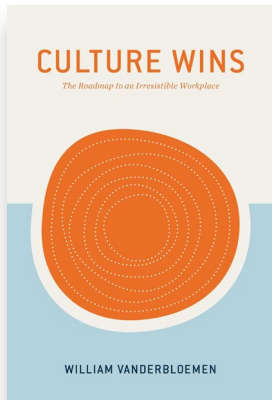


# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Culture Wins

### THE SUMMARY

Avery 2018

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#### Introduction: The Power of Culture

This book was an accident.

Team culture is usually an accident, but it doesn't have to be. Over the years, I've learned that there is a path to a winning culture, and it's a path that creates an irresistible workplace and a winning business.

Culture trumps your business idea. Culture trumps your strategic plan. Culture even trumps the competency of your team.

Culture wins—but it doesn't have to be accidental.

In 2015, I was traveling for work and staying in a hotel in Baltimore when I received a phone call. It was from someone from *Entrepreneur* magazine. I knew some people at my company had taken some kind of survey, and the call was about the results of the survey.

Turns out, we won best company culture in the whole country.

I was stunned. According to what the man told me, my little business didn't win the award for the best culture at companies just in the city of Houston or the state of Texas, or all faith-based organizations; we were selected from all the businesses in America. I was dumbfounded. I thought for sure an award like that would go to a high-tech firm in Silicon Valley, a place with Ping-Pong tables and all-you-can-eat buffets for the employees.

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After that, we won more awards and landed on more lists, including *Entrepreneur's* Top 5 Company Cultures, in 2015 and 2016, and *Houston Business Journal's* Best Places to Work, in 2015 and 2016.

I started the business with no investors, no venture capital, and no debt, and I didn't plan on hiring anyone to help me. Somehow, over the years, the firm grew to forty employees. Now people want to come to my company. They come here, they love working here, and most of them stay. The people who work for me aren't just employees; they're "family." That's a term I learned that refers to people who feel like friends *and* family in a healthy culture. In a healthy culture, the people who work with you aren't your coworkers—they're your *family*. My employees stay longer than what I have come to see as the average tenure at a job, especially for people their age, even though some of them could find better paying jobs. They don't join the company to hang out with their family, though. They work hard. I have employees who come in earlier and stay later than I do because they love the company and they love the work.

This book is for any leader who's wondering why it's harder to find and keep good people, and why employees stay for shorter stints and leave more frequently. That's a problem that's only going to get worse in the coming years.

This book is also written for CEOs who are looking at how they're going to attract and retain a workforce now and in the next decade because there's a tsunami coming.

Culture is changing and will continue to change, but you can't sit back and wait for the waves to settle. The tsunami's coming, whether you prepare for it or not, and it's time to get your feet wet. The best place to start is by looking at what companies like mine and others are doing to create an irresistible workplace where culture wins. Companies don't create culture wins by writing their values on a piece of paper and hanging it on the wall.

Values, behaviors, and everything else that comprises my company's culture evolved organically as the company grew and as more people came on board. We're still learning and improving, and I expect we always will be. But our culture comes from within, and it's driven throughout the entire organization. It's not a culture introduced to every new hire and then forgotten; it continues through the life cycle of every employee, from day one to the day he or she chooses to leave.

## SECTION I: GREAT TEAMS KNOW THEIR PULSE

### Chapter 1: Why Culture Will Win in the Next Ten Years

Thinking about culture starts with figuring out *why* you're doing something. What's the reason behind what you do? Before you can define your cultural values, you first have to define why the company exists. What does it bring to the world? If my company went away tomorrow, would it matter? Would the world notice if it disappeared?

When I got that call telling me my company had won the best-culture award, I wondered how we had

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won out of all the other great companies out there. Bay Area tech companies were attracting tens of thousands of employees, and they had racquetball courts, yoga classes, and all the food you could eat. Here we were, this little start-up. We were thirty people crammed into five thousand square feet in an office barely a step above the slum status. When I hired people, they got an IKEA desk and they had to build it. Don't laugh—it's true. Somehow, that didn't matter to my people, because they were happy to be there. We were all happy to be there because we had an irresistible culture.

