CULTURE NSYSTEM

TAPOVEN PROCESS FOR CREATING AN ARY TEAM CULTURE

J.P. NERBUN

CULTURE SYSTEM

A PROVEN PROCESS FOR CREATING AN EXTRAORDINARY TEAM CULTURE

J.P. NERBUN

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Some names and identifying characteristics of coaches and teams described in this book have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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To the leaders I've had the privilege to support these last five years. Our shared experiences and learnings made this book possible.



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INTRODUCTION

SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL TEAM CULTURES

MESSIAH MEN'S SOCCER NCAA DIVISION III NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS					
2000 2002 2004 2005 2006 2008	2009 2010 2012 2013 2017				

n 1997, Dave Brandt became the new head coach of the Messiah College men's soccer program. Over the previous 15 years, he had both played for and served as assistant coach alongside Messiah's long-serving founder Coach Layton Shoemaker. Since its inception in 1974, this strong Division III team had tallied 316 wins against only 96 losses and 27 ties. Like any young protégé taking over a program, Brandt wanted to take Messiah from good to great. But few could have predicted just how great they would become.

Over the next 20 years, the men's soccer team would go on to dominate their NCAA Division III, winning 11 national titles. It's worth noting that Division III has twice as many teams (400) compared to Division I but offers no athletic scholarships. Students play for the love of the game, not to keep their athletic scholarship. The story was similar on the women's side of the ledger: Coach Scott Frey would take over in 2000, and over the next 20 years they would go on to win 6 national titles. Their dominance during the decade spanning 2000 to 2010 was astonishing: the men's and women's teams would post a combined record of 472 wins and 20 ties, losing only 31 times during that period—a rate of less than one game a year.

But there was more going on than just winning. Messiah was also transforming the lives of their players. One alum would describe the impact this way: "I get scared sometimes thinking about who I would have become if I had gone anywhere else." Another alum credited the program for their continued growth to this day: "I don't think you ever stop growing from your Messiah soccer experience. I'm almost fifty years old and I'm still growing because of my time at Messiah." Nor is it just alumni who testify to the long-term impact of the Messiah culture; parents share countless stories about the influence even one semester of soccer had on their child.

At Messiah, selflessness and servant leadership aren't buzzwords. Watch a practice and you'll see seniors picking up balls and handing out water to underclassmen. All players are highly involved in service within the community and are known far and wide for their sportsmanship. Often the team will go an entire season without receiving a single yellow or red card signaling a player committed a hard foul, and yet their opponents will describe the squad as the most physically competitive team they've played. When Messiah loses the rare

game, opponents are taken aback by their genuine and thoughtful congratulations after the game.

In today's sporting culture, *family* is a buzzword players and coaches often use to describe their team, but few teams actually have relationships at the level Messiah does. Alumni describe the connections forged on the team as "the most important and lasting relationships of my life." And it's not just the players who recognize the special team chemistry. After one game the men's assistant coach overheard the opposing coach telling his team, "When someone makes a mistake or doesn't get you the ball, don't yell at him. Those guys [pointing to Messiah bench] never yell at each other. All they do is encourage each other! All they do is help one another!"

THE MESSIAH DIFFERENCE

In 2011, Messiah College's Professor of Leadership Michael Zigarelli wrote *The Messiah Method*, where he explored seven disciplines that had driven the soccer program's unprecedented success. These disciplines include "be intentional about everything" and "play to a standard"—catchphrases you might hear used by any organization.² But at Messiah these aren't just words—they are habits that are implemented and executed within every aspect of the program all year long.

In describing the seven disciplines, Zigarelli wrote something that as a culture builder myself I have come back to time and time again: "To orchestrate any one of them with consistency requires effort and expertise; to orchestrate all of them requires a master conductor."³

Most coaches are overwhelmed upon first hearing this statement, thinking to themselves, *I have to be a master conductor to build a great team culture*?! Culture often seems like an impossible task that only a few special coaches like Brandt or Frey can achieve. But when

I asked Brandt what he thought of the statement, he had a slightly different take: "In some ways, culture is very complex. But while it's big, if you approach leadership in the right way, most of it just follows or flows." Brandt understands what I've come to know to be true: with the right approach, anybody has the potential to build an exceptional culture.

