

# **CULTURE BUILDING STARTS WITH YOU**



You Can Still Impact  
Workplace Culture Even  
If You're Flying Solo

**CHELLIE PHILLIPS**

## Flying Solo

My first job was a cashier at JCPenney and I worked in the men's clothing department. I didn't manage anyone. In fact, I didn't have any decision making ability. Yet it was in that solitary position where I learned the value of building relationships with co-workers. You never know when someone might offer you extra hours because you were always dependable. You never know who might get you put on the list to be contacted every time seasonal work was available because you shared friendly conversation over sacked lunches. I learned customers weren't always nice or correct, and that you can be assertive without being a jerk. Which later meant the floor supervisor wasn't afraid to leave me alone in the department if they were needed elsewhere. Not being in charge or having the decision making power doesn't mean you are without influence.

We all have our sphere of influence. Being a leader doesn't mean your title has to include the word manager or director. The V.A.L.U.E. Culture concept works on the inside-out approach. It makes culture personal. First, there's you. There are things you have control over. Like how you decide to show up each day or how you decide to react to situations as they arise.



**Chellie Phillips is an international best-selling author, speaker and coach who understands the importance of culture in the workplace. For a business, culture is your internal brand. And an irresistible brand is what you need if you're looking to attract the most talented employees.**

No matter where you are in the leadership hierarchy, you can have an impact. Maybe you aren't CEO, but you lead a small team or department in your company. You can begin having an impact that others will see and it can spread. Or maybe, you're just in your cubicle and see changes that need to be made.

You don't have to wait for someone else to say ok, make things better. You can be the instigator and help be a changemaker and at least get it on leadership radar. Now to the CEOs out there I encourage you to listen several layers down to your people. Listening will help you to get the full picture of what is really happening. Direct reports are helpful but with you more involved in the listening you can make better fully informed decisions that can benefit the culture.

Once you gather the feedback, you begin working on the team. How can you influence the others you work with each day? Once the team exhibits the traits you want to emulate, it's time to spread through the organization.

## One Person Can Be the Spark

What does it mean to be a spark in the workplace?

Can you really make a change from the cubicle?

Well, I returned to my friend **Rich Sheridan, Menlo Innovations**, to help us answer this question.

**Q. Rich, how can we be the spark that changes things at work? Don't we need a corner window-lined office?**

Thanks for asking a powerful question. The answer is no. In fact, some of the most effective cultural changes happen with individuals and then spread throughout the organization. The hardest place to start is the easiest place to identify as a beginning spot. It's sitting here humbly admitting you have to start to change inside of you first.

Rich Sheridan is the CEO and Chief Storyteller at Menlo Innovations, a software and IT consulting firm. He's the author of Chief Joy Officer and Joy Inc.



Kids are so smart. After my eight-year-old told me what she had learned spending the day with me at the office was "*you're the most important person here because nobody could make a decision without you?*" It really opened my eyes. Guess who had to change? I had to change.

People get stuck thinking that they have to change the world. I always tell people you *don't* have to change the world. That's another problem with cultural change. You think we're so big. We're so old. We're so bureaucratic. We're so regulated. It's just a ginormous lie. You don't have to change the world. You just have to change your world.

## **Q. Rich, how do you do that?**

Change you. Be a different person when you walk in the door. Bring a positive attitude. Assume good intentions about the people around you. Then start to change the people around you. Invite them into your world.

Say we can't change anybody else, but let us be this band of brothers and sisters who can start to change our little world here. What's interesting is when you begin to be the change you want to see in the world, then people want to be more like you.

Eventually, they're wondering why you guys are having so much fun here. How are you getting so much done? I don't get it. I mean, you have got the same amount of people we do. You get the same hours in the week, but somehow, you guys are getting more done?

Then say, "Oh, you want to come to see how we do things here? We've made a few changes." Did you get permission? No, we're just producing better results. So, *we didn't need permission to produce better results.*

Everybody notices when you're producing better results. The way we produce those results is what we changed. A lot of times, people think I must change everything all at once. It's never going to happen. It's just not possible. So just start. Start here. Start with the people around you. And start being that contagion for change.

I love the statement “we didn't need permission to produce better results.” Each of us can make changes and the results will stand for themselves. How many of you agree with what Rich said? Think about it. Corporate culture plays a major role in job satisfaction and security. Fortunately, you can have a powerful impact on your workplace, whether you're a senior manager or a team leader. Try these suggestions to create an environment where everyone can feel valued and appreciated.