You don't have to be a giant company to have a great culture.

You don't have to be in the tech industry, or located in Silicon Valley, or have tens of thousands of employees or a Ping-Pong table. You have to commit to building and being part of a family that embraces what you're trying to accomplish and how you're going to get there.

Culture will look different at each workplace and there's only one cardinal rule: you have to be agile. Agility will allow your culture to bend, swerve, and survive in this climate of rapid change. If you aren't agile, you'll be left behind. That's the *why* behind culture—why your company's success in the coming decade begins with a great culture. You can't just tack it on to what you're doing right now. Culture starts with a healthy foundation upon which you build.

## Chapter 2: Foundation for a Healthy Workplace

I learned you can't build a healthy culture on a shaky foundation, and you can't be complacent and expect your company's culture to remain healthy without regular maintenance and occasional intervention. A healthy culture is reflected in how people view the company, the work, and one another—and in how they treat one another. To get an idea of where your organization stands on the culture front, ask yourself these questions:

- Question 1: Is there a basic code of human decency?
- Question 2: Do people like working here?
- Question 3: Are the best people (not slackers) referring their friends to work at the company?
- Question 4: Do people trust the leadership of the organization?
- Question 5: Are people communicating with one another at work?
- Question 6: How much are you collaborating?
- Question 7: Are you innovating, or working the way you always have?

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- Question 8: Are employees supported with the tools they need to do what they need to get done?
- Question 9: Do people take responsibility and ownership for their work?
- Question 10: Space matters. Do people like the space they're in?
- Question 11: Is there alignment between the service you provide and the organization's values?
- Question 12: Does your organization have *sustained* high turnover?
- Question 13: Does your company actively encourage and reward you for taking care of your non-work life?

## Chapter 3: Our Kind of Crazy

When my firm started winning company culture awards, we reverse-engineered our development, asking ourselves what we did, and are still doing, that makes us who we are. What makes our company unique and defines "our kind of crazy"? How did we get here?

To get that point, you have to figure out what your own kind of crazy is. You need to know this so you can communicate it to potential new hires and for other reasons. At Vanderbloemen Search Group, we began to define our kind of crazy with a mission statement focused on values.

When we were developing our mission statement, we started with what our culture already was. While I was figuring out what made our company unique and successful, I stumbled upon a great question. I haven't heard it anywhere else but have used it since then to help organizations figure out their culture. I looked at our team and asked them: "When we're functioning at our very best, what do we do that's common to our organization but uncommon in traditional companies?"

You can figure out your existing culture, and what your people want the culture to be, through internal surveys, input, and feedback. As we established particular traits that identified my company's culture, we wrote them on oversized Post-it notes and hung them on the walls. We asked for feedback and people started writing what they thought about these ideas right on the Post-its, and then they started adding their own. Over six months our values were culled from the people who spend every day doing the work that made us successful and unique. These values became part of our mission.

Once you and your staff have established your culture, you have to document it somehow. You codify your culture by writing it. Once you've documented your values, you have to live them. You need to find ways to start living out the culture you've defined in every phase of the organization. Companies winning at culture have made it more than a poster on the wall, words on white paper, or a presentation slide deck. They spread culture and make it a living, breathing part of every phase of an employee's life cycle.

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## SECTION II: GREAT TEAMS SPREAD CULTURE

### Chapter 4: Great Culture, Top to Bottom

Every company I've studied that has a great culture has a leader living that culture who is totally committed to it. Many of them pose questions to themselves regularly about what they're doing to maintain a healthy culture. They also tend to formalize this to ensure it gets done.

If you're hiring the right people, you've defined the culture with your people, and you've codified it and spread it throughout your organization, you're more likely to see people living that culture early on and without being asked or reminded.

That attitude has to exist at every level. Leaders have to embody it. Spreading culture is easier with a smaller, flatter organization with fewer layers, but regardless of the size of an organization or how it's structured, everyone has to be on board with the culture. There can't be an "us and them," or a different set of rules for employees and management.

