



## **Culture: Your Team's Psychic Foundation** *(excerpted from "The Corporate Creative" second edition)*

Over and over again, business academic studies draw a direct link between good culture and employee well-being and the associated benefit of enhanced productivity. From a moral and ethical perspective alone, we should strive to create working environments that respect and, dare I say, actively care for our fellow team members. Add to this the benefits reaped by our companies of a more productive agency that delivers the highest quality creative, and putting a focus on culture becomes a no-brainer.

Ironically this first and most critical focus creative teams should engage in is often never even acknowledged, let alone started - crafting and embracing a culture that expresses your team's values and prescribed ways of being. Without a clearly defined system of operational beliefs, regardless of the level of talent, equipment or process you have in place, your group will seize up and fail as team members either misunderstand your mission or default to counterproductive self-serving behaviors.

Culture is not just a kumbaya exercise that results in ignored bromides that end up on posters in meeting rooms, it is a practice that determines how your team members make decisions and judgment calls that directly impact your team's performance and provides guidance on how your team collaborates and coexists.

What attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, and mindsets are embodied in the cultures of fully evolved in-house teams? At the highest level they include:

- Authenticity as expressed through honesty, integrity, self-expression and transparency
- Respect for all players in the creative process and the organization at large manifesting as the practices of active listening, consideration, objectivity, and kindness
- Collaboration by truly subjugating ego and actively supporting all members of the group
- Passion embodied in the extreme commitment to innovation, creativity, executional excellence, and entrepreneurial spirit
- And most importantly, Service - to the team, the greater company, peers and colleagues, and the community

Fortunately, as a group, the creatives who typically make up our in-house teams usually innately embrace these pillars of a great creative team culture. Unfortunately, the culture of the larger organizations that our groups exist within many times does not. The dissonance between these two cultures can wreak havoc within the creative team. Often members of the team become either disillusioned and act out in anger and frustration or become alienated and withdraw into a shell of apathy and resignation.

There are symptoms of poor culture and signals of a healthy culture that can help you determine where on the good culture/bad culture spectrum your agency falls.

The **ADCs** of poor culture. Is your team:

- Apathetic, Alienated and Angry
- Disillusioned, Discouraged and Defeated
- Comfortable, Complacent and Careless

Just a note on the last bullet point. It's easy to default to assuming bad culture embodies maliciousness, backbiting, withdrawal, and other typical negative mindsets and behaviors. Almost more concerning are the seemingly benign behaviors of what is often called "punching the clock" or more recently "quiet quitting". It's important to look for those symptoms as well as they have a real impact on an agency's ability to produce high quality work.

**ICE** makes for good culture. Is your team:

- Inspired, Innovative and Integrated
- Collaborative, Creative and Caring
- Engaged, Energized and Enlightened

Wherever your team lands on the culture continuum, there is always room for improvement and there are real-world practices you can engage in to raise the culture bar for your team. The best path to both establishing and sustaining a creative culture includes some very tactical practices.

- Create a unique mission and vision specifically for your team separate from the greater organizational mission and vision. The entire team should participate in this at various phases of development.
- Acknowledge the disconnect between your internal and external cultures with your team; praise and support the internal culture and shield your team from the external culture as much as possible.
- Hire and fire team members with culture as your priority. It should trump skills every time.
- Embody the culture you wish to achieve in your actions and behaviors and make especially sure that your leadership team does the same.
- Showcase examples of the culture you wish to create and sustain it by referencing movies, music, books, and other groups and organizations that embody that culture.
- Publicly acknowledge team members who exhibit good culture behaviors.
- Include reference to culture in job descriptions, performance reviews, and one-on-ones.

Building and nurturing a team that knows what to do when executing on a creative deliverable or service is the easy part. Creating an environment and dynamic where they embrace how they go about doing it is driven by culture, and that culture should be consciously and carefully driven by you.