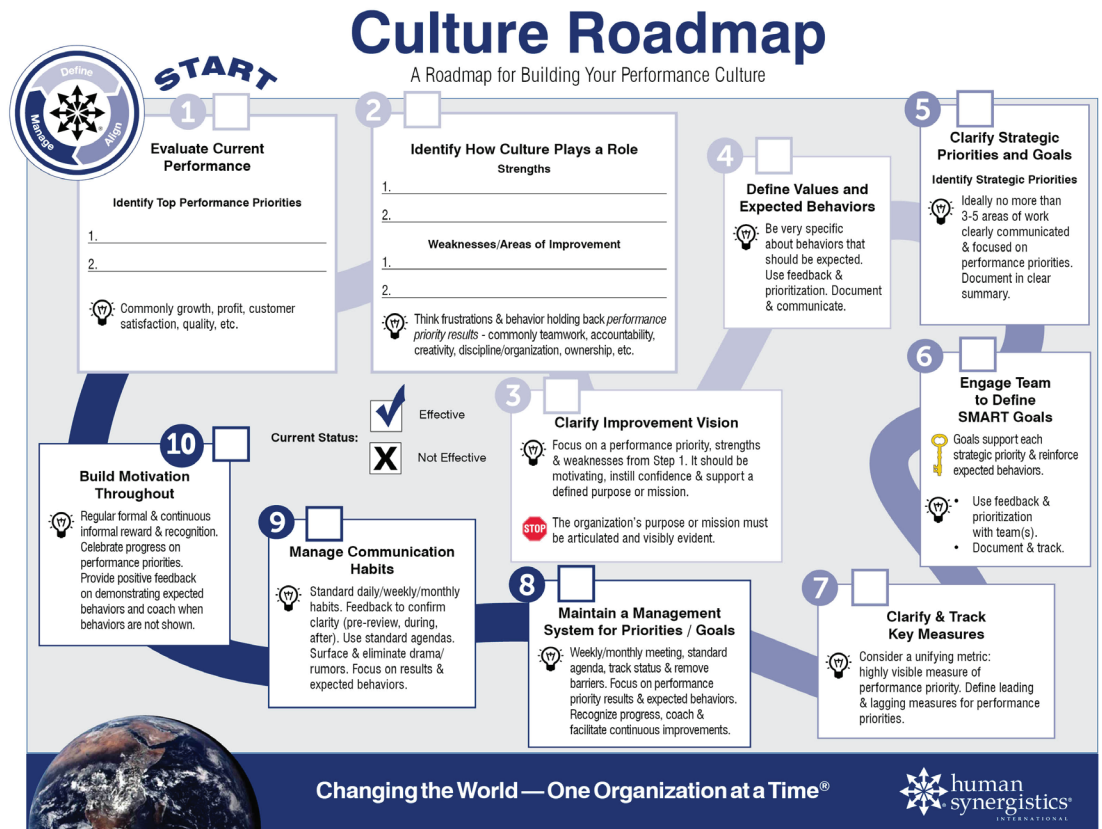
**THE CULTURE ROADMAP**

Leaders should engage their organizations in the process, covering the following steps as part of their strategies and improvement plans:

- 1. Define a top performance priority** that will be the focus of your efforts to improve or sustain results. It's often some specific aspect of growth, customer experience, profitability, or another "business" performance priority. Broad-based actions are actually the most difficult route to sustainable culture change. Focus on a specific priority to increase the likelihood of achieving results.
- 2. Identify "how culture plays a role"** with that performance priority by clarifying the top behavioral strengths (your unique cultural DNA that's critical to your success) and weaknesses (think frustrations, challenges, and inconsistencies as you manage work). Involve many others or even the entire organization in identifying the specific language for these strengths and weaknesses.
- 3. Clarify the improvement vision** for the top performance priority and how you will further leverage strengths and engage the team in addressing the weaknesses. It should be motivating, instill confidence, and support a defined purpose or mission.
- 4. Define specific expected behaviors** for at least the weaknesses from step 2. Involve employees in the process to define the language for these positive and constructive behaviors.
- 5. Clarify strategic priorities** (typically three to five areas or categories of work) for the performance priority. The organization needs to be on the same page with the key areas of focus to improve results.
- 6. Engage the team to define clear goals** and actions for each strategic priority. Use feedback and prioritization efforts with groups to define these goals, and they should reinforce the behaviors defined in step 4.
- 7. Define and visibly share measures** for the top performance priority. It often helps to define and visibly share a "unifying metric" the organization will track to determine if results are being achieved.
- 8. Maintain a management system for priorities and goals** (staff meeting, leadership meeting, etc.) to track progress on priorities and the related constructive behaviors.
- 9. Manage communication habits and routines.** These may include communication meetings, email updates, intranet communications, postings, videos, stand-up meetings, or other communication options. The key is to make them a regularly scheduled routine with a special focus on communicating progress on goals and measures related to the top performance priority.
- 10. Build motivation throughout the process** (reward, recognition, involvement, etc.). There should be formal and informal recognition of both progress on the top performance priority and exhibiting the specific expected behaviors.

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A visual version of the culture roadmap is below:



These 10 steps are far from providing the entire picture of what's involved with sustainable culture change, but they will help deliver business results with constructive behavior. The entire organization learns from the process and will apply what works to other performance priorities and expected behaviors.

These improvement phases or cycles are an iterative approach to change that's far more effective when it comes to culture change than most broad-based change efforts. They are also easier to "sell" to members of organizations at all levels because they are focused on sustainable results AND constructive culture development.

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*The descriptions of the cultural styles are from the Organizational Culture Inventory® by R. A. Cooke and J. C. Lafferty.*

## About the Circumplex and Culture

Effective groups and organizations show **STRONGER** tendencies along the **Constructive** styles.