## Steps to Take by Yourself

**1. Continue learning. *Invest in education and training.*** Developing your knowledge and skills will broaden your opportunities at your current company and in all your future positions. You'll be a stronger member of any team.

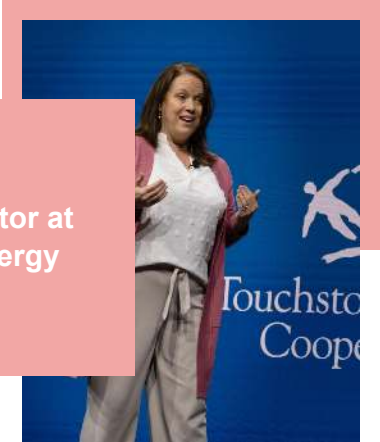
**2. Think long-term.** Keep your goals in mind. Evaluate how your actions will affect your company's future. Going the extra mile to satisfy a client could lead to repeat business, glowing reviews, and valuable referrals.



3. **Take risks.** *Reward yourself for being innovative, even if some of your efforts fail to pan out.* If you're persistent, you're bound to come up with some breakthrough ideas.

4. **Ask questions.** Being able to ask for information and advice is a sign of confidence. You'll do your job better and show your colleagues you appreciate their experience and expertise. You'll become known as someone who is curious and looking for solutions.

I know what you are thinking. “How can I make a change on my own? How do I get started? The first step is often the scariest. It can feel like you are alone on an island. I asked my friend **Jana Adams, executive director of Touchstone Energy**, what she does in situations like this to keep from getting discouraged.



Jana Adams,  
executive director at  
Touchstone Energy  
Cooperatives.

**Q. Jana, how do you stay positive and not get discouraged if you are the one to start the change at work?**

I encourage people not to get discouraged if they need to begin the process independently. They can make a difference and have an impact. You see, organizations have core values. Individuals have core values. Having honesty, truth, and transparency are just super important to me. So, it's vital that the individual has those values.

If you work in a way that is obvious to everyone, and you've got that underpinning of values that you're aligned with, you can influence culture quickly and positively. Not as quickly as an individual can negatively impact culture. We all know the power of bad and how quickly somebody can have a negative influence.

However, the opposite is true as well. You can positively impact simply by adhering to what is important to you. Especially when those values are aligned with what you understand is important to the organization.

If you see yourself in this role and if you want others to be a part of a cultural movement with you, the best way to start is by demonstrating the changes you want to see. I'm a firm believer in walking the talk. If you want others to follow, you need to show them the changes you are making aren't just for the short-term. Your co-workers need to trust your behavior change is something lasting. Then you can begin to bring others into the process.

## Steps to Take with Your Co-Workers

**1. Build consensus.** Think about all the stakeholders who are affected by your work. Request feedback and input. *Involve others when you're making important decisions.* They'll be more likely to support projects that they helped to develop.



**2. Socialize more.** Becoming more familiar with your colleagues outside of work can deepen your relationships. Participate in office picnics and happy hours. Join the softball league and invite your coworkers out to dinner.

**3. Welcome new hires.** Reach out to new employees. Explaining the corporate culture to them may reinforce your own beliefs and actions.

**4. Give praise.** *Be generous in acknowledging the talents and achievements of your colleagues.* Congratulate a colleague who recently published a paper in a prestigious journal. Let the office manager know that you like how they handled their last presentation. Thank the mail room staff for delivering a proposal in time for a tight deadline.

5. **Share credit.** Recognize teamwork. Thank others individually and in public for how they contribute to group victories. Write notes expressing your gratitude.
  
6. **Communicate openly.** Speak directly and respectfully. Thank your coworkers for sharing their viewpoints.
  
7. **Resolve conflicts.** Disagreements are unavoidable. *Hold yourself accountable for your actions and apologize when needed.* Be courteous, even when you find yourself on the opposing side of an issue.
  
8. **Focus on strengths.** Remember to pay attention to the things you and your co-workers do well. Everyone's strengths are the essence of your company's culture and the foundation you can build upon to keep growing.
  
9. **Give back to the community.** Your company's philanthropy and community programs say a lot about the corporate culture. Take part in initiatives you care about, such as holiday food drives or volunteer outings. Suggest new programs that are appropriate for your company's mission.

Once your team implements things, the culture shifts, and you begin seeing trackable progress. Now it might be time to talk with your supervisor to see if there are ways to spread the initiative across the department. One way to succeed is to learn what your supervisor is being measured on. This was one of the hardest things I had to learn throughout my career. It's so important to understand multiple viewpoints and learn how you can talk to someone in a way that paints a picture in their mind that addresses areas they are concerned about.





