

# Leap ahead of the competition

## Reshape your culture with these four winning practices

Near the end of a weeklong education session focused on breakthrough strategic growth, 30 CEOs reflected on all they had learned. They were surprised to find they unanimously ranked two of the many topics covered as the most potent means of spurring growth: cultural transformation and the leadership required to make it happen.



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**“G**reat,” one CEO mused. “I’m now convinced that reshaping our culture is what I need to do, but I don’t have a clue how to do it!”

Many leaders perceive cultural change as daunting, but it doesn’t have to be. Companies revitalize their cultures and reap new competitive advantage by systematically altering key behaviors within their organizations. Analysis of their success reveals four simple practices any leader can embrace to drive change.

### Link culture with your goals

Make cultural change a top priority by linking the desired culture with business goals.

Tony McGuire, CEO of the Irish company System Dynamics, sought to move his organization from a product- and project-focused culture to one focused on customers. The goal: drive breakthrough domestic and export growth.

A Canadian oil sands company sought to shift from “working hard” to a culture of ownership and accountability. The goal: boost performance in the areas of cost, safety and reliability performance.

### Define culture carefully

If you regard culture vaguely as “mindset” or “symbols,” that’s what you will attempt to change: mindset and symbols. It’s far simpler and more effective to identify the pattern of behaviors you currently have and the behaviors you need instead.

Start with the front line, since that’s where performance happens. Focus on a few, high impact behaviors before moving on to others. Then, work upward, identifying desired behaviors at every level.

### Understand the forces behind current and desired behavior patterns

There are proven tools for doing this. Knowing why behavior occurs cues leaders in to potent actions they wouldn’t have taken otherwise, and helps them avoid fruitless effort. Organizational processes alone don’t account for behavior; leaders’ own, day-to-day practices typically rank among the most influential drivers.

That’s good news, since organizations can directly influence what leaders do. Statistical evidence suggests that when senior leaders change, the pace, extent and sustainability of organizational cultural change improves dramatically.

### Think big, start small and scale fast

Once your senior team has clarified its goals, conduct “proof of concept” pilots in two to three areas prior to deploying cultural change at scale. This “go slower to go faster” approach yields practical wisdom, creates positive word-of-mouth and generates measurable impact that can “self fund” subsequent investment.

If your organization is seeking new levels of performance, ask yourself: Is your culture in the way? If so, do the potential gains merit making culture a top priority over the next few years? Are you personally committed to changing your own behavior, as well as that of other senior leaders?

If you answered yes to these questions, what are you waiting for? Changing culture doesn’t have to be elusive or complicated, but it does take the right approach. Winning cultures don’t happen by accident. ●



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