

## Culture Code

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This is why so many of Meyer's catchphrases focus on how to respond to mistakes. You can't prevent mistakes, but you can solve problems graciously. If it ain't broke, fix it. Mistakes are like waves; servers are really surfers. The road to success is paved with mistakes well handled.

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Most successful groups end up with a small handful of priorities (five or fewer), and many, not coincidentally, end up placing their in-group relationships—how they treat one another—at the top of the list. This reflects the truth that many successful groups realize: Their greatest project is building and sustaining the group itself. If they get their own relationships right, everything else will follow.

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Spotlight and honor the fundamentals of the skill.

Skills of proficiency are about doing a task the same way, every single time. They are about delivering machine-like reliability, and they tend to apply in domains in which the goal behaviors are clearly defined, such as service. Building purpose to perform these skills is like building a vivid map: You want to spotlight the goal and provide crystal-clear directions to the checkpoints along the way.

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Embrace the Use of Catchphrases: When you look at successful groups, a lot of their internal language features catchphrases that often sound obvious, rah-rah, or corny. Many of us instinctively dismiss them as cultish jargon. But this is a mistake. Their occasionally cheesy obviousness is not a bug—it's a feature. Their clarity, grating to the outsider's ear, is precisely what helps them function.

I flooded the zone with catchphrases to guide them through the writing-and-fixing process. One was "Power of the Problem," which reminded them that most effective stories consist of characters struggling with huge problems, the bigger, the better. (After all, Captain Ahab doesn't chase minnows.)

The first principle of synching fast and slow is that group timing requires a boss—someone or something above and apart from the group itself to set the pace, maintain the standards, and focus the collective mind.

The business school students appear to be collaborating, but in fact they are engaged in a process psychologists call status management. They are figuring out where they fit into the larger picture: Who is in charge? Is it okay to criticize someone's idea? What are the rules here?

Instead of focusing on the task, they are navigating their uncertainty about one another. They spend so much time managing status that they fail to grasp the essence of the problem (the marshmallow is relatively heavy, and the spaghetti is hard to secure).

Nick is really good at being bad. In almost every group, his behavior reduces the quality of the group's performance by 30 to 40 percent. The drop-off is consistent whether he plays the Jerk, the Slacker, or the Downer.

He doesn't perform so much as create conditions for others to perform, constructing an environment whose key feature is crystal clear: We are solidly connected.

Safety is not mere emotional weather but rather the foundation on which strong culture is built.

When you ask people inside highly successful groups to describe their relationship with one another, they all tend to choose the same word. This word is not friends or team or tribe or any other equally plausible term. The word they use is family.

These interactions were consistent whether the group was a military unit or a movie studio or an inner-city school. I made a list: • Close physical proximity, often in circles • Profuse amounts of eye contact • Physical touch (handshakes, fist bumps, hugs) • Lots of short, energetic exchanges (no long speeches) • High levels of mixing; everyone talks to everyone • Few interruptions • Lots of questions • Intensive, active listening • Humor, laughter • Small, attentive courtesies (thank-yous, opening doors, etc.)

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When you encounter a group with good chemistry, you know it instantly.

Belonging cues possess three basic qualities: 1. Energy: They invest in the exchange that is occurring 2. Individualization: They treat the person as unique and valued 3. Future orientation: They signal the relationship will continue

These cues add up to a message that can be described with a single phrase: You are safe here.

The key to creating psychological safety, as Pentland and Edmondson emphasize, is to recognize how deeply obsessed our unconscious brains are with it. A mere hint of belonging is not enough; one or two signals are not enough. We are built to require lots of signaling, over and over. This is why a sense of belonging is easy to destroy and hard to build.

In other words, the belonging cues sent in the initial moments of the interaction mattered more than anything they said.

The Beatitudes He said: 3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. 8Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

15Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

44But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Overall Pentland’s studies show that team performance is driven by five measurable factors: 1. Everyone in the group talks and listens in roughly equal measure, keeping contributions short. 2. Members maintain high levels of eye contact, and their conversations and gestures are energetic. 3. Members communicate directly with one another, not just with the team leader. 4. Members carry on back-channel or side conversations within the team. 5. Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back to share with the others.

And yet when it comes to predicting team performance, Pentland and his colleagues have calculated nothing is more powerful.

Group performance depends on behavior that communicates one powerful overarching idea: We are safe and connected.

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“A small signal can have a huge effect,” Walton says. “But the deeper thing to realize is that you can’t just give a cue once. This is all about establishing relationships, conveying the fact that I’m interested in you, and that all the work we do together is in the context of that relationship.

This idea—that belonging needs to be continually refreshed and reinforced—is worth dwelling on for a moment.