One of the mistakes people make when trying to learn from exceptional cultures like the Messiah soccer program is they look for a couple of tools or a method as the explanation for their success. But it's never that simple. The "right way" to think about and approach culture is as a *system* of tools and methods—used time and time again—that empower all members of the team to make the culture what it is.

As Zigarelli writes, culture happens when "the purpose is in place, the direction is clear, the standard is obvious, and the players are held accountable to it. People can just gently remind one another of those standards to reduce the malignant conflicts and power struggles that undermine so many teams." The reason why you can't point to one discipline or habit and say, "That's it! That's why they are so successful," is because it's a series of interwoven actions done intentionally and consistently over time. When Brandt shared with me his seven-step process for building a team culture, it was no surprise to hear that the final step, number seven, was "Repeat 10,000 times."

A CULTURE OF HIGH STANDARDS AND STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

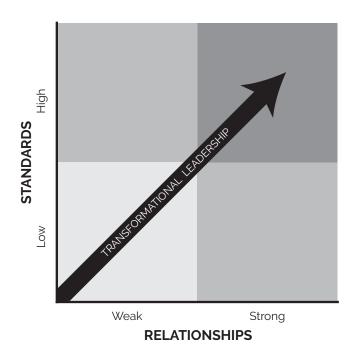
These days, nearly every organization seems to be focused on its culture. Google is known for its "cool" culture while a "champion-

ship culture" might aptly describe the New England Patriots. Other organizations aspire for a "high-performance" culture.

When trying to get coaches, athletes, employees, and business leaders to accurately describe their culture, I find myself coming back to the same two questions time and again:

- What does it *feel* like to play/work here?
- How do people do things here?

Their answers to these two simple questions turn out to reveal quite a bit about the actual culture of the organization because a team's culture is largely measured by two things. In my study of exceptional team cultures like that of Messiah's, I have found that they all have *high standards* and *strong relationships*.



First is the strength of the relationships. The more connected people feel to the group, the better the culture is. The members of the team not only perform better but enjoy their experience more, while being willing to go to exceptional lengths in order to achieve the team's goals.

Second are the standards of the program. When we establish, support, and enforce standards the right way, team members will buy in to how the standards benefit themselves and the team. They will be intrinsically motivated to take personal responsibility and uphold high standards of work ethic, attitude, competition, discipline, and respect. As a result, team cohesion will grow stronger and performance will improve, as will the results everyone desires.

Relationships and standards go hand in hand—both are dependent upon the other. A culture of high standards but weak relationships will feel like a dictatorship, while a culture of strong relationships but low standards will lead to poor results. Without relationships, standards of behavior can only be so high. And without high standards of behavior, relationships rooted in mutual respect and trust cannot be present.

THE POWER OF A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

How do high-achieving cultures like Messiah create these cultures of high standards and strong relationships? They use a *systematic* approach.

While many leaders have a goal or vision for their team culture, neither is sufficient to achieve the culture you seek. Goals and visions don't produce the results sought unless leaders implement a system that aligns and supports achieving them.

Why is that? Research has shown people do not consciously make the vast majority of their decisions. Instead, your subconscious chooses for you—upwards of 95 percent of your decisions. As James

Clear writes in *Atomic Habits*, "If you're having trouble changing your habits, the problem isn't you. The problem is your system. Bad habits repeat themselves again and again not because you don't want to change, but because you have the wrong system for change." 5

An organization's culture is made up of the unconscious behaviors of its members. Thus to change its culture it is not enough to consciously set goals and articulate a vision.

You have to change the system upon which the culture rests.

