

The Culture you didn't MEAN to build...



DEVELOP. EMPOWER. RETAIN.

1The Workplace Culture We Accidentally Create

Everyday leadership behaviors can create fear, apathy, burnout, and dependency — even when nobody intended them to.

Culture Is Not What You Say

Culture is what people learn they must do to survive and succeed here.

- Employees watch:
- What gets rewarded
- What gets punished
- What leadership ignores
- What happens when someone tells the truth, needs help, disagrees, or makes a mistake
- Then they adjust their behavior accordingly.

If your values say “innovation,” but every failed attempt gets publicly criticized, employees learn that safety matters more than innovation.

How Accidental Culture Gets Built

- One incident creates a story. Repeated incidents create a rule. Unwritten rules create a culture.
- Humiliation after a mistake → Do not admit mistakes.
- Extra effort taken for granted → Doing more only gets you more work.
- Help request dismissed → Handle it yourself.
- Reasonable decision second-guessed → Do not decide without permission.

Four Accidental Cultures

1. **Fear - Protect yourself.**
2. **Apathy - Nothing I do matters.**
3. **Burnout - My capacity is my problem.**
4. **Dependency - Do not move without permission.**

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Culture #1: The Culture of Fear

What Employees Learn:

- **Protect yourself first.**
- Fear does not always look dramatic. People may still appear polite, productive, and professional.
- Fear appears in what people do, not say.
- They withhold concerns, soften bad news, wait for undeniable proof, and quietly correct mistakes hoping no one notices.

How Leaders Accidentally Create Fear

- **React emotionally to bad news.**
- Publicly embarrass people over mistakes.
- Ask “Who did this?” before “What happened?”
- Treat questions as evidence of incompetence.
- Blame people before examining the process.
- Expect perfection without creating review opportunities.
- **Punish the messenger who identifies a problem.**

What Fear Looks Like

- Problems appear “suddenly,” although several people knew about them.
- Meetings are quiet, but hallway conversations are active.
- Updates sound positive until deadlines are missed.
- People document everything primarily to protect themselves.
- Employees avoid questions that might expose uncertainty.
- Near misses are hidden instead of studied.
- Silence can easily be mistaken for agreement, confidence, or competence.

Shift Fear Into Candor

- Control your first reaction.
- Thank people for raising concerns early.
- Separate honest mistakes from negligence.
- Debrief the process, not only the person.
- Make early disclosure less painful than late discovery.
- **Leader Language**
 - Instead of: “Who is responsible?”
 - Try: “What do we need to understand?” “Thank you for bringing this up early.” “Walk me through what you saw.” “What made this difficult to catch?”

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Culture #2: The Culture of Apathy

What Employees Learn - Nothing I do really matters.

Apathy is not always laziness. Sometimes it is a learned response. People stop caring when they repeatedly discover that their effort, ideas, ownership, or improvement attempts make no meaningful difference.

How Leaders Accidentally Create Apathy

- Ask for input after the decision is already made.
- Notice good work only when something goes wrong.
- Treat poor and strong performance the same.
- Let unnecessary processes continue indefinitely.
- Change priorities without acknowledging discarded work.
- Reward reliability with an endless supply of extra work.
- Let employees identify problems but never authorize solutions.

People become apathetic one ignored effort at a time.

What Apathy Looks Like

- “Just tell me what you want me to do.”
- Few new ideas or process improvements.
- Minimal participation in meetings.
- Work completed to the lowest acceptable standard.
- Experienced employees mentally retire before leaving.
- High performers resent tolerated mediocrity.
- People protect job descriptions instead of outcomes.

Shift Apathy Into Ownership

- Close the loop on employee input.
- Explain what can and cannot change.
- Connect work to clients, safety, community, and project outcomes.
- Recognize useful effort specifically.
- Address chronic underperformance.
- Give employees ownership appropriate to their experience.

Leader Language

Instead of: “Why don’t they care?”

Try: “What have they learned happens when they care?” “Here is what we did with your recommendation.”

“What is one frustration we have normalized?”

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Culture #3: The Culture of Burnout

What Employees Learn: Your capacity is your problem.

Burnout is not simply working hard. People can work intensely during an important, time-limited project and remain engaged. Burnout grows when high demand is paired with low control, low recognition, unclear priorities, or insufficient support.

Physical Signs of Burnout

- Anxiety — racing thoughts, constant tension, never really feeling safe or settled.
- Sleep disruption — trouble falling asleep, waking up in the night, sleeping too much and still being exhausted.
- Anger, frustration, or resentment — short fuse, internal rage, feeling unappreciated, overextended, or invisible.
- Brain fog — losing words, re-reading the same paragraph, struggling to focus.
- Inability to think, plan, or motivate — executive function goes offline and even simple tasks feel huge.
- Exhaustion that doesn't improve with rest — not tired, spent.
- Panic or feeling out of control — tight chest, sudden overwhelm, “everything is too much.”
- Physical tension — neck, jaw, shoulders, back.
- Depression or depressive symptoms — apathy, hopelessness, flatness.
- Feeling numb or disconnected — showing up, but not really in it.

