Culture Matters

Leadership consultant Jenni Catron in her wisdom-packed book *Culture Matters: A Framework for Helping Your Team Grow, Thrive, and Be Unstoppable* arrested my attention with these two opening salvos:

> *Whatever dream you're chasing, whatever goal you're pursuing, I promise you won't get far unless you have a team aligned around that goal, unified in purpose, and committed to one another.*
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> *Culture building is some of the most important work you will do as a leader, but oftentimes it's the thing we take the most for granted.*

In her book, she presents an air-tight rationale why the cultivation of culture needs to be extracted from the get-to-it-some-day list and shoved to the top of the leader's first-things-first list. And she provides a well-seasoned pathway to doing so.

I believe this is a must-read book that will inspire and empower leaders to give full focus to stewarding the culture to which they've been entrusted. Check out these Book Notes to provide a glimpse of the potency of this book.

Chuck Olson
Founder | Executive Director
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Title: ***Culture Matters:*** *A Framework for Helping Your Team Grow, Thrive, and Be Unstoppable*

Author: Jenni Catron

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Book Description:

Imagine a world where the mission and vision of every organization is clear, and employees are energized to come to work, they enjoy working together, and they have clarity for how to achieve their goals.

Stewarding people is one of the greatest responsibilities of a leader, and building a healthy culture takes intentionality. Author, speaker, and leadership expert Jenni Catron teaches leaders that if your culture is not healthy, your strategy is irrelevant. Using her LeadCulture Framework, Catron challenges leaders to be intentional about culture and to build it with passion, clarity, and teamwork. By providing a system for leaders to use in their own organization, she equips readers with helpful insights and an actionable plan to build an extraordinary culture.

Book Quotes:

Whatever dream you're chasing, whatever goal you're pursuing, I promise you won't get far unless you have a team aligned around that goal, unified in purpose, and committed to one another. LOCATION: 137

As we get started, let me share six reasons you should be intentional about your culture now more than ever.
1. The work you do really is all about people and for people.
2. Purpose matters more than ever. Great cultures are built on a clear sense of purpose.
3. Remote work is here to stay. This dynamic is radically impacting team culture.
4. Longevity pays off. The average worker today stays just four years in a job, and this stat has been on the decline for younger workers.
5. Navigating change requires great culture. The pace of change is faster than ever before. This means your team needs to be able to react and respond quickly.
6. Great culture multiplies. As you create great culture with your team, they in turn will create great culture with their teams. LOCATION: 164-181

My definition of culture is: Who we are and how we work together to achieve our mission…Who we are: our purpose combined with the things that are unique and distinct to our team. How we work together: the values, beliefs, and behaviors that guide us. LOCATION: 195

That's the beauty of culture. It's distinct and unique. The problem is that when culture is left undefined, every person on your team creates their own definition and lives it out in a different way. LOCATION: 198

Culture building is some of the most important work you will do as a leader, but oftentimes it's the thing we take the most for granted. LOCATION: 208

Those learnings have become the LeadCulture Framework™ that I now use to help leaders of organizations of all sizes develop a thriving team so they can accelerate growth and build unstoppable momentum. LOCATION: 219

In the whirlwind of activity that demands our time as leaders, one of the things that rarely gets our attention is the intentional development of our culture. It's not a question of whether you have a culture—you do. It's a question of whether you are creating the culture you want. You don't simply drift toward extraordinary culture. It takes time, attention, and commitment. LOCATION: 226

THE 5 PHASES OF THE LEADCULTURE FRAMEWORK:
1. Assess. In this phase you'll answer the question, "Where are we now?"
2. Define. The definition phase is about dreaming. It's about answering the question, "Who are we and how do we want to work together to achieve our mission?"
3. Build. In the build phase you'll answer the question, "What will it take?" Now that you've defined where you are and clarified where you want to be, it's time to build a plan to close the gap between your actual and aspirational culture.
4. Equip. The fourth phase is about identifying your immediate and long-term commitment to developing leaders at all levels of the organization to ensure they are equipped to lead your culture. You'll address the question, "How will we lead culture effectively?"
5. Commit. The final phase is about instilling your commitment to the plan you've designed. You'll answer the question, "How do we maintain momentum?" LOCATION: 232-242

Culture flows through everything you do. In essence, the culture of your organization is the river that is carrying your mission forward. LOCATION: 283

