

Stefan Bartel

# Culture change

**How managers with  
occupational safety lead  
companies to peak performance**

Translation via Deepl translator. Refined, optimized, adapted and corrected by Andrea Kühme, [www.diekuehme.de](http://www.diekuehme.de) with final native proofreading by Elliot Hiller from Malta.

Design and final implementation with entire layout and cover design by Angela Ruck, [www.angelaruck.de](http://www.angelaruck.de).

My special thanks go to Angela Ruck for her extreme meticulousness and consistency in finding all the imperfections. This combined with her creative gift has made a significant contribution to the success of the work.

**Bibliographic Information**  
**The German National Library**

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography: detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

**ISBN: 979-1-039-60958-6**

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## Foreword

The term »corporate culture« is something we have been encountering more and more frequently in recent years in the relevant articles in well-known management journals, but what meaning do we assign to it? Wikipedia defines it as a term from organizational theory, which means the emergence and development of cultural value patterns within organizations. The organizational psychologist and professor at MIT in Cambridge, Edgar Schein, in turn describes a corporate culture as a »profound, complex (and thus multifaceted) morally neutral phenomenon«<sup>1</sup>. In his eyes, this culture expresses itself in three ways: in visible artifacts (for example in status symbols), in professed values and norms, and in – usually difficult to recognize, but nevertheless existing – basic assumptions about behaviour or success factors. Schein also makes clear that corporate culture and leadership are inextricably linked, must be coordinated and are mutually dependent.

As a result, corporate culture is reflected in leadership behaviour, just as leadership itself significantly determines the guiding culture in companies. In other words, we can confidently claim that the culture of an organization is at a morally neutral level. If this culture is implemented by its leaders in this way, we can assume a well-developed company. I am describing a company in which highly motivated as well as equally loyal employees work. Motivation and loyalty are, after all, important indicators of employee's satisfaction, which in turn is an essential factor for the basis of the company's success.

The U.S. opinion research institute Gallup publishes a study on employee satisfaction every two years, and here the dilemma in which we find ourselves – for years – becomes clear: According to this study, only about 17 percent of all employees in Germany go into their work in a highly motivated manner. The rest, namely around 3 percent of all employees, tend to work to rule or have even already resigned.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, it becomes clear: German companies have a huge problem, and the main culprit is a corporate culture that either no one understands, no one pays attention to, or does not credibly reflect the values and norms they live by. In my almost thirty years of experience as a trainer for executives, I have repeatedly found that only a few participants in my seminars even know their own corporate culture! The rest are aware of it, but it often seems too theoretical, too difficult to implement in professional practice, or simply too detached and too little reflective of reality.

So, when we talk about corporate culture, we automatically mean corporate success and employee satisfaction. At the same time – and this conclusion will probably be new to many readers – we must also understand it to mean occupational safety. After all, this has a considerable impact on the success of the company. There is therefore a direct link between corporate culture and occupational safety; dealing with this is known as safety culture management. This is a term that has become increasingly established over the past few years, especially in the USA. I will describe why this connection exists and how

modern managers should deal with safety culture management. Management will be described in more detail in the next chapters.

When I included this topic in my trainings some time ago, I had no idea of the response it would generate. I conduct seminars in the area of leadership communication and occupational safety. In them, I train my participants in methods to make them more successful in dealing with employees and colleagues so that their leadership becomes effective, but these leaders also learn how to manage their team in order to carry out things that, as a supervisor, you would like to see done. I formulate this part in this way deliberately, because it is usually not so much a matter of clear work instructions that remain undone. Far more often, it is the so-called »small requests« that meets with rejection from employees.

*»Mr. Maier, please clean up at the plant when you get a chance.«*

These are the things I mean. In my seminars, it turned out that many participants often reject necessary changes or procedures before they have understood what they are all about. If something like this happens with managers, the topic of »rejection or resistance« will also be part of everyday management in their teams. This is merely a randomly selected point, one of a multitude of topics in everyday management, but one that can have an impact on occupational safety and ultimately is often part of the corporate culture. After only a short time, my participants asked me if I could write down what I had to say about safety culture management in a compact form. A guide, so to

speak, to better leadership in the increasingly demanding operational environment.

