The Culture Code Summary

By <u>Daniel Coyle</u>

There's a moment in class where the teacher says, 'I'm going to divide you into groups to work on this project.' For many of us, this is enough to make us break out into a sweat. But, why is this? Humans are social animals, and we're designed to interact with others, so why is group work, and working in teams, so difficult for so many of us?

The Culture Code is a fascinating insight into group dynamics and chemistry. The central argument is that culture is the most important thing to foster and develop as a leader. By looking at three key elements of culture, namely safety, sharing, and stories, we're shown how to unlock the true potential of culture and group relationships.

Daniel Coyle is an editor, advisor to the Cleveland Indians, and *New York Times* bestselling author. From a young age, he's been fascinated by teams and teamwork, and has dedicated his career to researching and understanding the idea of group culture and performance.

We'll briefly look at why some groups succeed, and others fail. We'll also demystify the concept of culture, and show how it can be built and developed by focusing on three critical elements. Every single group can choose to change their culture. By providing fascinating case studies, cutting-edge research, and practical tools, we have no excuses for tolerating toxic work, social, or family groups.

Decoding Culture

Google is often used as the example that epitomizes excellent company culture. Its unique brand of culture is why it's a place where everyone wants to work.

More and more people are starting to recognize the value of good culture, and how it's the driving force of any group or team's success. A group or team can be a well-oiled machine, or it can completely fail through a lack of synergy. If every individual is working for the group, then all of the parts of the machine allow it to function. However, if just one individual isn't invested in the group, then the machine falls apart. To get every individual to invest and work for the benefit of the group, they have to be embedded in the group's culture.

So how do you unlock the potential of your culture? Dan Coyle says that we've been thinking about culture in the wrong way. We see culture as something nebulous and difficult to define. Some people describe it as "the X factor," something that you either have, or you don't. However, It's not magic; it's a leadership skill that you can learn. And, there's a formula to making sure that we foster a strong and committed culture, where people flourish within group situations.

Group Work Is Child's Play

It's time to pick your team. Who do you choose? Do you choose the smartest, the most talented, or the hardest workers?

The point is it won't matter who you have in your group; it's how you work together that's important. Many businesses and groups have failed because they've emphasized individuals, individual performance, and micromanagement. Coyle says we need to rethink this, and uses the

superb example of Kindergarteners vs. MBA students.

How do you think Kindergartners stacked up against MBA students in a test on group work and performance? Well, it turns out that the Kindergartners completely annihilated their older, wiser, and more educated competition. Peter Skillman developed a test and researched how group dynamics impact results and performance. He gathered teams of Kindergartners and MBA students, and asked them to build the tallest structure they could, out of string, uncooked spaghetti, and a marshmallow. While the students averaged structures of 10 inches, the kids managed a whopping 26 inches.

So what went wrong for the students? According to Skillman, they succumbed to "status management." Whereas the Kindergarteners just dived headfirst into the project and tried to build the highest tower they could, the MBA students fixated on who was in charge, who should occupy what role, and who had what skills to offer. Hence, the MBA students ran out of time, and were ineffective in their problem-solving. If we look at the Kindergarteners, they just merrily began trying and failing, and eventually learned through trial and error. Their process was chaotic and enthusiastic, and perhaps unorthodox, but it was also supportive and collaborative. There were no egos, no jostling for position, and most importantly, no fear.

This element of fear brings us to the first of three integral components to fostering and nurturing a positive culture.

Safety First

Joining a group for the first time can be difficult, and being the "new

person" isn't always easy. If everyone is joining a group simultaneously, this can also be daunting because everyone is navigating first impressions, and some people will naturally vie for position. As we saw with the Kindergarten vs. MBA example, the children showed very little fear and felt secure and happy to get on with the task at hand. In contrast, the students fixated on "status management," which is a symptom of insecurity.

Feeling safe and secure in a group is the goal, and leaders need to promote a sense of belonging through honesty and connection. 'You're either in, or you're out,' has become a bit of a postmodern catchphrase. Being in, or out, is something that we decide very quickly, and a lot of this instinct comes down to whether or not we feel safe. And safety is paramount because it enables us to let our guard down and perform at our best. When we let our guard down, interacting and cooperating with others becomes easier and more natural.

So how do we foster feelings of safety and security?

As with culture, a sense of belonging and safety aren't magic. They're created through several factors, such as open channels of communication. We've all been in situations where we've felt unheard or ignored. In cases like these, we usually respond with apathy or rebellion. In a workplace with a positive culture, everyone is invited to participate in open communication channels, no matter what seniority level you are. Furthermore, individuals within the group should feel validated and valued for their contributions. However, at the heart of wanting to be inside, rather than outside of a group, comes down to the belonging cues that we're given.

Creating buy-in from individuals is a process, and it's easily done if you

pay attention and take a genuine interest in the people within your group. Anxiety is a natural feeling, and it's easy to alleviate through positive affirmations. Furthermore, sending out regular micro-signals that validate individuals in small but meaningful ways is also vital. Having a positive yearly performance review isn't enough to sustain feelings of security and safety. Belonging cues need to happen regularly, and good leaders know how to capitalize on this.

Coyle uses the example of a company called Wipro, which is a call-center that had an incredibly high staff turnover rate. It was so bad that they were losing half of their employees every single year. Wipro tackled this problem with an in-house experiment where they divided their company training in half. One group had the regular training, and the other group had the regular training along with an additional hour. The regular training involved a one-to-many approach, with trainers speaking about the company values, introducing high-fliers, and so on. During the extra hour that half of the employees were exposed to, employees were asked about themselves. They were asked about their best and worst workdays, and what special skills they had. After just seven months of this experiment, they found that the extra hour resulted in a 270% better retention rate. The belonging cues sent during this extra hour had a significant impact on morale and buy-in.

