CAP Quality Culture Course – Sample Content

What Is Culture?

Unwritten Rules

Any time human beings live or work together, they develop patterns of behavior, or "unwritten rules."

These rules govern:
- What it's okay to talk about, or say
- What behavior is acceptable and what is not

In some organizations, the rules might include:
- Don't question the supervisor – just do what he/she tells you
- If someone makes a mistake, don't say anything

These behaviors are based on a set of values, beliefs, and expectations.

What is Culture?

Values, Beliefs & Expectations

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Patterns of Behavior
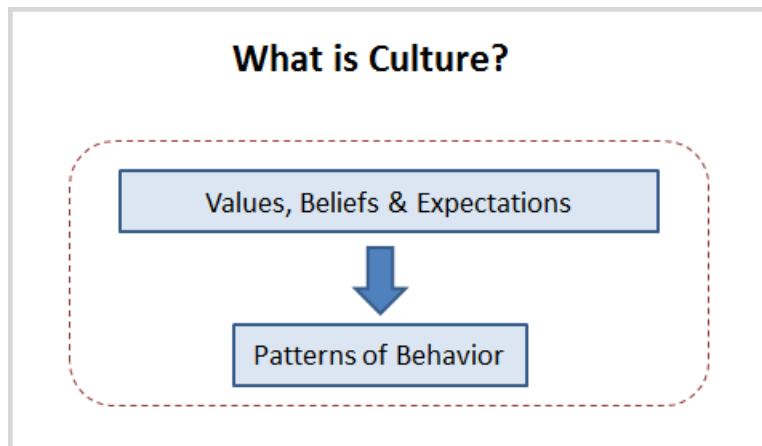
Culture is the combination of
- the shared values, beliefs, and expectations; and
- the pattern of behavior that follows

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Laboratories that are successful at delivering strong quality tend to have cultures that include the following behaviors:

- Don't blame defects on people; find the process cause.
- When you see a risk or a defect, speak up.
- Don't pass on defects. Instead, stop, investigate, and fix the problem.
- Be transparent about mistakes, deficiencies, and near misses.

A goal of laboratory leaders is to continually influence the culture to drive ever-increasing levels of quality.

What Creates Culture?

Two key forces create culture:
- Leadership and the environment it fosters
- Strong, influential individuals at every level

Leadership of an Organization

The primary driver of culture is the leadership of the organization.

The individuals in the organization – including the strong, dominant ones – are to a large extent reacting to the messages leadership sends through its words and actions.

For this reason, it's important not to blame the employees if there are problems in an organization's culture.

Leadership Drives Culture

Leadership and Management Actions

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Employee Values, Beliefs & Expectations

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Employee Behavior
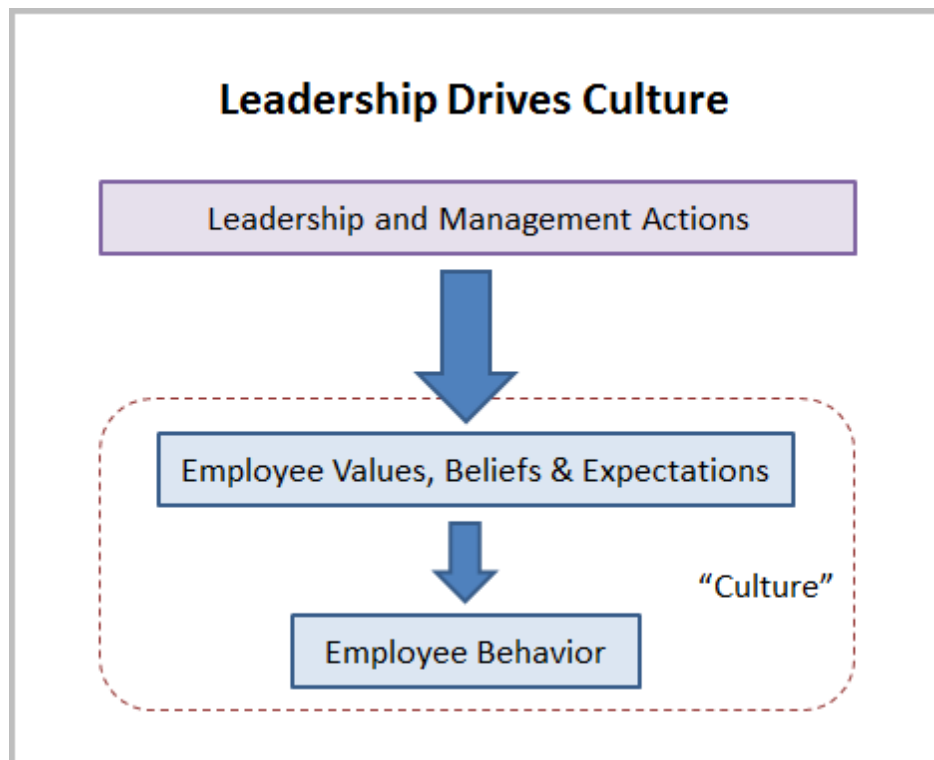
"Culture"