In addition to occupational safety, the quality of the corporate culture is also directly and clearly visible in absenteeism due to illness. Both values, occupational safety, and absenteeism, are therefore a measure of the maturity of the company's culture. Absenteeism can thus be seen as a direct expression of culture and also, therefore, of leadership behaviour. This book provides managers with detailed guidance on the background to absenteeism due to illness and the role of the manager in reducing absenteeism. It also details what a process for improving attendance should look like.

Finally, I decided to publish this book describing the exact requirements for a so-called »Safety Culture Manager®«. So not only do you get a precise description of the framework of this role, but also clear guidelines and checklists to enable you to perform this task in the future.

This book thus provides a detailed overview of the requirements that tomorrow's managers will have to meet. At the same time, it is intended to support you in developing the corporate culture in your company needed to improve occupational safety and thus ensure the company's success. On the other hand, this content is also to be understood as a workbook for the future Safety Culture Manager®.

No matter what considerations led you to read this book: I wish you many good and helpful insights, coupled with much success in the implementation of your activities as a leader.

*Your Stefan Bartel*

## 1 Culture change?

Does your company, which you head/lead or in which you work as a manager, have a defined corporate culture? In other words, guidelines, and values to which all employees should orient themselves in their contact with customers, suppliers and colleagues? Even broader frameworks, such as how companies understand their interaction with the environment, which ethical approaches they demand – for example fair trade – and much more can be found in these kinds of self-imposed values defined by corporations and medium-sized companies all over the world.

Definition is all well and good, but what follows now? What do you think, to what extent are these values lived in your company?

In my experience, after almost thirty years as a trainer for executives, we have to face a rather sobering result at this point: Only in a very few companies is the desired corporate culture actually lived out in daily practice. In most cases, these guiding principles are unfortunately not worth the paper they are written on.

Although the communication of a newly constituted corporate culture is often carried downward from the highest level, often by the CEO himself, the next management line already implements these new values only half-heartedly at best.

One participant recently told me about the introduction of the new corporate culture in his company, a corporation with

about three thousand employees worldwide. Each employee received a personal letter from the CEO, i.e., not just a mundane email, in which this corporate culture consisting of nine points was presented and described in detail. Employees also received a small plastic card in credit-card Format with the company's values. A few days after the HR department distributed the letter and the cards worldwide, the Group also conducted an online test. All employees had to complete a multiple-choice test in which they were asked to answer nine questions about the newly developed corporate culture. As if that was not enough, shortly afterwards the HR department instructed the department heads to check during the following weeks whether everyone was really carrying this card and knew its contents. The company invested a lot of time and money, primarily in the development of this online test, which was conducted by an external service provider, with the corresponding translations in all languages.

What happened to this new corporate culture? Almost everyone knew it by heart, but almost no one adhered to it. These were entirely sensible topics, such as sustainability in environmental subjects, or trustworthiness toward customers, suppliers and colleagues, as well as compliance with safety guidelines. Despite this elaborate campaign, the project failed shortly after its launch. For me, this case is symptomatic of how things are in terms of corporate culture in most companies around the world. Why is this the case? The reasons are many and varied, but I see three main points as being responsible for this failure:

1. The culture is simply too remote for actual implementation.

2. The employees do not see any sense in adhering to these values or find them obstructive.
3. Neither the top management, and certainly not the managers at the next levels down, are behind this corporate culture.

While the first point often takes an overly strategic approach with a strong focus on corporate vision, the second one lacks a practical approach for employees.

Visions are only suitable for a corporate culture to a limited extent, as they are usually located in a kind of »strategic meta-level« and – quite frankly – the »normal« employee can usually do very little with them.

Let me describe with an abstract example, using a project of the US space agency NASA, namely the manned flight to Mars, what I want to express.

A good illustration of the first point would be the adoption of a culture according to which everything must be done to ensure that in the event of contact with Martians, they do not feel threatened. This begins with a harmonious construction of the space shuttle, right up to the elaboration of exact behaviour guidelines for the astronauts. Such a definition of values sounds all well and good, but at the moment it is neither clear whether life exists on Mars at all, nor even how to actually get there, since most of the technical aspects have not yet been clarified. This value would thus be much too far away from the current reality. Nevertheless, many corporate cultures already start there and lose their employees very quickly in this way.