There is nothing more frustrating as a leader than to have a vision burning in your heart but the inability to see that vision become reality. LOCATION: 304

If your culture is not healthy, your strategy is irrelevant. LOCATION: 331

We often give lip service to the importance of culture, but in the pursuit of organizational growth we focus our efforts on strategic plans, setting audacious goals, and implementing the systems and structures to support them. The busyness of these efforts often causes us to neglect the development of our teams and creating environments in which the very people we need to accomplish our vision can thrive. LOCATION: 332

Strategy only succeeds when it's aligned with purpose and culture. LOCATION: 338

Where culture and strategy collide is where we see extraordinary outcomes, but we must give disproportionate time to culture development in order for strategy to be successful. LOCATION: 345

Another way to think about culture is the stewardship of people in pursuit of a purpose. As a leader you are simultaneously juggling these two mandates: 1) to accomplish the purpose of your organization, and 2) to build and retain a great staff who make that purpose possible. LOCATION: 355

Culture isn't just a nice idea that you'll get to if you have time. It's the very linchpin that ties your purpose and strategy together. You can't achieve your purpose without a team of people to make it happen. LOCATION: 365

Culture exists whether you acknowledge it or not and it doesn't get better on its own. LOCATION: 384

Healthy, sustainable, scalable culture needs leadership and it needs a system. LOCATION: 387

One of my notorious sayings is, "You must lead yourself well to lead others better." Self-leadership is the starting point of all leadership. If you want to lead your team to a new outcome—to a new culture—it must start with you. LOCATION: 429

The starting point for building an extraordinary culture is assessing where you currently are. Good, bad, or unfortunate, you need to get honest about the reality of your culture. The difficult thing for most leaders to understand is that your culture is rarely as good as you think it is. Culture always feels the best at the top of the organization. The primary reason for this is that you hold more influence on your experience in the organization. If you don't like something, you have the agency to change it. LOCATION: 471

As you make a commitment to assess your culture, you will find some things that pleasantly surprise you and uncover other things that gravely disappoint you. LOCATION: 477

Like Maslow's hierarchy, there are five needs that impact a team member's ability to grow with your organization and positively contribute to the health of your culture. To truly build an extraordinary culture, attending to these five needs is essential.
1. Basic Needs. The first level of the hierarchy is about an employee's basic needs to succeed in the organization.
2. Organizational Clarity. The second level of the hierarchy, organizational clarity, is arguably the most critical level of the culture hierarchy. This level of the hierarchy is the single greatest differentiator between extraordinary teams and mediocre teams. Organizational clarity means I understand what is expected of me, I have clarity of my place in the organization, and my role and responsibilities are clear.
3. Psychological Safety. Psychological safety is about employees feeling emotionally secure when they are at work. It's really a fancy phrase for trust. Employees will feel empowered when they are part of an environment where they feel trusted and respected. Psychological safety gives team members the confidence to contribute wholeheartedly.
4. Connection. One of our great needs as humans is belonging. We are wired for community. We're designed to do life with others. It's the functional definition of the word team—two or more people working together to achieve a goal.

5. Personal Fulfillment This final level is an outcome. You can't force anyone to find personal fulfillment in their work, but you can create an environment that fosters it by attending to the first four needs and thereby setting the stage for this one to be achieved as well. LOCATION: 493-532

Trust is the foundation of teams. Trust is the currency of healthy working relationships. LOCATION: 549

In small teams, relationship equals trust. This works for a while until the growth of the organization eclipses your ability to give time and proximity to every team member.
LOCATION: 565

My personal experiences coupled with the learnings from working with hundreds of organizations on their culture have helped me realize that trust in an organizational setting is built through competence. LOCATION: 574

"Culture is the vision, values, systems, language, expectations, behaviors, and beliefs that increase or decrease an organization's chances of accomplishing its strategy and fulfilling its mission, which in turn increases or decreases how much people enjoy coming to work."
—Matthew Kelly LOCATION: 802

Culture is clarity of who you are and how you work together to achieve your mission. There are three key parts of this definition: 1. Who you are 2. How you work together 3. Your mission LOCATION: 815

In simplest terms, your mission is a succinct, memorable phrase that communicates why you do what you do and typically includes who you're doing the work for. The power of a mission statement is that it is timeless. How you carry out your mission may change with your strategic planning, but your mission—your core why—will remain the same. LOCATION: 825

