



From Macro to Uh-Oh

From Company Concept to Employee Culture... and Back Again. Stan Slap

Increase revenue. Increase margin.
Don't just make market share; take it.
Improve customer reputation. Improve
product quality. Get to market faster.

Which employee could argue with the irrefutable logic of these corporate performance strategies? In a perfect world, your own employees would immediately grasp the logic and devote themselves wholeheartedly to achieving them.

Wake up, wipe the drool from your desk and say “hi” to reality.

Want your employees to buy a new management goal? You have to know how to sell it to them. This doesn't mean selling to your employees; it means selling to your employee culture, which is a whole different proposition. “Culture” is the most overused yet least understood concept in business. The difference between understanding your employees and understanding your employee culture is the difference between whether your performance goals succeed or fail.

When they form a relationship with a company, employees become a culture. A culture is a separate organism living within your company. It has its own purpose and the power to make or break any management plan—and any manager right along with it.

Neither business logic nor management authority nor any compelling competitive urgency will convince an employee culture to adopt a corporate cause as if it were its own. In the killing field between company concept and employee commitment lay many a failed strategic plan. As a manager, this must have crossed your mind. Or crossed your legs if you really thought about it.

“Culture” is the most overused yet least understood concept in business. The difference between understanding your employees and understanding your employee culture is the difference between whether your performance goals succeed or fail.

Welcome to the Jungle

The definition of culture has been around for many hundreds of years, formed by those hardy anthropologists who once trooped through the weeds to study primitive native tribes, and it has immaculate translation to business today. Here's the bottom line: A culture is your employees' shared beliefs about the rules of survival and emotional prosperity.

Whenever people share the same basic living conditions, they band together to share beliefs about how best to survive. The more people there are looking for the safe watering hole, the safer it is for everyone. In your organization you have a group of people who all work in the same industry, for the same company, on the same team, for the same manager. They are your employee culture and their obsessive concerns are “How do I survive—in this company, on this team, working for you—and once I know I'm going to be okay, how do I get rewarded emotionally and avoid punishment?”

An employee culture isn't just self-protective. An employee culture *exists* to protect itself. Once you get this, your employee culture becomes the simplest operating system in the world. It is an information-gathering organism, designed to assure its survival. That's its own survival, not yours and not the company's. Even though it seems logical that the success of the enterprise is linked with the survival and emotional prosperity for the culture, that's not how it works.

Such thinking depends on the employee culture perceiving a reliable connection between what happens to the company and what happens to the culture.

This is rarely the case and it is rarely the culture's fault.

Because it's self-protective, an employee culture is a little crazy. Even on its best days an employee culture is neurotic and prone to hypochondria. How could it not be? It is trying to understand how to survive in an environment it can't reliably anticipate or control. On its worst days—which ironically can be some of the company's best days—it's in a snarly, hostage-taking mood. Ignore this and that decision will come back to bite you. Snippy and Pissy aren't cartoon characters; it is your employee culture under pressure.

“A culture is your employees' shared beliefs about the rules of survival and emotional prosperity.”

Mystery Achievement

Here are three things you can do right now to increase the commitment of your employee culture:

→ **GIVE YOUR EMPLOYEE CULTURE ENERGY**

A culture has an extraordinary need for energy, which it uses to defend itself in a world it cannot reliably anticipate or control. Demand whatever energy you need, but be sure to replenish it as you go, because your employee culture's energy translates into its flexibility, resilience, commitment and productivity.

1. GIVE YOUR CULTURE CONTEXT: WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

- Revisit company decisions made and unmade with your culture.
- Don't focus context exclusively on revenue goal. Once they've met it, who are they?

2. GIVE YOUR CULTURE PREDICTABILITY: WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

- Provide simple rules for living: always do this and never do that and you will be safe. Even if you make the wrong decision, you were trying to do it the right way.

- Hold predictability drills: Here's where we need to go and here's how we'd handle a variety of circumstances along the way.

3. GIVE YOUR CULTURE A SENSE OF SELF: WHO AM I AS PART OF THIS COMPANY?

- Help to answer, "What do you do?" This is a question that members of your culture have to answer constantly to people they've just met.
- Help to answer, "What did you do today?" This is a question that members of your culture have to answer constantly to the people whom they know best.

→ GIVE YOUR EMPLOYEE CULTURE PERSPECTIVE

An employee culture doesn't hate change. It hates the loss of the known rules of survival and emotional prosperity that change represents. Even good, logical change produces anxiety, and the culture moves to stop or slow the change.

1. GIVE YOUR CULTURE PERSPECTIVE

- Explain what isn't changing at the same time you introduce what is—this is who we have always been; this is who we will always be.