The problem isn't merely subconscious, either. Even your conscious mind winds up facing decision fatigue from having to make thousands of decisions each day. Leaders quickly become exhausted and stressed by the responsibility of constantly having to

You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.

-James Clear

motivate others, engage in difficult conversations, and hold people accountable.

Using a systems approach considerably lessens the mental fatigue of making thousands of decisions by reducing the number of decisions needed. Systems—decision strategies—help make it easier to do what is most important.

One remarkable example of a successful systems approach can be found in the Toyota Motor Corporation. Since World War II, Toyota has become the most successful car manufacturing company of all time. Just look at their record of accomplishments in just the last 15 years alone (2004–2018):

Profit: Toyota was the most profitable car company during this span, clearing \$180 billion in profits during this time and outpacing both Honda (\$75 billion) and Volkswagen (\$37 billion). In fact, the combined profits of Honda, Ford, Volkswagen, and GM (who posted a loss) of \$125 billion still fell short of Toyota's.⁶

Dependability: Toyota has more honors and awards for dependability from JD Power than any other company (some years winning almost 60 percent of their top awards).

Quality: The Lexus (made by Toyota) and Toyota brands have the #1 and #2 world rankings for quality by Dashboard Light.

Longevity: Six of the top 14 vehicles Americans keep for over 200,000 miles are Toyota.

Not only is Toyota wildly successful by almost any measure, but it's been recognized as one of the world's best companies to work for and viewed as a model for management success that other organizations spanning fields as diverse as healthcare, government, retail, production, sports, and even the military have tried to replicate.

Toyota's success can be credited to two things: the first is the Toyota Way, a leadership philosophy comprising the company's mission, vision, and values. As mentioned earlier, a lot of companies have compelling and inspirational visions and values. What ensures Toyota can put it into practice is an *intentional system*. At Toyota, this is the Toyota Production System (TPS). It's difficult to overstate the impact of the TPS (what the industry now calls *lean manufacturing*) on the rest of

the world. It hasn't just led to Toyota's success—it's quite literally the reason why a company like Amazon became the giant they are today.

In the second edition of his bestselling classic *The Toyota Way*, Jeffrey Liker explains how the TPS is both a *mechanical* and *organic* system. A mechanical system uses a top-down leadership structure to implement tools, methods, and procedures, while an organic system uses a flat organizational structure to connect everyone to a shared purpose, drive high engagement at all levels, and create an adaptable learning organization. Liker argues the companies who are unsuccessful at implementing the TPS typically apply it in a mechanical way, focusing exclusively on the tools and methods while ignoring the organic aspects of every culture, where people and challenges are continuously changing.

It's helpful to think of creating a successful culture as less like building a house and more like tending a garden. While a gardener uses a variety of mechanical tools, the process is very organic. A good gardener anticipates and prepares for changes in weather, and depending on the environment and what they are growing, they plant, cultivate, and harvest at different times. It's systematic without being rigid—a system for operating that offers guidance while being flexible.

THE CULTURE SYSTEM

Over the last few years, I've helped coaches build their own Culture Operating System (Culture OS). Like Messiah College's soccer program, the Culture OS provides tools and methods to systematically raise standards and strengthen relationships. Like the TPS, it is both mechanical and organic. And now I've put it all down on the page for everyone to be able to access.

The Culture OS I offer in this book draws on ideas and research from some of the best minds in psychology, philosophy, neuroscience,

and organizational culture. The tools and methods come from some of the best leaders and organizational cultures in the world. You'll learn from a comedian, Navy ship captain, an airline, a car company, a community court system, and from coaches from across the globe.

But the Culture OS is much more than just a bunch of good ideas. After over a decade of coaching and implementing these ideas with my teams, I pivoted to direct my energies toward helping coaches at all levels and sports implement these strategies in ways that work for their teams. It's been an extraordinary experience to work intimately with over 100 coaches and their teams. You'll hear some of their stories as well.