The more the leader lives out the culture, the more employees will follow suit. If the leader embodies, pushes and champions the culture, while participating with the employees by being visible and accessible, the culture will thrive.

As a leader, living out your company's values should feel natural. It shouldn't feel unnatural or forced, and if it's not natural, then either the values are wrong or you, as the leader, are wrong for the company. If the leader doesn't match the cultural values, one of those two things is out of place.

Also, not every culture is a good fit for every employee, and you can have people working for you who don't like the culture. However, the majority of your employees—if they've been involved in its development or have been hired with culture in mind—will enjoy being part of the family at your company, and they'll guard and protect the culture. Protecting your culture has to be an ongoing process or it will leak, but there are ways to ensure your culture remains intact.

### Chapter 5: Stop Culture Leaks

When we won the Best Places to Work award, I was amazed the award didn't go to some cool start-up you'd see on the cover of *Fast Company* or *Inc.* We're a group of ordinary people working together with a common mission. As thrilled as I was seeing my company recognized this way, I was instantly worried as well. "Oh wow, we won" quickly turned to, "Oh man, we'd better work hard or we might lose it." I was captured by some level of fear. I wondered how long our culture would last and started worrying that it would go away.

I knew the bigger we got, the harder it would be to hang on to our values and spread our culture throughout the growing company. You see, the bigger your company gets, the more opportunities there are for culture leaks. Most business leaders want their business to grow and grow fast, but

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the faster you grow and the more people you hire, the harder it will be to maintain your culture and values. As our group continues to grow, I've become hell-bent on maintaining our heavenly culture—a culture we love.

I want our business to keep growing. I want to make an impact on the world by helping churches and other organizations build their own roadmap to an irresistible workplace. In order to do that, I've come to realize we have to be willing to spend more money on culture. We have to put a larger percentage of our budget and time into it for it to work.

When I'm interviewing and hiring, I hire for the four Cs: character, competency, chemistry and culture. If you can grow your team and improve your culture at the same time, you'll never have a hiring problem, and you likely won't have a retention problem either. People will want to work for you, and they'll want to continue working for you.

## SECTION III: CULTURE PERMEATES THE EMPLOYEE LIFE CYCLE

### Chapter 6: Hire for Culture

Every time I've seen an employee who causes a culture problem at a company, I can usually draw a line straight back to a hiring problem. Cultural misfits don't just happen. The problems are usually present when you're interviewing people. Once you've got your culture figured out and it's in a healthy place and you hire around that, it's doubtful your new employee will become a cultural misfit.

A valuable lesson I've learned over the years is that chemistry is seasonal. Sometimes, when people's lives change, they may no longer fit in your company's culture. They may have fit in when they were single and didn't have relationships outside their work family, but then they got married and had kids, and their priorities changed. That's a season-of-life change, and it can go both ways. As people get older and their children move on, they may also be looking for a different type of company culture.

What does hiring for a cultural fit look like? It starts with pace. One of the top mistakes in staffing—and this is true no matter whether you're a church or business—is that people hire too quickly and fire too slowly.

They'll delay hiring new staff until they're backed against a wall, and then decide, "We've got to get somebody quick." I stress hire slowly, hire around your company culture, and make sure you take more time than necessary to make the decision. Go slowly. Take your time. Don't put off the process when you know you're going to need to bring someone in and then, hire around culture.

If you hire around culture, you will save the kind of crazy you are, and if you intentionally work toward having symmetry between the interview process and the way your work culture functions, then

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people including those who are highly talented will opt out if they don't fit. Allow people to see what they're getting into on day one. That way they won't walk down the aisle with Rachel, but wake up with Leah.

## **Chapter 7: Onboard for Culture**

Have you ever started a new job and looked forward to that first day at the office, only to quickly find that you don't have any clue what you're actually supposed to be doing?

At our company, we've built an on-boarding system that delivers a massive cultural infusion from the get-go. We begin loading people into our culture even before day one. After the hiring phase, the cultural initiation into our family is just beginning. The company's cultural values need to be driven through the entire life cycle of the employee, so once that person is in your office, you need to make sure you onboard him or her in a way that matches who you are. The massive infusion of our company's culture begins on the day a person is offered a job.