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Leadership influences values and beliefs, and creates expectations, through a number of means. For example:

- What they communicate through their decisions, priorities, and actions
- What they communicate verbally
- What they reward and recognize
- What kind of skills training and support they provide
- Who they hire, fire, and sanction/discipline
- How they spend their time

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Consider these two laboratory cultures, and their associated expectations:

Non-Productive Culture – Expectations	
If I …	**Then…**
Question the status quo	I'll get reprimanded or minimized
Point out problems in the laboratory	My concerns will be ignored, and my career might suffer
Tell people about a mistake I made	I'll create more work for myself
Stop testing to investigate an anomaly or issue	My supervisor will get angry; I won't be liked

Productive Culture – Expectations	
If I …	**Then…**
Question the status quo	I'll get support, even if my idea is not accepted
Point out problems in the laboratory	My supervisor will appreciate it
Tell people about a mistake I made	I'll be seen as furthering quality and our competitive advantage
Stop testing to investigate an anomaly or issue	My supervisor will thank me

These expectations are based on experience in the laboratory and the actions of the leaders.

Example of Leadership Driving Culture – QC Failure	
Situation:	A technologist experiences a QC failure. The supervisor asks the manager if she should shut down testing to investigate the failure.
Response:	The manager says no; he describes the QC failure as "random error" and orders the supervisor to retest specimens, and if the results are correct, to continue testing.
What This Decision Says:	The highest priority is keeping specimen testing moving.

In this scenario, the manager is building a culture of overlooking risks.

Strong Individuals

Strong individuals drive culture by the force of their personality.

In any group – for example, school friends, sports teams, and concert-goers – there are people who tend to lead and influence the behavior of others.

Some people go with the flow; some people create the flow.

At each level in an organization, dominant or charismatic individuals often exert strong influence over the people they interact with.

This happens in laboratories as well.