In the case of the second point, it would be as if the astronauts, after landing on Mars, had to carry out the colonization only taking into account a later site design. Consequently, the roof structures as well as the floor height should remain harmonious. This example may seem too absurd. I often, however, received exactly this feedback from participants regarding the implementation of their corporate culture. When – as mentioned above – values such as a »sustainable approach to the environment« duel with the requirement to »drive the company car through the car wash at least once a week« employees very quickly distance themselves from such corporate cultures.

The third point is the one most often responsible for the failure of a culture development. If the introduction of a culture is not directly linked to the company's success, managers lose focus on it within a short period of time. The reason is obvious: Most companies measure managers by operational metrics. Any values that are not in line with these benchmarks quickly lose priority. Corporate culture thus degenerates into a necessary evil.

## **The UCAA-technique**

Even if all employees understand this corporate culture, is having been written in a practical way and definitely in line with corporate development, this still does not ensure that these new values are actually implemented. The reason lies not only in how we deal with change, but also in how companies normally carry out change processes. I do not just mean the introduction of a corporate culture by these processes. I mean all the »innovations« that are implemented in companies and

whose lack of implementation can sometimes have serious consequences.

To ensure that this does not happen to you in the future. I would like to start by introducing you to a learning technique that I have been using for two decades now and which I teach in my seminars.

It stems from the author Napoleon Hill, and he first published it in his famous book »Think and grow rich«. He was studying law and earning some extra money as a journalist when, at the beginning of the 20th century and at the age of about twenty, one of the richest Americans at the time, the steel baron Andrew Carnegie, gave him an interesting assignment: Hill had to investigate whether certain success factors exist. In other words, factors that could be used to be successful in life. He then interviewed 500 of the most successful Americans, including people from business, industry, politics, sport and the public. From this he developed, in twelve rules, his theses on success in life. »Think and Grow Rich« is his most famous work and one of the most popular personal development books ever written. Napoleon Hill did not publish it until 1937, since when it has sold over one hundred million copies worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Hill identified four Golden Rules for learning success: Understanding, making connections to one's own situation, adapting and applying. Let's call it the UCAA-technique and look at Understanding, Connecting, Adapting and Applying more closely.

Only when we understand something – a context –, can we derive meaningful activities from it. By nature, however, most

people tend to reject new knowledge or applications as soon as they call previous knowledge into question. We thus prefer to behave a little more cautiously before we might make a mistake that could harm us. This attitude, however, is not always helpful and »**understanding**« helps us to overcome this hurdle.

Before we reject something, we should try to find out what knowledge, for example, is behind a thing, what energy, what life experience.... One must also, of course, be able to classify all this correctly, i.e., put it into the context of a task. Over the years I have experienced many participants who were against new thoughts without having understood them. Their facial expressions and body language reveal, sometimes even before I have finished a sentence, if someone is against them, before they have fully understood the real possibilities. This is a pity because they are missing out on great opportunities. You can be against it afterwards, but please not from the outset.

Once you understand it in the first step, you have to be able to make connections, which brings us to the second point of the Napoleon Hill learning technique. This is what Hill understands by making connections, appropriate to one's own situation. One should therefore be able to transfer. »**Abstraction ability**« are the magic words at this point. This helps us to establish a relationship between existing information and how it helps us to achieve our goal. Abstractions are certainly also a measure of practical intelligence because an inability to transfer and thus make connections would be a real cause for concern.

After connecting comes the third step in the UCAA-technique, »**adapting**«.

At this point, I have to admit to having neglected this point myself for many years. Not only that, but I also even applied this step wrongly, because I completely disregarded an essential point. Here I speak of the so-called »depth knowledge«. I call depth knowledge an understanding which differs elementarily from learned knowledge. I would like to give you an example of what I mean by this: I am passionate about running and running long distances. When I started, I read everything I could about long-distance running, so after a short time I knew all about what stride technique would be optimal on different terrain, how to control my breathing, and how mental obstacles might stress me during a marathon. Through my research I acquired quite a considerable amount of learned – theoretical – know-how, but it lacked a fundamental aspect. I am speaking here of experience, of »practical knowledge«. Deep knowledge arises only when, and as soon as, I combine theory with practical experience. According to my example: when I have run my first marathon.