More than ever, I believe that when a company focuses on infusing culture into the on-boarding process, the quicker and more effective the process will be. That means happier employees and more cost-efficient employees.

The goal for us is to make a new hire feel part of the family within one or two weeks. One way we do this is through what we have come to call the cultural funnel. Every day, employees receive more of our culture through an automated workflow, driven by email. They receive emails from me, from their manager and their direct reports, and from others, as well as YouTube videos on how to do certain activities. We call this daily infusion the cultural funnel. It simultaneously educates and engages people so they feel more informed about and comfortable with, our company.

When our new team members have completed the on-boarding process, rather than sitting at their desks wondering what they should be doing or tiptoeing around, walking on eggshells, they already start to feel like family.

## **Chapter 8: Culture Lifestyle**

Some people prefer to show up from eight to five to do their jobs, but that attitude wouldn't work at our company. Our people have a sense of full immersion, instead of feeling and acting like they're here to do a job and go home. Real culture breeds a sense of friends and family, without isolation.

We begin our staff meetings with a core value spotlight. We tell stories that illustrate a core value someone on the team has lived out in a tangible way. We are careful to celebrate the value (not the individual).



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Every other week our “culture whip” emails an article to everyone about how to improve on a cultural value. The email has a link to a story that tells how one of *our* values is being positively implemented by another organization.

We take time during paid work hours to participate in company-wide cultural events such as everyone going to an “escape room” (to work on our value of solution-side living}. A two-hour break for fun can inspire people to work even harder the remaining hours of the day.

We require managers to spend time with their people outside of the workplace by taking them to lunches, movie nights, or team dinners. It’s important to make time to solidify that bond.

In addition to providing everyone with a gym membership, we have a trainer come in once a week to work with our team. This workout time doesn’t come at the expense of their lunch hour; instead, it’s offered as a paid time when people can practice our value of stewardship of life.

We partnered in the *UberKittens* program for a while, and my people had a blast playing with these kittens. (They could adopt a kitten if they liked.) That’s a good example of how infusing fun into your workplace, even in just a small amount of time, can pay off.

## Chapter 9: The Culture Whip

You’re probably thinking, if culture is such a winner, wouldn’t you want to ensure it is implemented properly and well guarded? How do you do that? You talk about a cultural calendar, a cultural budget, and a calendar of cultural events, but who in the world manages these events?

At my company we said, “Culture matters enough to put a focus here. In fact, it matters enough to put personnel dollars here.” We decided to have one of our employees take on the role of cultural whip and devote 30 to 40 percent of her time to culture. The job is to “whip” everyone in line with our culture through events, reading, coordinated on-boarding, and a growing list of objectives, all designed around the bet that in the end, culture wins.

If you don’t make it someone’s job to drive the culture, it won’t happen. You can’t expect people to volunteer their time on top of all their other job responsibilities, and if you expect people to do it in their free time, you will have a long wait. People are busy. If you’re serious about building and maintaining a strong company culture, I strongly advise you to create a position for it. Provide time and a budget to do it well. Put someone in the position who already lives the culture and can relate well to others in your company.

Staffing for culture costs money but the truth is that what we pay for is what we’re serious about. So if you say you’re serious, budget some dollars and make it someone’s job to whip your culture into shape. Without that person, your values will remain on paper in a file, or maybe on a wall, but your



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culture will leak. It will drift into a different place and that new culture will still end up winning the day with your team, whether or not it's the culture you want. Having a cultural whip isn't just a fun add-on; it's insurance worth buying.

## **Chapter 10: Tie Compensation to Culture**

What do you do with the person who hits all the sales numbers, has great ideas, always gets great results . . . and is a total horse's backside? It's an issue nearly every company has to face. The simple answer is you don't hire the person.

There's a strong temptation to hire the best of the best, the top talent. Remember, though, culture trumps competency. The majority of the time, problems that teams have with specific members could have been prevented if the company had done a better job hiring.