Strong Individuals Influence Culture

Managers

Supervisors

Bench Techs
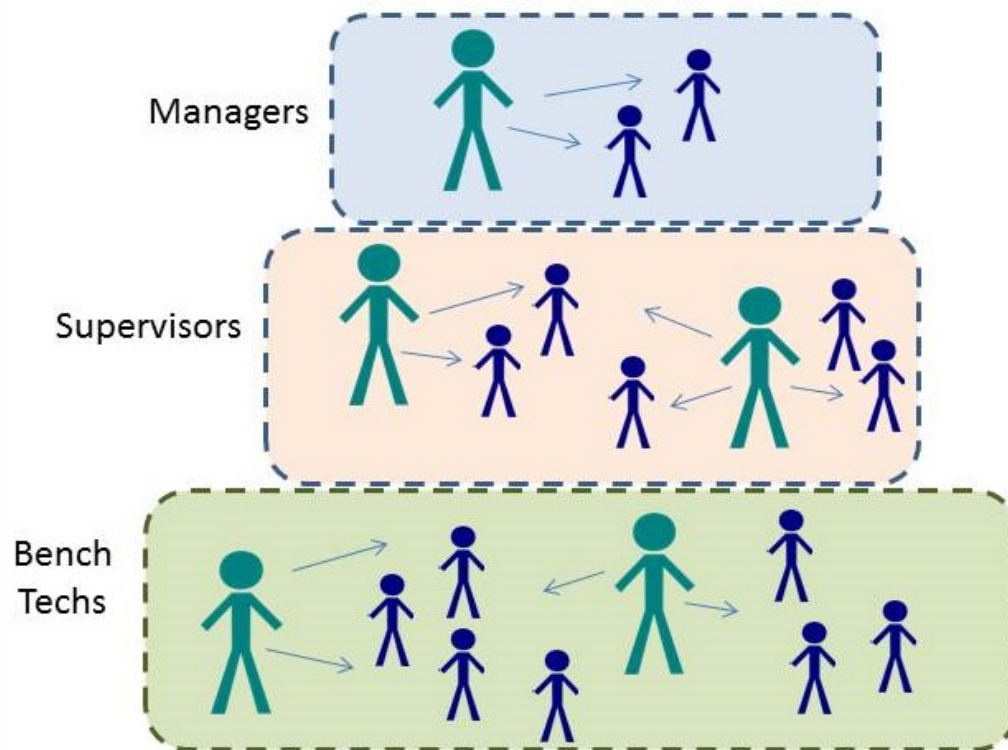
The influence of these strong individuals may be good or bad – they may foster
- Cynicism, blaming, and low effort
- Positive energy, rigorous thought, and continuous improvement

It is unwise to leave this to chance.

This is why it's important to proactively influence culture through the methods included in this course.

Culture Doesn't Always Match the Signs on the Walls

Often the actual cultural values are different than the stated values – for example, those that are posted on the wall or circulated in flyers.

Stated Values	Actual Behaviors that Drive Operations
Innovation – Generate new ideas and methods	Conservatism – "Don't change anything. What we have has worked for us for 30 years. Leave things alone."
Teamwork and team decision making	Top-down control – e.g., "Do as I say."
Transparency	Suppressing Information – "Don't raise problems that will slow down work."

What are the values and behaviors that will help your laboratory execute on its strategy and meet its goals?

What Is a Culture of Quality?

By culture of quality, we mean those aspects of culture that are critical to achieving quality goals. Seven key aspects are:

- Innovation
- Speaking Up
- Going Above and Beyond
- Transparency
- Process Orientation
- Teamwork and Involvement
- Risk Awareness

Innovation

Key behaviors for staff:

- Question the status quo, question assumptions, and examine the way things are
- Initiate changes and improvements
- Support change

Key behaviors for managers and leaders:

- Support staff who make suggestions; follow up with staff on what can be done
- Initiate changes and improvements
- Build continuous improvement into processes
- Use "bad" or impractical suggestions as opportunities bring staff into the discussion and coach them on process improvement

Joe Rutledge on the "yellow card" system

David Wolfe on encouraging innovation

Speaking Up

Key behaviors for staff:

- Speak up when processes are cumbersome and will likely result in a workaround
- Respectfully disagree with supervisors and managers

Key behaviors for managers and leaders:

- Listen to staff when they raise issues
- Actively solicit the perspectives of those closest to the work

David Wolfe on speaking up and collaborating

Going Above and Beyond

Key behaviors for staff:

- Do more than is required, striving for higher levels of quality, continuous improvement, and achievement

Key behaviors for managers and leaders:

- View occurrences as useful – as opportunities for learning and creating improvements
- Request internal audits of processes – be willing to have process weaknesses or opportunities exposed
- Model going above and beyond