How Leaders Accidentally Create Burnout

- Treat every request as urgent.
- Add priorities without removing anything.
- Depend repeatedly on the same reliable employees.
- Reward availability instead of effectiveness.
- Confuse resilience with unlimited capacity.
- Promote technical experts without leadership support or training.
- Praise heroic rescues instead of repairing the system.
- Make after-hours availability an unwritten expectation.

What Burnout Looks Like

- Everything is urgent.
- The most dependable people receive the most work.
- Quality declines among previously strong performers.
- PTO exists but is culturally difficult to use.
- Managers cannot name what employees should stop doing.
- Knowledge is concentrated in exhausted experts.
- Teams rely on repeated last-minute heroics.
- Turnover surprises leaders but not coworkers.

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Culture #3: The Culture of Burnout, cont

If success requires continual overextension, you have a design problem.

Shift Burnout Into Sustainable Performance

- Establish real priorities.
- Identify what should stop, wait, or receive less attention.
- Ask about capacity before assigning work.
- Build backup knowledge and redundancy.
- Protect time for mentoring and training.
- Reward sustainable performance, not only rescues.

Leader Language

Instead of: “How can we get more from people?”

Try: “How can people succeed without continually exceeding capacity?” “If this moves to the top, what moves down?” “What are we asking people to carry that the system should carry?”

Culture #4: The Culture of Dependency

What Employees Learn

- Do not move until the right person approves it.
- Dependency often grows around an excellent technical leader. The leader has deep expertise, cares about quality, and can solve problems faster than almost anyone. So people bring the leader everything.
- Eventually the leader becomes overwhelmed, and the team becomes less capable.

How Leaders Accidentally Create Dependency

- Correct work without explaining the reasoning.
- Redo work instead of coaching.
- Require approval for low-risk decisions.
- Give advice before asking for a recommendation.
- Step in whenever someone struggles.
- Keep client or technical knowledge concentrated.
- Say “take initiative,” then react poorly to a different approach.
- When the leader is always the answer, the team stops thinking before asking.

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What Dependency Looks Like

- Leaders copied on nearly every email.
- Routine decisions wait for senior approval.
- Employees escalate questions without recommendations.
- Projects stall when one expert is unavailable.
- Managers complain that no one takes ownership.
- “I didn’t want to do the wrong thing.”
- Senior people are constantly interrupted.
- Junior employees gain tenure without developing judgment.

Shift Dependency Into Judgment

- Define decision boundaries.
- Separate reversible decisions from high-risk decisions.
- Ask for the employee’s recommendation first.
- Explain how experts evaluate tradeoffs.
- Allow reasonable differences in approach.
- Distribute client and technical knowledge.

Leader Language

Instead of: “Bring me the problem.”

Try: “Bring me your thinking.” “What do you recommend?” “What options did you consider?”
“Inside this boundary, you own the decision.”

Stop Asking “Does That Make Sense?”

Ask this instead: “Tell me what you plan to do first.” “How will you know when you have been successful?” “Where do you think you may get stuck?”

You are not quizzing them. You are checking whether the two of you created the same picture.

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The Accidental Culture System

Culture is not a values statement. It is an engineered system built by repeated leader reactions, rewards, tolerances, and decisions.

- Leader punishes uncomfortable information → People hide problems → Result: Fear
- Leader ignores effort and input → People stop investing → Result: Apathy
- Leader adds work without support → People overextend or fail → Result: Burnout
- Leader takes over every decision → People wait for permission → Result: Dependency

Each row is a feedback loop that self-reinforces until a leader deliberately interrupts it.

The Culture Audit

Complete these sentences:

Around here, it is safest to _____.

Around here, people get rewarded for _____.

Around here, asking for help means _____.

Around here, mistakes are treated as _____.

Around here, the people who succeed learn to _____.

Listen For These Survival Strategies

“Keep your head down.” → Fear. “It’s not worth bringing up.” → Apathy. “Just get it done.” → Burnout. “You’d better run it by them first.” → Dependency. “That’s just how it is here.” → This could signal all four.

Do not listen only for complaints. Listen for the survival strategies people have learned. Those strategies tell you what your culture is actually rewarding.

Four Moves Leaders Can Make Immediately

1. Manage Your Reaction - Your first response teaches people whether to tell you the truth next time.
2. Close the Loop - Tell people what happened after they raised a concern or offered input.
3. Match Responsibility With Support - Provide authority, information, training, and capacity.
4. Reward the Culture You Say You Want - Recognize early warnings, thoughtful disagreement, sustainable work, knowledge sharing, and responsible decisions.