Only then do I know how little all the theoretical knowledge about running techniques helps me when, after twenty kilometres, the first blister forms on my heel or I want to immediately stop and give up. This is when I can now put my acquired knowledge about mental techniques into practice. From this moment on, theoretical knowledge acquires a value for me, namely an experiential value. Only then can I properly determine which techniques work for me in my individual case and which do not!

Anyone who has only learned knowledge, or secondary knowledge, is going about the third step of Napoleon Hill's

learning technique, the wrong way. At this point there is also nothing to gloss over.

What does this mean? These people implement learned knowledge one-to-one without paying attention to the respective framework conditions that stand between this knowledge and my goal. In the absence of experience, we orient ourselves on our learned knowledge; more than that, we sometimes even cling to it like a drowning person to a straw. So, since these people do not know what matters in practice, they elevate methods to an end in themselves. In this case, it is no longer a matter of achieving the desired goal in the best possible way but doing everything they can to implement the method itself. This in turn means that everything must sometimes be even the actual goal.

My request to you, the reader, is therefore: Adapt all instruments. Unconditionally.

And that means not only your strengths, that suit you, but also the culture and the history of your company.

All the methods you will learn in this book are neither good nor bad; they may or may not fit you and your story. For this reason, it is important that you measure everything against them: Do they fit to your company, your employees, your company's culture? This is what the philosopher Odo Marquart formulated in a very vivid way: »Zukunft braucht Herkunft« (Future needs origin).<sup>4</sup>

This means that the method is always only to an end and never an end in itself. More important than a method itself, however,

is the ability to bring people along with you, to take people with you. That is why all methods must always be adapted to the specifics of a corporate culture.

You should ask yourself these questions again and again throughout this book. Only then will you ensure an intelligent adaptation process and avoid the danger of confusing learned knowledge with in-depth knowledge.

After the adjustment follows the fourth step, applying.

You probably know the saying, »Knowledge is power«.

I view this quote as being incomplete, because in the end only applied knowledge means power!

Using this approach, I would like to motivate you to apply all the ideas, suggestions, and recommendations in this book in a practical way. The experience you gain will ensure that you adapt all these techniques until they fit the best for you, your employees, and the culture of your company. If you do it this way, you will find that change takes time. Even more so, that there are no shortcuts. In all my years of experience, I have seen so many times that any apparent shortcut turns out to be a detour, and I can safely say today: Shortcuts in learning and experience processes are in the end nothing more than – mostly – painful detours that lead back to the original path.

You learn in the »**Apply**« phase that everyone who wants to change things gets a bloody nose at some point. For my part I have never experienced it any other way. The principle we all

know, “The twin brother of change is resistance”, will be a hindrance in any change process, whether we like it or not. In other words, it means change requires persistence. We have to stick with these initiated processes, even if – in the initial phase – we seem to be fighting windmills.

When we talk about culture change in companies, we usually talk about a period of 3 to 8 years until these changes bear fruit.

In practice, we regularly move back and forth between the steps »adapt« and »apply« until we reach our actual goal, adapting knowledge, learned as well as deep knowledge, to the prevailing situation until we find the optimal method for us in each case.

## **Never give up!**

At this point it should be said that with any kind of changes there will be difficulties in the implementation, no matter how perfectly I prepare them.

In addition, marathon running taught me a lesson for life. As I mentioned earlier, running is one of my favourite leisure activities. When I was preparing for the New York City Marathon in 2011, my running coach at the time said probably the most important sentence in my life, which I never really took seriously until that point: »Never give up!«

My coach had already run this marathon a few times and he told me that, especially in this city, the demands on the runners

are unimaginably high, starting with the huge number of participants, which especially in the first kilometres can give you an oppressive feeling. Added to this were the many climbs and the capricious weather elements.

»Never walk« he added.

Even if I felt totally broken, I was not allowed to walk a meter, but always had to stay in my running mode. I heard these words a hundred times during the training, until the time finally came, and I was waiting in the starting area of one of the most famous events for marathon runners, adrenaline pumping, goose bumps and wet eyes, for it to finally start.