Frank Schneider on a system for tracking issues

Deborah Miller-Jones on going above and beyond

Transparency

Key behaviors for staff:

- Report errors and near misses to supervisors and managers

Joe Rutledge on removing fear from reporting defects

Key behaviors for managers and leaders:

- Support staff and encourage them to escalate errors; reward and recognize those who come forward
- Seek to drive fear out of the workplace
- Build trust with staff; interact frequently with staff

Process Orientation

Key behaviors for staff, managers, and leaders:

- When investigating mistakes, ask, "How did it happen?" rather than "Who did it?"
- Respond to mistakes by looking for a process cause
- Reject explanations that focus on individuals and their weaknesses
- Look for weaknesses of processes and procedure using the tools of root cause analysis, Lean, and mistake proofing

Frank Schneider on responding to a PT mistake

David Wolfe on consequences of blaming

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Teamwork and Involvement

Key behaviors for staff:

- Collaborate in decision making

Key behaviors for managers and leaders:

- Include front line staff in decision making
- Make sure everyone feels like a valued member of the laboratory team
- Help staff understand the big picture
- Show appreciation for ideas and input from staff

Deborah Miller-Jones on including everyone

David Wolfe on teamwork and involvement

Risk Awareness

Key behaviors for staff:

- Proactively look for risks in the environment
- Ask questions of leadership when something doesn't seem right

Key behaviors for managers and leaders:

- Stop testing when staff bring up a risk issue such as a QC failure
- Trace QC and PT anomalies to their root cause

David Wolfe on acknowledging risks and bad news

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Here is a document that goes into more detail on these seven dimensions:

Medical Laboratories – Dimensions of Culture that Foster Quality

Culture Assessment Tool

Here is an Excel-based assessment tool that can help you understand your laboratory's current culture, and prioritize efforts to improve your culture.

Medical Laboratories – Culture Assessment Tool

The Culture Assessment Tool allows you to survey your organization to see what dimensions of culture are strong, and what would benefit from improvement efforts.
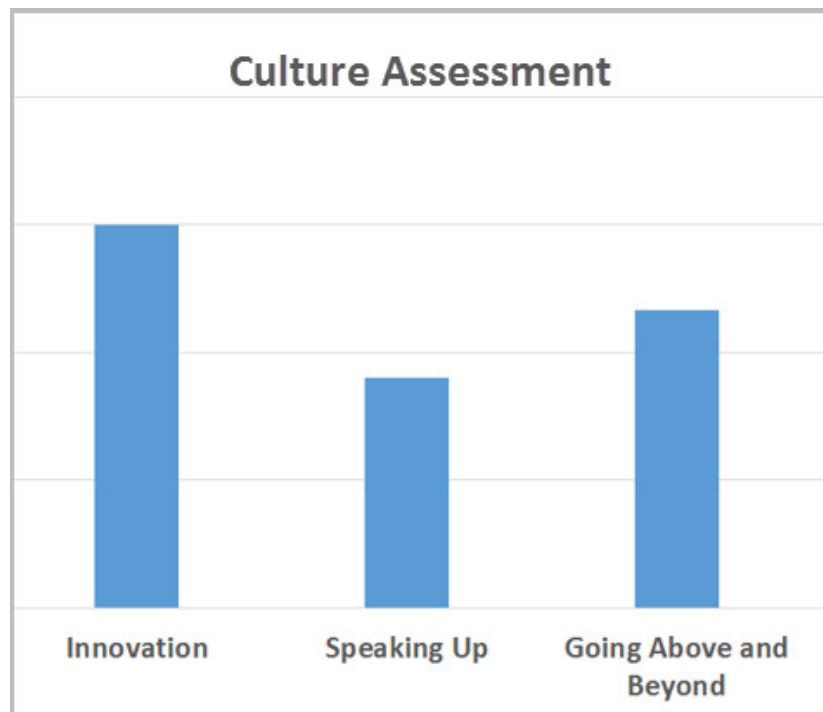
Sample output of Culture Assessment Tool

Later in the course we will explain how this tool can be used to assess quality culture, and improve it.