It goes beyond hiring for culture as well. One you have new hires on your team, you have to make sure they're living out the culture daily. The person who delivers phenomenal results yet drags everyone else on the team down isn't helping the bottom line. If you compensate people based solely on hitting their sales numbers or other goals, you're encouraging bad behavior. In our company, we recognized we could offset this potential issue by making culture a key part of the compensation.

To be honest, measuring culture is an area we're still figuring out. If you plan to compensate people based on culture, you need to have a very clear method for quantifying how well they live up to it.

I encourage managers, leaders, and CEOs to be intentional about how and when they give performance reviews. I strongly suggest using those reviews as opportunities to help drive culture throughout employee's lives. Drive it right through to their paychecks, which they're bound to pay attention to. While we don't live culture in our company just for the money, we're a cost-driven company. At the end of the day, we all have bills to pay and a family to feed. When you tie culture to the paycheck, people are going to pay attention. That's when culture gets real.

## **Chapter 11: Cultural Endings**

Have you ever had someone on your team who works just hard enough not to get fired? Culture can be the litmus test of whether a person whose numbers are okay but something else isn't right. The person is not coloring severely outside the lines, but everyone on the team senses something's wrong. Whatever it is, it's not clearly a fireable offense.

Hiring too quickly and firing too slowly are the biggest mistakes I've seen at companies. When you recognize someone on the team isn't cutting it, the decision to fire that person can be quick.

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Unfortunately, the *process* of firing can take some time.

Firing someone starts with a conversation to let the employee know they are on thin ice and then say why. We give our team members some time to make a change. I recommend that the disciplinary periods fall somewhere between 30-90 days. (I believe anyone can fake change for two weeks.) If the person really turns things around, that's great. My experience of true change is rare.

It's important to give employees a chance to adjust and recover any portion of the culture they're not living out. Theoretically, you've taken the time needed to hire them slowly so they can fit into the culture comfortably. When your team member begins to make changes toward improvement, check in at intervals to make sure there is a steady change in trajectory.

When you set up a personal improvement plan, be crystal clear about your expectations and intentions from the moment you initiate the PIP. It needs to be a severe enough meeting that the employee says, "Man, I need to go home and regroup." If you're not clear, the employee will probably underestimate the consequences and will not make a serious attempt to correct the problematic behavior. If people don't improve and you have to let them go, be clear that the reason is you are protecting the culture of the company.

## **Conclusion: The Future Belongs to the Cultured**

My prediction is that building culture into companies is going to become more and more important in the coming years. The millennial generation is a generation that's waiting longer to get married and start a family, made up of young people who change jobs more often than their predecessors. As these young people continue to enter the workplace, they're looking for more than a job. They're looking for a family. Leaders who figure out their culture are going to have a hiring advantage and will be able to keep people longer. If you can increase your retention by keeping people on your staff one more year, you'll benefit financially. The cost of *keeping* a good person versus *finding* another good person is very small by comparison.

According to a Gallup study, we're living in a country where two-thirds of Americans hate their jobs. What would happen if, in the future, two-thirds of Americans loved their jobs? What if people talked about their former employers as good people at great companies? What would happen if instead of having to bribe people to work for you, they were lining up outside your door saying, "Can I work for you?" That's when you'll know you're focusing on culture.

When leaders and their teams commit to creating a healthy workplace and focus on culture, they won't see it as something urgent, expensive, or even time-consuming. In the end, they'll see it as an investment that will keep their best people around, and those people will refer other great people.

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What would it be like if most people in the United States *loved* their jobs? Instead of two-thirds of the country hating their jobs, a future with happy workers would be a future with a winning economy. I hope we get to a time when, whether people stay or leave a job, they refer their friends to that company. That vision is possible, but it begins with you. It begins when you commit to figuring out what kind of crazy your company is and what kind of crazy your people are, and then driving that crazy throughout every part of your organization. If you commit to doing that, then you're making a commitment to a successful future.

Your culture has already happened likely by accident. Whether you know it or not, it is winning at your workplace. Still, by reading this book, and learning from my company's journey, you're well on your way toward creating an intentional, winning culture and a workplace that's irresistible.