11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Cohesion happens not when members of a group are smarter but when they are lit up by clear, steady signals of safe connection.

All these signals were small—a personal question about their best times at work, an exercise that revealed their individual skills, a sweatshirt embroidered with their name. These signals didn’t take much time to deliver, but they made a huge difference because they created a foundation of psychological safety that built connection and identity.

Belonging cues have to do not with character or discipline but with building an environment that answers basic questions: Are we connected? Do we share a future? Are we safe? Let’s take them one by one.

That’s the way Pop approaches every relationship. He fills their cups.”

“A lot of coaches can yell or be nice, but what Pop does is different,” says assistant coach Chip Engelland. “He delivers two things over and over: He’ll tell you the truth, with no bullshit, and then he’ll love you to death.”

They had sat down with trepidation, expecting Popovich to detail the sins of the previous night, to show them what they did wrong and what they could do better. But when Popovich clicked on the video, the screen flickered with a CNN documentary on the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. The team watched in silence as the story unfolded: Martin Luther King, Jr., Lyndon Johnson,

and the Selma marches. When it was over, Popovich asked questions. He always asks questions, and those questions are always the same: personal, direct, focused on the big picture. What did you think of it? What would you have done in that situation?

The room shifted and became something of a seminar, a conversation. They talked. They were not surprised because on the Spurs this kind of thing happens all the time. Popovich would create similar conversations on the war in Syria, or a change of government in Argentina, gay marriage, institutional racism, terrorism—it doesn't really matter, as long as it delivers the message he wants it to deliver: There are bigger things than basketball to which we are all connected.

“Pop uses these moments to connect us. He loves that we come from so many different places. That could pull us apart, but he makes sure that everybody feels connected and engaged to something bigger.”

But most of all it can be seen in the way he uses food and wine as a bridge to build relationships with players.

One misconception about highly successful cultures is that they are happy, lighthearted places. This is mostly not the case. They are energized and engaged, but at their core their members are oriented less around achieving happiness than around solving hard problems together. This task involves many moments of high-candor feedback, uncomfortable truth-telling, when they confront the gap between where the group is, and where it ought to be.

Researchers discovered that one particular form of feedback boosted student effort and performance so immensely that they deemed it “magical feedback.” Students who received it chose to revise their papers far more often than students who did not, and their performance improved significantly. The feedback was not complicated. In fact, it consisted of one simple phrase. I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.

Actually, when you look more closely at the sentence, it contains three separate cues: 1. You are part of this group. 2. This group is special; we have high standards here. 3. I believe you can reach those standards.

Here is a safe place to give effort.

Popovich's methods are effective. His communications consist of three types of belonging cues. • Personal, up-close connection (body language, attention, and behavior that translates as I care about you) • Performance feedback (relentless coaching and criticism that translates as We have high standards here) • Big-picture perspective (larger conversations about politics, history, and food that translate as Life is bigger than basketball)

Popovich toggles among the three signals to connect his team the way a skilled director uses a camera. First he zooms in close, creating an individualized connection. Then he operates in the middle distance, showing players the truth about their performance. Then he pans out to show the larger context in which their interaction is taking place.

Alone, each of these signals would have a limited effect. But together they create a steady stream of magical feedback.

we have a natural tendency to try to hide our weaknesses and appear competent. If you want to create safety, this is exactly the wrong move. Instead, you should open up, show you make mistakes, and invite input with simple phrases like "This is just my two cents." "Of course, I could be wrong here." "What am I missing?" "What do you think?" R.

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He's a quiet, affable hound-dog Kansan who asks questions, listens keenly, and radiates humility.

Embrace the Messenger: One of the most vital moments for creating safety is when a group shares bad news or gives tough feedback. In these moments, it's important not simply to tolerate the difficult news but to embrace it. "You know



the phrase ‘Don’t shoot the messenger?’” Edmondson says. “In fact, it’s not enough to not shoot them. You have to hug the messenger and let them know how much you need that feedback.

Spurs coach Gregg Popovich takes each of his star players aside and thanks them for allowing him to coach them. Those are his exact words: Thank you for allowing me to coach you.

But this kind of moment happens all the time in highly successful groups, because it has less to do with thanks than affirming the relationship.

This is because thank-yous aren’t only expressions of gratitude; they’re crucial belonging cues that generate a contagious sense of safety, connection, and motivation.

In my research, I sometimes saw the most powerful person in a group publicly express gratitude for one of the group’s least powerful members.

Here is the unheralded person who makes our success possible.