See the sections of this course entitled "Applying the Change Levers" and "Project Steps for Influencing Culture."

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Summary

Here is a summary chart of the seven dimensions:

Dimension of Culture	❌ Does Not Support Quality	✅ Supports Quality
Innovation	• Go along with status quo • Resist change out of fear	• Question assumptions • Seek to improve from status quo
Speaking Up	• Don't speak up about issues • Create workarounds to cumbersome processes without speaking up about the problems • Defer to hierarchy • Avoid conflict	• Speak up when processes are cumbersome and will likely result in a workaround • Work to remove obstacles from processes that make them cumbersome • Share expertise regardless of rank • Face and resolve conflict
Going Above and Beyond	• Do the minimum to meet external requirements	• Maximize efficiency and quality
Transparency	• Hide or stay silent about errors	• Report and escalate errors
Process Orientation	• Focus on individual and who is to blame • "Who did it?" • Shallow investigation • Quick, short-term fixes	• Focus on process • "How did it happen?" • Thorough investigation • Long-term fixes
Teamwork and Involvement	• Top-down decision making • "Cog-in-the-machine" attitude among staff • "I do what I'm told"	• Collaborative decision making • Staff are curious, energetic and aware; they take responsibility for results
Risk Awareness	• Focus on immediate task without maintaining awareness of risks • Ascribe events to "random error"	• Proactively look for risks in the environment • Stop testing when a QC failure or PT anomaly surfaces

Rituals and Programs

Culture can be enhanced by rituals and programs.

Rituals may include things like:
- Laboratory Huddles
- Management by Walking Around (MBWA)

Programs may include things like:
- CAP's Laboratory Accreditation Program
- CAP's ISO 15189 program
- Lean
- Press-Ganey HPI (Healthcare Process Improvement) program

Huddles

A huddle is a short, stand-up meeting, held daily, that involves posting metrics on a visual display and reporting status in a concise form.

The purposes of the huddle are to:
- Spread awareness of current issues that may impact safety and quality
- Prioritize problems and assign resources
- Solicit support across the team, and between teams

Here is a document that provides more detail on developing a huddle program.

Developing a Clinical Laboratory Huddle Program

Consider the cultural messages that huddles send:
- It is important to take time to focus on quality
- Staff of all levels in the laboratory need to collaborate to solve problems
- If there are problems, there is no shame in making them visible
- The focus is not on fixing blame but on addressing the process cause

Joe Rutledge on transparency and huddles

The particular routines within the huddle can also shape culture.

- "Celebration and Safety Stories" – If you make this a regular part of the huddle, you will reward a focus on safety and transparency.

- Issues Check – When asking for issues or problems, you can go around and look at each person in the group individually, with eye contact, and say, "Any issues with you, Sally?" This will communicate the seriousness of this reporting step. It reinforces openness and transparency.

Mary Fountas on getting staff to speak up

If, when a person raises or reports an issue, you say, "Excellent, thank you, good to know," that communicates acceptance and support.

