

# LEADING A CHURCH THROUGH CULTURE CHANGE

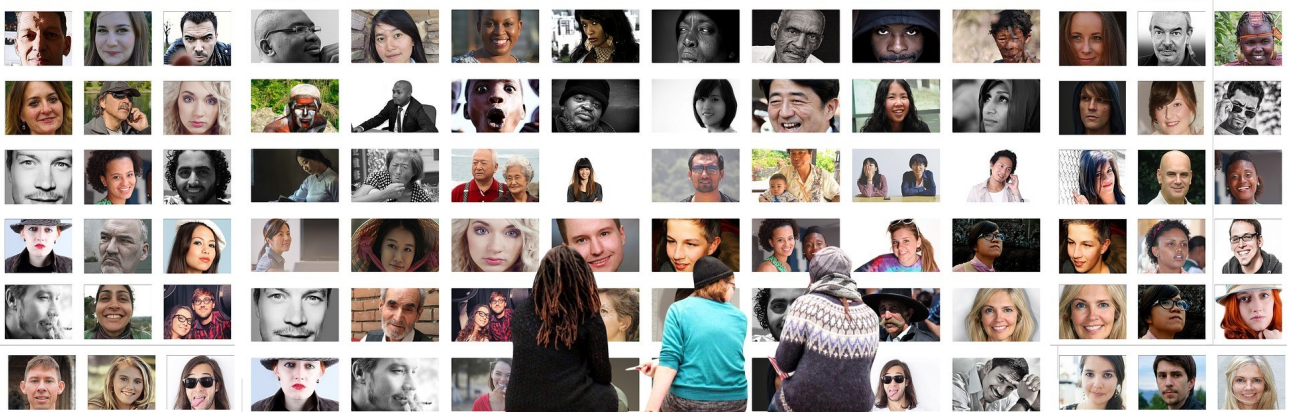
BY ADRIAN BEAVIS

Go to any conference or course on leadership and you will hear one word almost immediately and very often – ‘vision’. Whilst whole conferences are given over to ‘vision’ and ‘turning vision to action’ comparatively little attention is given to one of the main reasons visions (even the most electrifying, kingdom-building, Christ-centred visions) get derailed and fail – the problem of ‘culture’. A vision to ‘welcome in the broken’ will die in a culture suspicious of newcomers. A vision ‘to reach the missing generations’ will struggle in a culture resistant to change. The vision may be beautiful but unaddressed cultural issues obstructing (or in some cases working against) it may mean it never gets off the ground.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

It has been defined as simply, ‘the way things are done around here’. It is often unquestioned and, like the smell of our own house, unnoticed by those who feel most at home. To go further, culture is the atmosphere created by ‘the way we do things around here’ (in our worship, fellowship, groups, discussions of big issues and so on) that creates the environment which helps or hinders the mission of God and our specific local vision to be faithful to it.

Vision is, of course, vitally important. A strong vision that has been collectively discerned by the leadership, with input from as wide group as possible, is a vital first step and will act as an anchor and guide when challenges (not just cultural) come. But if it becomes clear that cultural issues are working against the vision and mission and need to be addressed then the exciting job of casting vision must be accompanied by the equally important but slow, painstaking job of culture change.





## DIAGNOSING THE CULTURE OF THE CHURCH

Because culture is like the air we breathe, it is often most clearly noticed by newcomers and visitors. That is why a new minister or leader can often quickly discern the culture of a church – whether people arrive early or late; whether regulars stay around after the service to connect; whether newcomers are left on their own or quickly included; whether comments are made about the way people dress or who look different; whether new ideas are greeted with enthusiasm or suspicion. In many ways little signals flag up the unspoken culture of a church.

In one of my first services as new vicar, a long-standing member apologised for a homeless person in the service ('They should behave better in church!') and another asked why I spent so long talking to visitors. 'You seem too concerned with people outside the church.' After a few other incidents I could see that although 'Welcoming people from all backgrounds' was a core value, laminated on our notice-board, our culture was actually unwelcoming.

This was unintentional, and people were unaware – they had a strong desire to be welcoming (the 'Welcoming All' value was enthusiastically adopted) and would have been horrified to think they were unwelcoming – but the culture worked against our value.