On the Pulaski Bridge in Queens, there was a sign that said, »Halfway to heaven.« This is where the marathon really begins.

At the beginning of the second half, the small mistakes I made in the first few miles began to take their toll. Although I paid attention to my pace, I ran a little too fast, flooded with adrenaline.

Now the high initial speed and the constantly changing ground conditions had a painful effect. Cobblestones replaced asphalt roads, followed by sections with a lot of potholes. The bridges with their total of almost five hundred meters of elevation that I had to cross in the course of the marathon were also taking their toll on me.

»Never walk« was the rule and I violated it a few times. The phrase »once is not a never« does not apply here. As soon as you slack off once, the next time is already in the air.



In the end, I had to give everything and go beyond my limits to make it to the finish line. There I experienced ten seconds of real happiness, an incomparable feeling, for which alone the whole effort was worth it.

What does this little story mean for us now?

When things get hard, they get easier. You can count on that, and I have never experienced it any other way, provided that you have met the challenge every time and ultimately carried it through to the end.

This marathon was extremely exhausting and at times I thought I had no more strength, but suddenly it came back, and I was able to keep running. As if out of nowhere, I felt this energy in my body that carried me forward. This is exactly what will happen to you as soon as you make changes in your company: obstacles build up, and if you persevere, they dissolve. Sometimes as if by magic, then again sometimes only through your iron will.

At this point something else is important to understand: boundaries usually only exist in the mind. We can all achieve much more than we give ourselves credit for.

Finally, there is something that I would particularly like to recommend to you. When things get really difficult and your energy is almost gone, take your eyes off the distant goal and focus on the here and now. If you think that nothing will work at kilometre 33, I assure you that the next three steps will still work. After that you can walk five hundred meters again, and so on. When many difficulties arise in a change process and the

goal seems to be far away, focus entirely on the next, small step. As Goethe already let us know, it is better to have done ten percent at 100 percent than one hundred percent at 10 percent.

At the end of the day, it is always the result that counts. If you really want to achieve something, you will.

Keep at it and do your best! If you do, the energy will eventually return. This is where the law of thought of Nikolaus Enkelmann applies: »Only used energy flows back.«<sup>5</sup>

Let me give you another example on the subject of »Never give up!«. You may remember the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. The men's 400-meter semi-finals included Derek Redmond of Great Britain, who was considered one of the co-favourites for a place on the podium.

A few seconds after the start, a murmur went through the crowd as Redmond briefly jumped up, tensed, and grabbed his right leg. While the other runners passed him, he limped on for another few meters; probably everyone in the stadium suspected that his dream of an Olympic medal was history at this point. He could have just stopped and given up, because finishing in last place was already a certainty. He apparently suffered a torn muscle fibre and risked severe injury if he did not retire immediately.

Derek Redmond did not give up.

More limping than walking, his face contorted with pain, the Briton continued on his way after a short break. Gradually the

audience realized what was happening below them and thunderous applause began in the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona. One hundred meters from the finish line, his father came running onto the track, always dodging the numerous security guards, to support his son so that he, by now in tears, could still fulfil his dream on the last meters.

His dream was to finish in the 400-meter final at the Olympic Games. To achieve this, the young man worked incredibly hard and did not let anything or anyone get in his way, as he later told a TV program.

What do I want to convey with this story? Although Derek Redmond did not give up, he did not achieve his goal of winning a medal. No one suspected at the time what doors would open for the Briton with the iron will. In the end, he earned far more than Quincy Watts of the U.S., the gold medal winner in the 400-meter final, because suddenly everyone wanted to hear his story. Redmond lectured on motivation, and as he did so, he repeatedly told of his fateful day in Barcelona and why he did not give up but kept running. His fate made him a rich man. That is how he became a winner, even though he could not fulfil his actual dream. In the words of Napoleon Hill, »Every adversity bears within it the seed of an equal or better opportunity.«

What can we learn from this? If we keep at it, we will achieve something. Even if it may not be the result we were originally aiming for, we will succeed at the end of the day, precisely because new opportunities suddenly appear, ways that we did not even think of at the beginning.

In other words: In the end, there is always a gain if I am prepared to give my best.