Huddles provide an important venue for interaction between staff and management.
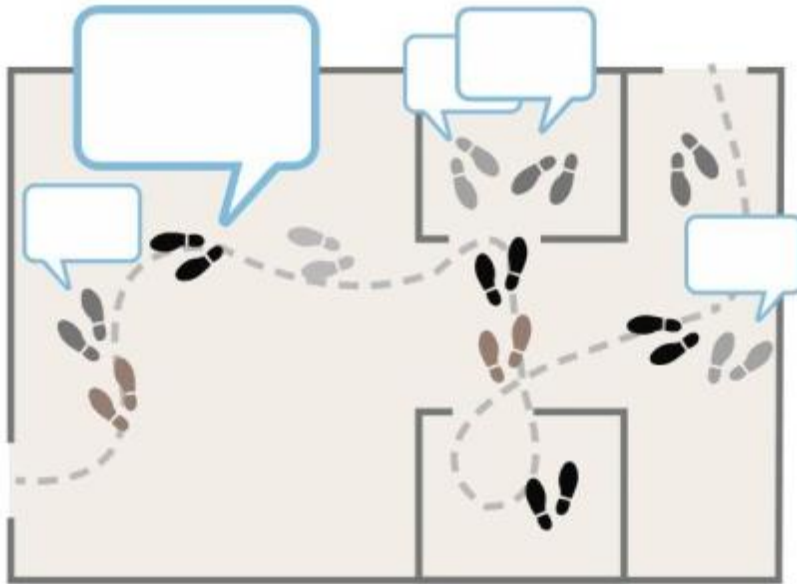

Mary Fountas on using huddles to increase engagement

Management by Walking Around (MBWA)

This refers to the practice of wandering around, in an unstructured manner, through the workplace(s), at random times, to check with employees, equipment, or on the status of ongoing work.

It helps if this is done on a regular basis.

Don't limit the interactions to work-related conversations. Include casual conversations. Chat with people. Ask about items the employee has up in his/her cube – e.g., sports pictures, family pictures.

The point is to:
- Break down barriers
- Reduce the distance between staff and leadership
- Help them feel comfortable talking to you as a colleague, as an equal

If leadership does this, employees will feel more comfortable opening up when there is a real issue.

They won't feel like they need to hide things; this means you'll address problems more thoroughly and quickly.

Don't make your employees come to you. Go to them. Minimize the distance that separates staff and leadership.

Minimize or eliminate the perception that leadership is aloof and superior.

Mary Fountas on why facetime saves time

Deborah Miller-Jones on the night shift and appreciation

David Wolfe on building trust with employees

Programs

Leadership's choice of major programs for the laboratory can change culture. For example:

- CAP Laboratory Accreditation Program
- CAP's ISO 15189 program
- Lean
- Press-Ganey HPI (Healthcare Process Improvement) program

Vipul Trivedi on the impact of ISO 15189 on culture

Each of these programs demands new behaviors, and is based on specific values.

Program	Cultural Values It Promotes and Requires
CAP Laboratory Accreditation Program / CAP Checklists	• Going above and beyond – being on the cutting edge of laboratory testing and technology • Dedication to customer satisfaction • Attention to detail in specimen collection, handling, and reporting
CAP's ISO 15189 program	• Prevention of problems – risk awareness • Tracing problems to their root cause and solving them permanently • Focusing on process causes; not blaming people • Studying the work flow; learning why things happen • Integration of different departments; working together to solve problems • Empowering front line technologists in voicing and solving problems • Continual improvement
Lean	• Efficiency and eliminating waste • Neat and orderly workplace • Providing value and on-demand service to customer • Thorough investigation of problems – going to the source of problems • Data focus – visual display of data; reliance on data • Problem-solving rigor • Safe and defect-free flow of work
Press-Ganey HPI (Healthcare Performance Improvement) program	• Complete reporting of mistakes, near misses, and potential problems • Investment of time by leaders in relationships with those who report to them – e.g., facetime with staff