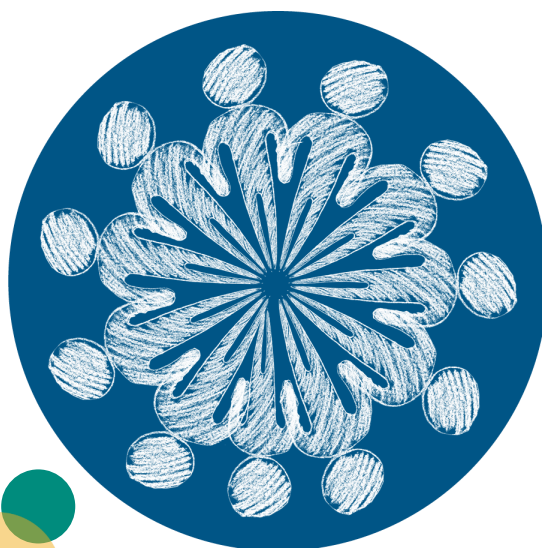
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Once unhelpful and unhealthy parts of a church culture are diagnosed – whether being unwelcoming, resistant to change, critical, disunited – the slow work of culture change needs to take place. Why is culture change so slow?

Partly, because we are often unconscious and unaware of our culture, we can be unwilling to accept the diagnosis of an unhealthy culture. But, just as important, culture is reinforced in many subtle ways – from the church programme, to values of key leaders, to what is prioritised and publicised, to how things are celebrated – so culture change only happens when addressed on many different levels, consistently and deliberately over many months and (often) years.

Culture change needs to be addressed through:

- **Teaching** – explaining why, biblically, an authentically Christian, Christ-centred church will have a culture of (for example) welcome to outsiders, care for the broken, evangelism to the lost, passionate worship of God, commitment to one another, care for the needy. Acts 2.42-47 is an obvious template for a New Testament model of Church. Importantly, addressing cultural issues must happen not just on Sundays, but be reinforced in midweek teaching, and perhaps most crucially, with key leaders, including church councils.
- **Modelling** – we need to show, as leaders, why this value is important to us. Not just in our teaching but in how we live. Spending time and praying with the homeless man who had heckled in our service did more to show a culture of welcome than a hundred sermons. Helping at the Foodbank and Night Shelter will address a culture of indifference to the poor by not only showing what it looks like but also that it really is important to us.
- **Celebrating** – we model the new culture, and move the glacier of culture change a bit quicker, when we highlight and celebrate glimpses of that new culture emerging. If we are addressing a culture that struggles to reach out, then



make it a priority to celebrate those who share their faith and invite their friends to church, and highlight testimonies of those who come to faith. The equally important, but opposite, task is not celebrating or highlighting things, activities, or people that work against the new culture.

- **Appointments** – this could be for paid or volunteer positions of leadership. If you are fortunate to be in a church with a staff team, make 100% sure that any new staff appointed share the vision and can be champions of, and model, the new culture. This is also true for new volunteer lay leaders taking up positions of leadership – especially those who may teach, lead groups, and who join the church council. These key leaders will help speed up culture change and ensure it is long lasting (even outlasting our leadership).
- **Policing** – I find this the hardest. We must notice, flag up and (as graciously as possible) correct those who continue to work against the new culture. For example, to address a culture of resistance to change this may mean, at the beginning of a meeting, saying, 'We'll listen to every new idea, and the words "It won't work" and "We've tried this before" are banned.' If addressing a critical culture in a staff team, this may mean stopping someone from personally criticising another member. This policing may need to be public (in which case it will need to be gracious and non-personal), but often this can be done personally out of sight, but clearly addressing the issues. But if we fail to police the new culture the old culture, like weeds in the garden, will inevitably reappear and those resistant to the new culture will feel it's not really that important to us.

## CONSISTENCY OVER TIME

One thing is certain, culture change takes time. It can feel like moving a stone uphill. You feel you are making progress. Then you go on holiday and come back to find it at the bottom again.

As John Wimber used to say, 'Don't overestimate how much changes in a year, or underestimate how much changes in five!' New vision can be discerned and set in months; culture change will likely take at least three years of hard, consistent work and possibly longer for very deeply rooted problems.

However, this is work well worth doing. For just as 'an unhealthy culture eats vision for breakfast', a healthy culture gives 'food for the vision' – it will strengthen, support and sustain the godly vision we hope to see. So if culture change needs to be done, let's do it for the sake of the kingdom of God.



### FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you describe the culture of your church? How would a newcomer? How would a neighbour?
2. How can you take the cultural temperature of your church (e.g. in welcome, in neighbourhood contact, in evangelism, discipleship, worship, prayer etc.)? If you've been in the church a long time is there a newcomer, new staff member or friend who could act as culture-tester?
3. How and where are the unhealthy parts of your church culture expressed? How could these be addressed?
4. How and where are the healthy parts of culture that support and enhance the vision expressed? How can these be given more support, more space and be more celebrated?