Clarity is the chief indicator of the health of your culture. If the mission feels unclear, your culture will struggle. LOCATION: 850

Thirty-three percent of employees quit their new job within ninety days, and 32 percent name company culture as the reason for leaving. These disheartening stats only reinforce the fact that equipping new employees for success is extraordinarily critical. LOCATION: 960

Payroll is easily the largest operational budget line for most organizations, business or nonprofit. And this is precisely why it is so foundational for organizational culture. While our initial instinct is to keep compensation as low as possible, we must evaluate the broader financial impact of our compensation decisions. Consider this: The more competitively you pay your employees, the better employees you'll attract and retain. The more employees you retain, the lower your costs of turnover; the lower your turnover costs, the more margin you have to provide raises that enable you to continue to retain those employees. The less turnover you have in your organization, the more institutional knowledge you keep; the more institutional knowledge you keep, the less cost you have in onboarding and training new team members. Now, let's consider the reverse: The less you pay your employees, the less qualified or talented employees you'll attract. The less qualified your employees are, the more turnover you'll see; the more turnover you have, the greater your costs in hiring. The more costs in hiring, the less resources you have to provide raises; the fewer raises you're giving, the more turnover you'll see with tenured staff. With less tenured staff, you lack institutional knowledge that leads to errors that in turn create additional costs; those additional costs keep you from compensating and training well. LOCATION: 1002

Now that we've acknowledged the basic needs employees have, we move to what I believe is the most critical level of the culture hierarchy: organizational clarity. This second level of the hierarchy is the single greatest

differentiator between extraordinary teams and mediocre teams. I cannot overemphasize the power of this need. It's essentially the crux of culture. LOCATION: 1168

Clarity is a chief indicator of the health of a culture. LOCATION: 1177

Strong, clearly defined values: Provide a filter for decision-making. Clarify expectations. Give team members confidence in what is expected from them. Simplify the need for bureaucracy. Values are a set of guiding principles that clarify the habits and behaviors that are essential to accomplishing your mission. LOCATION: 1194

The values grid is comprised of four elements: 1. The value itself 2. The belief behind that value 3. The behaviors that reflect that value 4. The "sticky statement" or the internal language and/or stories that make that value unique to your team. LOCATION: 1233

Creating a shared set of values that align your team is some of the most important work you can do as a leader…Values are the guiding principles that tether your team together and will equip your team to become stronger and more unified. LOCATION: 1260

Discuss questions like: What is important to us? What do we want to be true of how we work together? What makes our team distinct from another team? What phrases do we frequently use to encourage and motivate our team? Are there any axioms that have become common language? What values did the founder of our organization hold? What was most important to him/her? LOCATION: 1292

You're probably going to argue that there is no way that you can narrow it down to three to five values but I'm going to challenge you to try. Your goal isn't to capture everything that's important. Your goal is to capture the three to five values that are disproportionately important to who you are as an organization and how your team works together to achieve the mission. LOCATION: 1306

Organizational clarity requires a fierce commitment to making sure our systems and processes provide the clarity and alignment that removes roadblocks and helps our team do their work with minimal avoidable frustration. LOCATION: 1439

Vision inspires hope. If your mission is your why, the vision is your what—a more specific target defining what it will take to bring that mission to life. A vision is essentially a large, audacious goal in the future that helps us measure how we're going to live out the mission. LOCATION: 1456

This is the power of a strategic plan. A strategic plan starts with the mission and vision and then defines strategies, tactics, and actions required to put feet to this vision. It's essentially a tool to help every person on the team know specifically what to do today to help them achieve the vision tomorrow. LOCATION: 1468

I love a good org chart. Give me your org chart and I'll tell you within two minutes how effective your team is. Growth consultant Les McKeown says that your organizational chart is your team's "decision-making tool." A good org chart helps everyone understand their place on the team. Essentially it clarifies their purpose in helping the organization accomplish its purpose. LOCATION: 1491

As a leader, you hold two responsibilities, in this order: 1. To fulfill the mission and vision of your organization 2. To align a team of talented staff to achieve that mission and vision LOCATION: 1519

The better way to design your organizational chart is to think first what, then who. LOCATION: 1523