Visible Leader Actions

Leaders are signal generators. Their words and actions send signals.
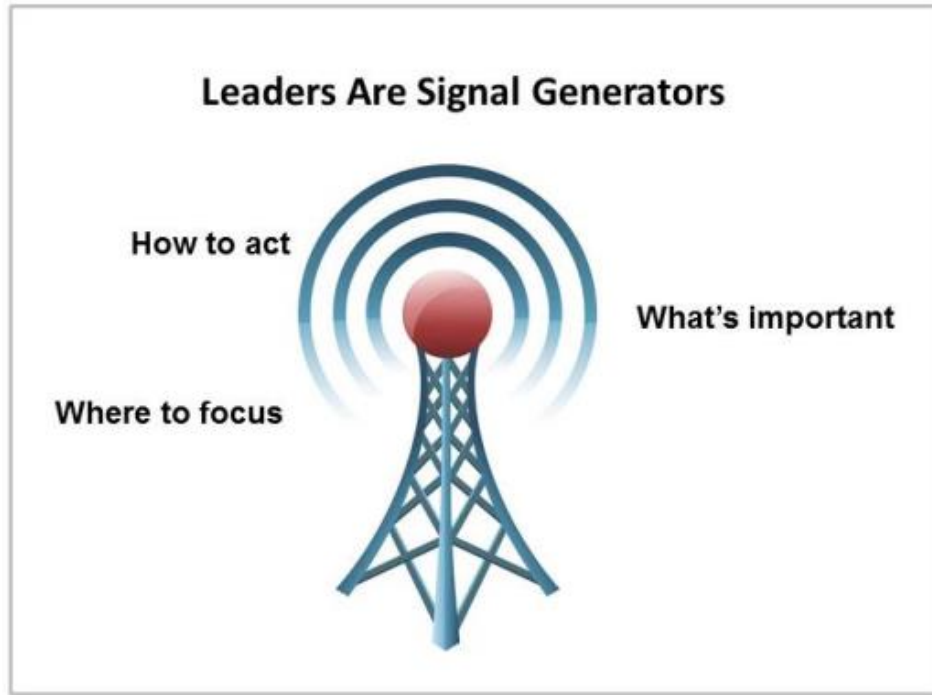
Top-level leadership can influence culture in a number of ways:
- Modeling
- Decisions where core values are at stake
- Stated messages
- Personal behavior

Modeling

Leaders are constantly teaching and influencing by their actions.

When laboratory directors openly discuss problems or near-misses in a non-judgmental, problem-solving way, they model transparency.

Gerry Thomas on transparency and leaders

Decisions Where Core Values Are at Stake

When decisions must be made, employees tend to ask, "What would my boss do in this situation?"

For this reason, it's important to lead visibly to help people learn to make the right trade-offs. Leaders have to uphold cultural values, even when it's hard.

Example 1: Stop Testing

Stopping testing when QC is out, or investigating when the laboratory learns of a PT failure, communicates the following:
- Every employee is an inspector
- It's important to inspect, stop, and fix at the source
- Don't pass on defects
- Stop the line to prevent defects, and make improvements

Example 2: Intervening with Individuals

It is important for leaders to intervene when an individual or group is refusing to adhere to the values the laboratory has adopted. This may mean coaching, corrective counseling, or other consequences. If the core values really matter, leadership will not just look the other way when they are violated.

Example 3: Funding Projects

Leaders reinforce values when they allocate resources that are necessary, such as funding the development of an occurrence management tracking system.

Example 4: Choosing Whom to Promote

Promotions are visible signals of what behavior is valued and rewarded within a laboratory. Ask: "Does this person embody the values and culture we are trying to create?"

Stated Messages

While actions ultimately speak louder than words, it is important for laboratory leaders to regularly speak about the values they want the laboratory to embody, and the kind of culture and work environment they are trying to create.

It is powerful to hear a leader voice messages such as the following:
- "Our goal is to drive fear out of the workplace. We want to create a climate where you will not hesitate to escalate errors and problems."
    - This needs to be backed up by doing good root cause analysis.
    - If leadership stops blaming people, fear in the workplace will diminish.
- "Our philosophy is to decide carefully, and implement rapidly. We make decisions based on extensive data collection, to make sure we know the source of a problem before we jump to a solution."
    - This needs to be backed up by leadership and staff working together to dissect a problem.
    - Take the time to find out what caused the problem. Don't jump to conclusions.

Personal Behavior

Employees watch the leader's behavior closely.

For example, if a leader starts every email communication with a paragraph about continuous improvement, staff will get the message that this is a priority.