Culture is complex and varies from team to team. And within each team it's always changing. But this book is about how to lead through all the complexity and change, offering coaches a system they can adapt to their circumstances year in and year out.

For that reason, the Culture OS does *not* provide solutions, but instead gives coaches and their team members the tools to find solutions. As you gain more experience with this system, like any good gardener, you will learn how to anticipate problems, improvise, and eventually develop and refine your own Culture OS.

The book is specifically designed to help you to organize the tools and methods that by themselves would be overwhelming. As New England Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick recognized early in his career, "The key to success was in being organized. The less time you wasted, the better a coach you were."

To simplify matters further, each chapter is equipped with one more powerful tool. A 2009 study showed over half of all surgery complications were avoidable if this tool was implemented. The WHO did a worldwide study using the same tool. The intervention reduced

infections by 66 percent and mortality by half, saving over 1,500 lives and 75 million dollars.

What was the intervention?

A checklist.

Essentially, the Culture OS is a series of checklists to help you track implementation and stay consistent. It will help you stay organized with structures as you work to implement its many strategies to create a unique culture for your team. The Culture OS allows you to identify issues early, respond with appropriate strategies, train team members with the necessary skills, and reinforce the right behaviors. It allows you to focus your energy on introducing new habits and raising the standards. But most of all, a Culture OS optimizes the environment where the right behaviors (meeting the standards) take less willpower, self-control, and motivation from individuals, freeing you up to pursue excellence.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK



There's a saying in racing: a car is only as good as its driver. As the driver of the Culture OS, you need to work on yourself first. Thus,

Part 1 focuses on the driver— you as the leader and your philosophy. Through the lens of transformational leadership, you'll create your *leadership manifesto*, which includes your mission, vision, values, and personal disciplines. You won't just have a clear philosophy; you'll have a *Leadership* Operating System (Leadership OS) to make sure your philosophy isn't just aspirational or cliché but becomes a reality.

In Parts 2, 3, and 4, you'll pivot and learn how to implement your Culture OS by *establishing*, *supporting*, and *enforcing* your unique culture. To create a Culture OS, you need to clearly and continuously *establish* your standards as you build relationships, *support* those standards as you nurture your relationships, and *enforce* those standards in a way that honors those relationships. Each chapter starts with a story to illustrate the concept and ends with an example of the concept being applied by leaders I've supported through my mentorship and consulting business TOC Culture Consulting. At the end of each chapter, you'll receive Monthly Checklists and Yearly Checklists (as appropriate), which will be combined to create your Leadership or Culture OS.

You can also download the free printable Leadership and Culture OS PDF at myculturesystem.com, which includes the Leadership Manifesto Template, 12 Month Culture Checklist, and a Monthly Checklist.

There are undoubtedly other ways to build a great team culture, but this book is about the best way I know. Regardless of your team's sport or level, this approach will effectively strengthen your team's connections, raise their standards, and improve your performance. As a leader, you can return to this book season after season and experience less stress and more fulfillment as you continue to grow an extraordinary culture.

Transformational Leadership

- Mission Statement
- □ Vision Statement
- □ Core Values
- □ Personal Disciplines

Establish Culture

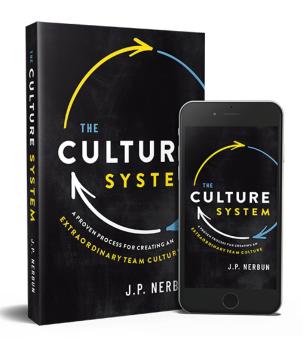
- □ Onboarding Program
- Non-Negotiables
- □ Team Manifesto
- □ Player Improvement Plans
- □ Captains' Council

Support Culture

- □ Team Culture Days
- Motivational Conversations
- □ Issues List
- Standard Reviews
- □ EARN
- □ Connect and Correct

Enforce Culture

- □ Celebrate Behaviors
- Natural Consequences
- □ Progressive Consequences
- □ Restorative Consequences
- □ Remove Culture Killers



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