When you start with what, you let the mission and strategy guide you. When you approach your org chart this way, you are ensuring alignment between your mission and the daily activities of your team. LOCATION: 1532

The final step of your organizational structure is ensuring that not only is every role in the structure clear, but every role has clear responsibilities and expectations. This is another level of clarity that when not provided creates frustration for your team. LOCATION: 1600

Culture is the system that fosters the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a group. If you're not designing the system, you will default to one—and likely an ineffective one. That may be the most important revelation you need in order to make your culture great. LOCATION: 1700

Lack of a system is why your team members are disengaged. Lack of a system is why your values were an episodic exercise that didn't take root. Lack of a system is why your hiring is ineffective. LOCATION: 1706

There are six stages to the employee journey:
1. Interviewing
2. Onboarding
3. Meeting Rhythms & Communication Tools
4. Performance Plans & Reviews
5. Training & Development
6. Departure LOCATION: 1722

Character—We want people of integrity.
Chemistry—We want people we enjoy working with.
Competence—We want people who know how to do the work, or at a minimum have the ability to learn it.
Culture—We want people who value who we are and how we work together. LOCATION: 1741

Steps for Leading Change. Culture change is just one of the many changes that you will need to lead through. The following are steps to help you do this.
• Listen well—When change is imminent you can be tempted to either operate in denial until you're forced to change or rush to make changes to get it over with as soon as possible. Either extreme robs you of the opportunity to listen well. When you need to lead through change, take time to listen.
• Question thoroughly—After you've listened well, begin to ask questions—lots of them—particularly if you're leading change through an issue that is new to you.
• Evaluate rigorously—Change is challenging. It's tempting to make snap judgments or jump to quick fixes. Take the time and mental energy to evaluate the situation from all angles before hurrying to a decision.
• Decide thoughtfully—Once you've listened, questioned, and evaluated, it's time to make a decision about what to change and how to lead through it. Consider everything you've gleaned.
• Direct confidently—Finally, you need to provide a strong, confident direction for change. LOCATION: 2176-2189

While this is in no way an exhaustive list of leadership skills, here are eight of the most critical skills managers need to demonstrate in order to positively lead culture.
• Self-Leadership. The single greatest skill every leader needs is to lead themselves well. Self-leadership is a commitment to consistent growth, discipline, and doing the right thing for the sake of those you lead.
• Emotional Intelligence. The superpower of the best leaders is emotional intelligence. We live in a time when much of our work can be replicated by machines and artificial intelligence. But what cannot be reproduced authentically are the people skills historically referred to as "soft skills," meaning the skills required to emotionally connect and interact effectively with others.
• Communication. I hold a deep conviction that good communication is an act of respect for others…I've found that three simple questions help me be more intentional in my communication: Who needs to know? What do they need to know? When do they need to know it?
• Decision-Making. A clear organizational chart with defined roles, responsibilities, and goals should solve

many of the questions in regard to who has the authority to make decisions.
• Delegation. Leaders empower others by delegating…A tool that I use in my coaching work with leaders is something I simply call Only/Could/Must. To start this exercise, create three columns on a spreadsheet, whiteboard, piece of paper, whatever brainstorming method of choice you prefer, and label the columns from left to right: Only I Can Do / I Do but Could Delegate / I Must Delegate.
• Accountability…One of my favorite tools for creating a culture of accountability is the simple question, Who is doing what by when? This simple question provides immense clarity.
• Feedback. "What's it like to be on the other side of you?" is one of the most powerful questions we can learn to ask. Healthy teams foster a culture of feedback. Feedback is essentially evaluative communication.
• Ownership. In great cultures every leader at every level has such a deep commitment to their work, to their team, and to the mission of the organization that they behave like owners. They show up and engage as if they were the founder. They care deeply about the work and demonstrate their commitment through the behaviors we've talked about so far. LOCATION: 2311-2483

I once had a mentor tell me that one of the most important things a leader is responsible for is protecting momentum. I've returned to this nugget of wisdom time and time again. Protecting momentum applies in every area of leadership and it's especially true of your culture. Once you have your culture moving in the right direction, you need to fiercely protect that momentum. LOCATION: 2551

There are four key things we can do as leaders to protect the momentum we've created for our culture:
1. Anticipate the unwinding.
2. Plan for ongoing effort.
3. Know your driving force.
4. Identify the friction. LOCATION: 2563

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry.