

8 words that Define your Churches Culture

Creating your church's culture doesn't happen by accident. The truth is, I could walk into your church today and ask, "Why do you do that?" (*that* being a program, tradition, practice, use of terminology, etc.) and you would probably have any number of reasons for your, or your church's, behaviour. And probably buried somewhere among your answers would be, "That's just the way we do things around here." Therein lies the simplest definition of culture—***the way we do things around here.***

Unfortunately, few churches create their culture on purpose. Instead, they drift into a culture. Here are eight words to keep in mind if you want to create (or re-create) your churches culture:

1. Vision

Culture isn't completely understood without a clear vision. Vision is a future-oriented picture of what your organization *sees* or what it wants to *be*. It's your unique organizational fingerprint that describes a preferred future. My observation is that most churches underestimate the importance of vision. They whip together a catchy statement that sounds good yet lacks conviction.

The birth of true God-given vision is often a raw mixture of pain, sweat, prayer, learning, editing, reflecting, and dreaming. Because leaders have a bias toward action, the vision-formation process is often shortchanged. When you pop out a vision like a bag of microwaved popcorn, it usually looks like a mass-produced, mind numbing replica of another leader's vision.

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It's been said a million times: vision is like a fingerprint. But my experience is quite the opposite. Most visions today look like they were formed by hands with melted fingertips. Original prints are nowhere to be found.

The unintended consequence of this vanilla flavored vision is a lack of clarity, unity, and discipline. As I reflect on my own vision formation process at the church I lead, I observe two things:

- The values that shaped my vision cooked inside of me for ten years.
- The words that describe my vision were crafted over three years.

I'm not suggesting that you wait a decade before you formulate a clear vision for your church. I'm simply challenging you to evaluate the passion and conviction behind your vision.

If you want to develop a healthy organizational culture, it begins with a clear, conviction-filled vision, and preferably one that wasn't taken from somebody else's playbook. Without vision, your culture is haunted by aimlessness.

2. Values

Values are one of the greatest influences in culture. Values tell me what your church considers important above everything else. Values are the internal rules of the game. Values are the driver behind behaviors and programs.

Here's a good way to identify your current values: "**Our church does** _____ **because we value** _____." In the first blank, put any program, strategy, or behavior your church practices. In the second blank, put the value that's driving whatever you wrote in the first blank. The first blank is WHAT you do. The second blank (your values) is WHY you do it.

For example, a company might say, "We produce the highest quality products because we value excellence." A non-profit might say, "We operate with open books because we value integrity." A church might say, "We mentor teenagers because we value the next generation." And an individual might say, "I give a percentage of my income to charities because I value generosity." Stated values describe how your church currently behaves.

3. Philosophy

Every leader has a philosophy that guides his or her decision-making. Philosophy is tied to deeply held beliefs, history, assumptions, values, education, attitudes, or

preferred practices. Sometimes a philosophy has a specific “label” attached to it based on the organization’s industry.

For example, there are dozens of “ministry philosophies” practiced by churches around the globe. Some of these philosophies have labels such as “purpose-driven,” “seeker-sensitive,” “emergent,” “missional,” “multi-site,” or “cell church.” I’m not suggesting that one model or philosophy is right and the rest are wrong. I’m simply pointing out that the approach you choose will profoundly shape your church’s culture.

There are also different leadership philosophies: Servant-leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, team leadership, democratic leadership, collaborative leadership, and laissez-faire leadership, just to name a few.

When a leader is unclear about his or her philosophy (personally and organizationally), the consequence is employee conflict (because every employee has a philosophy too). If you want to better understand your church’s culture, consider the philosophies you hold and how they shape what you do.

4. Traditions

Every organization has traditions, even organization’s that are just a few years old. Traditions aren’t necessarily bad, unless, of course, they’re more influential than your vision. This is important because your traditions are your norms.

It’s easy to misinterpret traditions as “don’t rock the boat” mediocrity, but that’s not necessarily the case. *Traditions are the rituals and routines that you normalize and celebrate in your organization.* Innovation, creativity, risk-taking, and bold vision can be the norm of your organization. Staff with courage, character, competence, and an aggressive personal growth posture can be your norm.

The key is to be on-purpose about which traditions are allowed into the normalcy of your culture. Here’s an important question to consider: *Can you describe—in writing—what your traditions are, and how they shape “normal” in your church’s culture?* Your answer to that question provides you with definition to your culture.

5. Language

Words frame culture. Every word you speak has *benefits* and *baggage*. For example, what comes to mind when you hear the following words: crusade, outreach, preacher, committee, small group, choir, band, offering, or missional? If you're leading a non-profit, what do you think of when you hear these words: volunteers, fundraising, value-added, benchmarking, advocate, mission, or stakeholders? Every word conjures a different emotional reaction—some life-giving, others deflating—each different for every person.

The point is this: *The language you choose defines your organization's culture in the minds of the people you lead and the people you serve.* Author Bill Hybels observes, "leaders rise and fall by the language they use....The very best leaders I know wrestle with words until they are able to communicate their big ideas in a way that captures the imagination, catalyzes action, and lifts spirits. They coin creeds and fashion slogans and create rallying cries, all because they understand that language matters."

Language defines your organization's culture in the minds of the people you lead and serve.

If you want to understand your culture, make a list of the words and phrases that you and your team throw around most often. What baggage or benefits do those words carry? What do they mean to you? What do they mean to the people you serve?

6. Systems

Systems are the gears rotating under your church's bonnet that create results for everyone to see. You have systems—or processes—for delivering services, developing programs, hiring staff, mentoring people, assimilating guests, communicating with teams, managing facilities, raising money, measuring results...the list is almost endless. The question is, are your systems effective, efficient, and employee friendly?

First, good systems are *effective*. They get things done with excellence, and they produce the results they were intended to produce. Like it or not, the results your church is seeing (or not seeing) are directly tied to the systems you (or somebody) created. If you don't like your results, change your systems.

Second, good systems are *efficient*. They get things done without wasting time or money. When systems experience drag, everything takes more energy. It's the difference between a sports car and an 18-wheeler. Sports cars slice through the air while 18-wheelers need skirted trailers to reduce the amount of aerodynamic drag. Highly developed systems experience little to no drag.

Finally, good systems *engage volunteers*. When systems are complex and bureaucratic, they produce frustrated and disengaged volunteers. Unhappy leaders rarely foster great cultures. Leaders can't demand their teams behave differently so that the organization's culture will improve. They must address the issue at the root, and systems are the root.

When systems change, behaviours change. When behaviour changes, the church's culture follows suit. One of the best ways you can define your culture is by asking your team members to provide honest input about the effectiveness, efficiency, and friendliness of your systems.

7. Measurements

Every organisation measures something—attendance, donations, testimonies, life change, projects completed—just to name a few. Whatever you choose to measure in your church will do two things: It will *reveal* your culture and *reinforce* your culture. The real question is this: *What measurements will create a healthy culture aligned with your vision and values?*

Misaligned measurements are like playing football but keeping score for golf. That wouldn't work in sports, and it doesn't work in organizations. You must align your measurements with your methods (what you do) and your mission (why you exist). Evaluate what you measure, and why you measure it, to get the pulse on your culture.

8. Behaviours

You can shout vision from the rooftops and deliver your core values with inspiring speeches, yet still develop a culture disconnected from your aspirations. How? By behaving in a way that's inconsistent with what you say. Culture follows behavior and perpetuates behavior. It shapes how we act and react. The behaviors that matter

most are the behaviors of the church's leaders, beginning with the pastor. A leader's behaviors shape the behaviors of team members *directly* and *indirectly*.

First, leaders shape behaviour *directly* by how they personally interact with people on their team. When they treat employees or volunteers with respect, dignity, honesty, and compassion, they empower those team members to do the same with co-workers and volunteers.

Second, leaders shape behaviour *indirectly* by the systems they create in the organization. As I mentioned already, systems shape behavior and behavior shapes culture. When creating systems, leaders should ask themselves, "How will my decisions about this system shape my team's effectiveness, efficiency, and engagement?" And if you're wondering whether or not your current systems are broken—or how they're actually shaping your culture—just ask the people who have to execute your systems every day. While you're at it, ask your team about your behaviours too.

These eight words provide powerful context and definition for culture. The more you understand them, the more you'll understand the kind of culture you're creating in your church. As you read each word, you may have experienced mixed emotions about their reality in your environment. It doesn't have to stay that way. Imagine how different things could be twelve months from today?

Question: How have you seen these "culture-creating" words shape your church's culture? What other words would you add to the "culture-creating" list?