



June, 2019 In The Know Summary

The Culture Code

The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups

by Daniel Coyle

Discussion Facilitator: [Heeral Coleman](#)

About the Book | In [The Culture Code](#), Daniel Coyle explores the question, “How is it that some groups add up to be greater than the sum of the parts, and others do not?” The book is based on research over a period of four years, looking at some of the best/most successful team cultures. The discussion is organized into a presentation of three skills known for generating high-performing groups: (1) Build safety, (2) Share vulnerability, and (3) Establish purpose.

Discussion Highlights

We discussed three key skills common to highly successful groups, and how to build these skills. Many of the ideas and comments below come directly from the book.

Skill #1 – Build Safety

- Groups are successful not because their members are smarter, but because they are safer. We need more than just a hint of belonging; we need continuous signaling that we belong. Our brains are wired to look out for danger, so we don't process this rationally. How can groups be made to feel safe? The brain science: When the amygdala senses belonging, it becomes dedicated to building social bonds.
- Discussion question used in an orientation program: What is unique about you that brings about your best at work? → This question builds safety and builds sense of belonging.
- To build safety, over-communicate your listening. Physically indicate that you are listening by leaning forward, nodding, making eye contact, etc. These are belonging cues.
- As a leader, spotlight your fallibility early on. Demonstrating their own vulnerability can hard for a leader to do (leaders will say they do not want to appear to be incompetent). How does a leader do this?
 - Invite feedback. Say, “I know what I know. Tell me what I don't know.” (Vulnerability of learning.) Leaders can ask: “What am I doing well? What do I need to improve on?”
 - Brené Brown: Don't expose yourself to everything and everyone. Vulnerability = Expose that you want to learn. Say, “I am not the expert in everything.”
 - If you are coaching someone who is doing a 360: Suggest that the person thank the people who provided feedback and also share themes from the feedback. For example, “These are the things I heard I need to work on.” This is very useful and helps a leader demonstrate vulnerability.
 - Team exercise to consider: How to create an environment where everyone shares. Once a month, go around the room with key people and share – “Here is one thing I am proud of. Here is one thing I didn't handle well.” Then ask, “What do you recommend?” Everyone has five minutes to gather input. This is a way to show vulnerability. Leader can go first and role model this.

- Embrace the messenger. If someone brings you bad news, make it safe for them (and others) to do this again.
- Create safe “collision rich” spaces. Where people can connect and talk.
- “Pick up trash.” Example: The founder of McDonalds picks up trash when he sees it. The message you send: demonstrate that you do what your employees should do.
- We hear a lot about “sandwich feedback,” i.e., “positive, negative, positive.” But it is not a good model.
- Capitalize on “threshold moments.” For example, the first disagreement for the team, or first instance of vulnerability. Look for these moments. Celebrate them—or provide safety in those moments.

Skill #2 – Share Vulnerability

- Vulnerability comes before trust.
- We have an authority bias. Teams do what the leader asks of them, even if they do not agree with the leader. Leaders need to create a space where other ideas can emerge. This is an ah-ha for a lot of new leaders. Coaches often need to tell new leaders that people see their ideas as a request or mandate, not “just an idea.”
- Building group vulnerability must be approached with a plan. Some of the tips: Make sure the leader is vulnerable first. Core message: It’s safe to tell the truth here.
- Over-communicate expectations. The author talks about surveying an organization to ask about the mission/values. And only two people could repeat it. Don’t assume people know it!
- Deliver negative news in person.
- “Listen like a trampoline.” This means, listen in a way that energizes the giver of info. Take the info in, absorb it, make something of it, and send it back. Repeat.
 - Rob Cross’s [ONA research](#) – One of the questions asked is, “When you talk with someone, does your energy go up or stay the same?” People who can boost energy in others are correlated as high performers. These people are not necessarily “cheerleaders.” But talking with them has the effect of energizing others.
 - In conversation, resist the temptation to reflexively add value. (This is especially important when you are the leader.) Give someone else the chance to speak.
- Build a wall between performance review and professional development.
- Make the leader occasionally disappear, so the team can work together and bond.
 - Many leaders understand why it’s important to “build your second team;” however, in many cases they cannot actually do it until there is some type of short-term leave (illness, parenting, etc.). When something forces the leader to be out of the office, they are able to work on their second team and step out of certain roles.

Skill #3 – Establish Purpose

- Create a link between present and future. Envision a reachable goal and then envision the obstacles. This is a trigger for progress and behavior.
- Creating a high-purpose environment is a never-ending process of trying, failing, reflecting, and learning.
- Name and rank your priorities. With a restaurant, customers come first, but employees come above your customers.
 - Be TEN times as clear about your priorities as you think you should be.

- Embrace the use of catch phrases. All high-purpose environments have these catch phrases that people repeat. (Note: The author makes a distinction between high-purpose environments and high-creativity environments. These require different approaches.)
- Measure what matters. (What gets measured gets done.)
- Use artifacts to remind the group of purpose. These are reminders of purpose.
 - Example from Booz Allen: Booz Allen created a “museum” display with examples from client projects and points in the company’s history. Another example: if you are moving a process online, show stack of paper to demonstrate how much paper is saved by moving a process online.
 - It’s also effective / useful when artifacts are an “inside joke.”

Mental Contrasting Exercise

Three steps:

1. Establish a realistic goal you wish to attain. (E.g., Lose 10 lbs.)
2. Picture a future where you have achieved the goal.
3. Visualize an obstacle. (If you are trying to lose weight, visualize the cookies. What will you do when you smell them?)

Discussion:

- One participant used a similar exercise with a group that was struggling with communication. It is very easy for the brain to think of obstacles (negative thinking). It’s very easy to come up with reasons why we have trouble—much easier than articulating how to improve or what to try.
- If you do this activity with a group, these discussion questions are helpful:
 - What are our obstacles? (Poor communication...)
 - Are we doing anything now that is making us fail? (The group lists issues.)
 - Then come up with an action plan to address the issues. (Action planning)

Related Resources

- Laura Mendelow’s [blog](#)
- [Power of Authenticity](#) (Video, from 6:45-15:22) by M Robbins.
- [Feed the Wolf](#) (Video) by S Salzberg. Message: What you follow is what you feed. Don’t feed the negative.
- [Creating a Purpose-Driven Organization](#) (HBR article) by R Quinn, A Thakor. Message: What you resist persists.
- [The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures](#) (Book) by H Lipmanowicz, K McCandless.
- [TedTalk from D Rock](#) – Message: When someone does not feel safe in an environment, they have the same physical response in the brain as if someone has a gun to your head. The body reacts in the same way. (Shunning, not inviting people in, can be destructive.)
- [Compassionate Curiosity](#) (Video) by K Christian.

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