2. LET THE CULTURE SELL IT TO THE CULTURE

- Don't go for mass buy-in. Sell to early adopters first and let them sell it for you.

→ GIVE YOUR EMPLOYEE CULTURE BELIEVABILITY

The purpose of communicating to your employee culture is to persuade, not to inform. Keep it heartfelt, empathetic and free of management buzz lexicon. Acknowledge the culture's natural cynicism rather than pretending it doesn't or shouldn't exist. Cynicism doesn't mean your employee culture doesn't care; it means it hurts to care.

The best way of communicating to an employee culture is to get it to communicate to itself. A message from the culture to the culture has more credibility than anything you send from your position outside of it. To do this, deliberately create cultural legends that speak on your behalf.

1. RESPECT THE CYNICYSM

- Don't be intimidated by a cynical reaction to corporate communication. Acknowledge it rather than pretending it doesn't exist; this will help move your culture to optimistic.

2. DECLARE WHAT YOU STAND FOR

- Make your standards, intentions and point of view very clear to set context for our actions.

3. DO SOMETHING TO PROVE YOU MEAN IT

- Take significant, provocative, exaggerated action to support what you say is most important, including advocating it relentlessly, protecting it under threat and reinforcing support for it. This will create a legend for your employee culture: a clear link between what you say and what you do that serves as a proof point about how it should align its own actions to stay safe in your world.

The Culture's Vision Statement: Keep A Wary Eye On You

You can't bribe, bluff or bully an employee culture into sustainably doing anything. You can't tell the culture what to believe. You can't stop it from existing. But you can take comfort from knowing that an employee culture is the utmost rational system: agnostic and objective about everything except its own survival. And it isn't static—it is focused on survival, so it must remain constantly open to receiving and evaluating new information.

Based on its own perceptions, an employee culture rarely does anything illogical or unpredictable. It's not asking for motivational fairy tales. It is asking for management demands to be embedded with respect for what is most important to the culture. And while an employee culture is naturally suspicious, it isn't naturally hostile to business goals. Your employee culture wants to do the right thing. It believes that the right thing is to protect itself. Don't fight this; honor it. Do this and you're on the way to the culture linking its own protection to protection of the business.

“Your employee culture wants to do the right thing. It believes that the right thing is to protect itself. Don't fight this; honor it.”

The Cost And Effect

There are many bad decisions a company can make, but few that can't be made good by an employee culture's decision to course-correct it. There are many good decisions that a company can make, but few that can't be made great by an employee culture's decision to protect it and promote it to customers with its own good name. You can't sell it outside if you can't sell it inside.

Your own employee culture will give you everything you want, but you have to give it what it wants first. This is the difference between defiance and compliance and, once you know how, it won't cost you much to do. Not doing it will cost you plenty.

Deeper than the bottom line

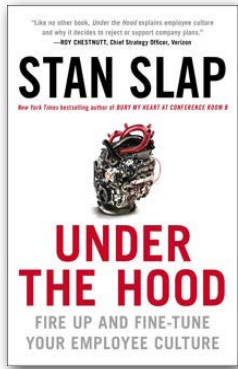
Knowing how your employee culture works and how to work it can be the pivotal difference between career success and failure—or between success and extreme success. But this isn't simply about your company or your career.

Culture is where the humans gather in business. As a manager you have constant, lingering impact on the members of your employee culture, inside and outside of work. You intimate whether they are worthy of inspiration or indifference; your actions color their prevailing view of the world as secure or anxious. You are a role model of how the privilege of authority can be used for better or worse.

A person made to feel small on the job doesn't stay on the job. You have the agency to decide if you want treat what is most important to these humans with disinterest and depress their sense of who they are and what they deserve. It's also up to you to decide if you want treat them with the honor that humans have earned regardless of their position in the hierarchy of an enterprise, and elevate their sense of who they are.

An employee culture's profound search for safety and meaning is a reminder that we all inhabit the same world; we all have these same concerns. **Treating your employee culture with empathy, concern and respect is not a performance tactic or a job responsibility. It is a mirror that reflects your own true humanity.** 📖

Info



BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of [Under the Hood](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Stan Slap is president of the international consulting company SLAP, renowned for achieving maximum commitment in manager, employee, and customer cultures. His work has produced legendary impact for a who's who of successful companies—the kind that don't include "Patience" on their list of corporate values. He is the author of the New York Times bestseller *Bury My Heart at Conference Room B*. He lives in San Francisco.

→ **SEND THIS** | [Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

→ **SUBSCRIBE** | [Sign up for e-news](#) to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

This document was created on March 18, 2015 and is based on the best information available at that time. The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA. Cover image from [Veer](#). You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.

About ChangeThis

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

800ceoread

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).