

Culture by Design: Why Great Nonprofit Leaders Build Culture Intentionally

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A White Paper for Fulcrum Nonprofit Leadership

Introduction

Organizational culture is often described as "the way we do things around here."

While culture can feel intangible, it is anything but accidental. Research consistently shows that leadership behavior is the single greatest influence on organizational culture. Every conversation, decision, recognition, and response to adversity shapes the employee experience.

Strong cultures are not inherited. They are intentionally built.

For nonprofit organizations, where mission, people, and purpose are deeply intertwined, culture may be the organization's greatest competitive advantage.

Every Leader Is a Culture Carrier

Culture does not belong solely to the CEO or Human Resources. Every leader influences the environment around them.

Employees watch how leaders respond to pressure, communicate during uncertainty, handle conflict, and recognize success. Those behaviors become the organization's unwritten standards.

Simply stated, leaders reproduce what they model.

If leaders want trust, they must be trustworthy. If they want accountability, they must model accountability. Culture improves only when leadership improves.

The CULTURE Framework

Healthy cultures are intentionally developed through seven leadership practices:

C – Create Trust

Trust is the foundation of every healthy organization. It grows through consistency, honesty, follow through, and fairness.



U – Understand Through Communication

Frequent, transparent communication creates alignment. Great leaders also ask thoughtful questions and listen before acting.

L – Lead with Recognition and Accountability

Recognition reinforces desired behaviors, while accountability ensures consistent standards. Healthy cultures require both.

T – Tie Everyone to the Mission

People remain engaged when they clearly understand how their work contributes to a larger purpose.

U – Unify Around Shared Values

Values should guide hiring, promotions, decision making, and performance, not simply appear on a wall.

R – Respond Well During Change

Periods of uncertainty reveal culture. Leaders who communicate early and remain visible strengthen confidence during difficult seasons.

E – Evaluate and Improve Continuously

Culture is never finished. Regular feedback, reflection, and intentional adjustments keep organizations healthy as they grow.

Culture Is a Leadership Responsibility

Many organizational challenges that appear to be performance issues are actually culture issues. Declining engagement, poor communication, turnover, and reduced collaboration often stem from weakened trust, inconsistent leadership, or unclear expectations.

Culture should receive the same intentional attention as strategic planning, budgeting, fundraising, and board governance because it influences the success of each.



The Fulcrum Takeaway

Nonprofit leaders do not simply manage culture. They create it.

Every interaction either strengthens or weakens the environment people experience each day. Organizations with exceptional cultures rarely arrive there by accident. They build trust, communicate openly, reinforce shared values, connect people to the mission, and continuously invest in leadership.

Culture is not what an organization hopes to become.

Culture is what people experience every day.

For more information about Fulcrum Nonprofit Leadership, please visit our website at www.fulcrumleader.com or reach out to us directly via email at hello@fulcrumleader.com.