According to Coyle, relationships have a physics. Safety grows over time, and like trust, it gets built and delivered by small acts, rather than grand gestures. Connection is established through good communication channels, listening, and showing that we're cared for.

So how can we implement effective belonging cues?

Belonging cues focus on connection, future, and security. Feeling

connected results from being listened to, feeling supported through small courtesies, and physical contact. Future cues are essential because they focus on long-term security and upward mobility within the company. Finally, security cues include providing and allowing feedback, valuing individual and group opinions, and acknowledging work ethic. It's important to note that there's a difference between authenticity and niceness, and sometimes critical feedback is necessary in order to promote a culture of honesty. Acknowledgment doesn't always have to be nice; it should always be honest and constructive.

Some examples of cues could be using "interjecting affirmations," such as "great idea," "you're really onto something," or "good job!" Being curious about individuals is also a cue that shows you're interested in them, and want to form a connection. It's also important to be authentic about seeing people and their work, and caring about what they have to say. Coyle further suggests that we stop "shooting the messenger" and opt instead for "embracing the messenger." Bad news and failure are part of every single organization, so when someone brings bad news, embrace the moment and learn from it. By doing this, you'll also show that it's safe for people to tell the truth and to communicate. Finally, never underestimate the power of the "one-liner." Sending an email to individuals asking them to comment on, 'one thing you'd like me to do more of and one thing you'd like me to do less of,' can go a very long way.

Sharing Is Caring

Brene Brown argues that vulnerability is a strength rather than a weakness. Traditionally, teamwork is viewed as something competitive, where people need to jostle for position. Contemporary thought-leaders argue that pitting individuals against each other, and hiding weaknesses, instills a toxic and ungovernable work culture.

Coyle reveals that a group leader is usually the first person to admit to vulnerability and flaws. Leaders share their shortcomings and reaffirm the commonly held but often glossed over belief, that nobody is perfect. The point of being a group is that everyone has a crucial role to play, and that everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses.

We've all been there. Sitting in a job interview, we're asked the question, 'So, what do you think your weaknesses are?' Our response is to cunningly disguise strengths as weaknesses in a bid to save ourselves from actually revealing that we're flawed. 'Well,' we might muse, 'I'm a bit of a perfectionist.' This isn't the approach we should be taking; we need to own our flaws and vulnerabilities because perfection is a myth, and being vulnerable shows character and develops trust. When we open up to other people, this creates what's known as a "vulnerability loop." A "vulnerability loop" is the snowball effect that arises when people start sharing and trusting each other, as one person opens up

A poignant example of asking for help, and relying on group strength, was seen on United Airlines Flight 232. In 1989, United Airlines Flight 232 experienced a catastrophic failure and had to prepare for a crash landing. Although 112 people lost their lives, 184 survived, which was a considerable achievement given that the odds were against them, and no one expected anyone to survive. So how did the crew manage to defy the odds and save all those people? One of the main reasons was the plane's captain encouraged everyone to help solve the problem, and

didn't just take control as other captains might have. He admitted his vulnerabilities and applied cockpit resource management, which allowed for everyone's input and to use their strengths to solve the problem.

What's Your Story?

Whatever team you're on, you need a clear sense of purpose. A sense of purpose is essential because it communicates a clear message, and gets people to invest emotionally.

While you may think that all you need to do is dial Keith in marketing and get him to come up with a catchy slogan, a pithy mission statement, a fancy and memorable logo, this isn't enough to instill a sense of purpose. Any company can get hold of their version of Keith; what you need is a story.

Purpose comes through creating a compelling narrative around shared goals. We invest in stories, and they make us believe in why what we're doing is important. As Simon Sinek suggests, 'We need to start with why?' People buy into a narrative, and the promise of being part of something great or revolutionary galvanizes massive shifts in mindset.

Having a clear purpose also allows everyone to stay on message and work within the framework provided by the group's values, goals, and vision. It's also a great driver of consistency because it makes everyone align with the group's priorities and goals. What's more, by creating a strong sense of narrative, people use that to visualize the future and work towards overcoming obstacles.

In 1982 Johnson and Johnson didn't just face an obstacle; they faced

utter tragedy. In September of that year, seven people in Chicago died of cyanide poisoning. The culprit was Tylenol capsules that had been sabotaged. Tylenol accounted for nearly 20% of the company's revenue, so this was a massive disaster for Johnson and Johnson, and many thought they wouldn't recover. However, just two years later, Tylenol was back on the shelves, and the company began to thrive once more.

How did they manage to claw their way out of this mammoth crisis? The company did a huge recall of the product, and offered safer replacements free of charge. In 1982, no company had ever done a total product recall, and many criticized the decision, believing it to be corporate suicide. The man at the helm, James Burke, showed incredible leadership and was praised for his honest and open communication. Despite the major loss of earnings, Johnson and Johnson weathered the storm because they had a leader with an unbelievably clear sense of purpose and strong ethical duty. James Burke did not deviate from the core purpose of the company.

In Conclusion

The Culture Code is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand or create a shift in group dynamics. There is absolutely no excuse for tolerating or allowing toxic group culture. Dan Coyle shows how with three clear and easy to follow strategies, group dynamics can shift, and culture can be changed.

Great teams work, not because they have the magical ingredient of chemistry, instead this chemistry has been nurtured and developed. Performance comes from developing cohesion and trust through safety, vulnerability, and purpose.

So reflect on your own groups, your family, a team you belong to, your work environment, or perhaps even a school or society you belong to. Think about the culture and ask yourself if there's anything you'd change, and how you could make these changes. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, 'Culture does not make people, people make culture.'