Eliminate Bad Apples: The groups I studied had extremely low tolerance for bad apple behavior and, perhaps more important, were skilled at naming those behaviors. The leaders of the New Zealand All-Blacks, the rugby squad that ranks as one of the most successful teams on the planet, achieve this through a rule that simply states “No Dickheads.” It’s simple, and that’s why it’s effective.

The lesson of all these studies is the same: Create spaces that maximize collisions.

(Completing all the meetings took about six weeks.) Abrashoff asked each sailor three questions: 1. What do you like most about the Benfold? 2. What do you like least? 3. What would you change if you were captain?

All-Blacks rugby team have formalized this habit into a team value called “sweeping the sheds.” Their leaders do the menial work, cleaning and tidying the locker rooms—and along the way vividly model the team’s ethic of togetherness and teamwork.

This is what I would call a muscular humility—a mindset of seeking simple ways to serve the group.

These actions are powerful not just because they are moral or generous but also because they send a larger signal: We are all in this together.

Of course, threshold moments don't only happen on day one; they happen every day. But the successful groups I visited paid attention to moments of arrival. They would pause, take time, and acknowledge the presence of the new person, marking the moment as special: We are together now.

**Avoid Giving Sandwich Feedback:** In many organizations, leaders tend to deliver feedback using the traditional sandwich method: You talk about a positive, then address an area that needs improvement, then finish with a positive. This makes sense in theory, but in practice it often leads to confusion, as people tend to focus either entirely on the positive or entirely on the negative.

They handled negatives through dialogue, first by asking if a person wants feedback, then having a learning-focused two-way conversation about the needed growth.

They handled positives through ultraclear bursts of recognition and praise. The leaders I spent time with shared a capacity for radiating delight when they spotted behavior worth praising. These moments of warm, authentic happiness functioned as magnetic north, creating clarity, boosting belonging, and orienting future action.

They demonstrated that a series of small, humble exchanges—Anybody have any ideas? Tell me what you want, and I'll help you—can unlock a group's ability to perform. The key, as we're about to learn, involves the willingness to perform a certain behavior that goes against our every instinct: sharing vulnerability. —

If you never have that vulnerable moment, on the other hand, then people will try to cover up their weaknesses, and every little microtask becomes a place where insecurities manifest themselves.”

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The interaction he describes can be called a vulnerability loop. A shared exchange of openness, it's the most basic building block of cooperation and trust.

Vulnerability doesn't come after trust—it precedes it.

Second, Kauffman decreed that every aspect of the training be team-based. Instead of operating solo, trainees were put into groups of six (the number that fit in navy-issue rubber rafts) and kept together through the duration of training.

Third, Kauffman eliminated the hierarchical distinction between officer and enlisted man. In his program, everyone did the training, no matter their rank. This, of course, included Kauffman. The enlisted men of the first class took one look at their ungainly, nearsighted commander and reached the same conclusion: There was no way this guy would make it.

But as the trainees watched, he proved them wrong.

When Del Close developed the Harold in the 1970s, he wrote down the following rules: 1. You are all supporting actors. 2. Always check your impulses. 3. Never enter a scene unless you are needed. 4. Save your fellow actor, don't worry about the piece. 5. Your prime responsibility is to support. 6. Work at the top of your brains at all times. 7. Never underestimate or condescend to the audience. 8. No jokes. 9. Trust. Trust your fellow actors to support you; trust them to come through if you lay something heavy on them; trust yourself. 10. Avoid judging what is going down except in terms of whether it needs help, what can best follow, or how you can support it imaginatively if your support is called for. 11. LISTEN. Every rule directs you either to tamp down selfish instincts that might make you the center of attention, or to serve your fellow actors (support, save, trust, listen). This is why Close's rules are hard to follow, and also why they are useful in b

As Dave Cooper says, I screwed that up are the most important words any leader can say.

Meyer delivered the message—I was scared—with steadiness, confidence, and comfort that underlined the deeper message: It's safe to tell the truth here. His vulnerability isn't weakness; it's his strength.

Among the refrains: Collaborate and Make Others Successful: Going Out of Your Way to Help Others Is the Secret Sauce.

Deliver the Negative Stuff in Person:

This is the way high-purpose environments work. They are about sending not so much one big signal as a handful of steady, ultra-clear signals that are aligned with a shared goal. They are less about being inspiring than about being consistent. They are found not within big speeches so much as within everyday moments when people can sense the message: This is why we work; this is what we are aiming for.

“You have priorities, whether you name them or not,” he says. “If you want to grow, you’d better name them, and you’d better name the behaviors that support the priorities.”

Creating engagement around a clear, simple set of priorities can function as a lighthouse, orienting behavior and providing a path toward a goal.

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