There is a process in learning what really matters, and I asked **Adam Schwartz, founder of *The Cooperative Way***, to put his consultant hat on and share insights on how employees can better understand what matters to their next level leader.

**Q. Adam, how can employees learn what matters most to leadership regarding culture and the workplace?**

For folks not at the highest leadership level, it is important to find out what your supervisor's goals are. What are their KPIs (key performance indicators)? What are they getting measured on? Then think about the idea that you have and how you're going to position that idea. How will it help your boss achieve their KPIs so that you can build alignment? If you do this, this is the impact it will have or may have.



**Q. Adam, why are employees afraid to share ideas? Is it because we aren't 100% sure how the ideas might scale or how they can be put into play?**

Well, one of my favorite quotes is from Bill James. He's a baseball statistician. He developed a new way of thinking about baseball players' statistics. It was sort of the premise behind the *Moneyball* movie. The Oakland A's were using his theory on identifying great players.

In baseball, he's gotten a fair amount of celebrity status because of what he's done. Now he gets approached by people all the time and asked how is so and so, the player, going to do next year. He says whenever he's asked that question, he feels he needs to respond by saying, "It's the future. No one knows."

We spend a lot of time preparing for the future as well as we should. But we have to recognize that we just don't know. Right? We should be mindful. We should do all the steps, but it's important to be curious too. Just being curious about the next thing, being open-minded to accepting new ways of doing things, and just putting a big, red circle with the slash through the comment, “that's not the way we do it around here.”

While we might not know the future, I believe we can learn the key measures those in decision making positions use when deciding to move forward with a project or not. You must be willing to do the research. Learn what's on their mind. But when you can clearly articulate why what you want to do will benefit them and the company, getting a yes becomes much easier. After my conversation with Adam, I remembered that **Bob Brown, Vice President of Finance and Operations Support for Newnan, GA Yamaha**, shared how adding “proof of concept” had become an effective tool which encouraged employees to share ideas at all levels inside the company. It's a great way to show management you've thought about the benefits.

**Q. Bob, can you share with us what you mean when you said, we need to add a proof of concept when we want to scale?**

Sure. We have a fairly new president here at Yamaha. One thing he's brought to the table that I think has been effective is this idea of a proof of concept. You have a strategy and a tactic in your strategic plan. But before you commit to that for the next three or five years, how do you check to ensure that the logic is sound or that the tactic achieves that strategic objective?



Over the past year, we have been doing proof of concept in many different areas of our strategic plan. This makes you think about what benefits you expect to see. How would I measure that? To do a proof of concept, you have to be able to measure the result. Did it have the result that we expected? Sometimes just defining what to measure, especially around culture, can be one of the most difficult things to do.

**Q. Bob, share more about this.**

One of our strategic pillars is what we call local branding. That's not a marketing term. It's more our local brand or how we're doing internally, in the community, and with our employees, our peers, customers, and suppliers. How do people see us?

So we've been doing proof of concepts that are at a much smaller scale around this employee engagement. For example, one way we've decided to test some of these concepts is to do a smaller activity that you can put your arms around more easily with a smaller group of people.

We surveyed them before. Then we surveyed them after this test to see what kind of impact it had. Did it increase their perceived value of our brand? Did it increase it in the right way that we thought it would? It forces you to figure out what I am going to measure.

Doing a smaller test gives you good ideas on how to roll it out more broadly. I figured out what kind of challenges are on a smaller scale. I can address that upfront and make sure that's part of the rollout in the grander scheme of things. It allows you to move faster because now, instead of pursuing this five-year target, we're saying no, don't even worry about what happens years from now.

What can we do now to test it, and then it gets you to move a little bit faster? You realize once you've tested the proof of concept, you figured out most of what you needed to roll it out more broadly. In fact, you've done a lot of the work on the front end. It allows you a lot easier to deploy it on a broader basis.



Proof of concept may start simply inside your cubicle and with a few coworkers who share your vision. Look for ways you can quantify your efforts. How are you improving performance? How is customer satisfaction increasing? I encourage you to start keeping a list and tracking your results and don't get discouraged if it takes a little while to get someone's attention. As a leader, you may have to share your ideas several times before someone embraces them, but sometimes, just having the conversation can move the process. I wanted to find out more, so I asked **Scott Peterson (retired) Senior Vice President of Communications with the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA)** to go deeper.



**Q. Scott, what would you say is the first thing to do when conversing with leadership?**

Number one, don't be afraid to converse with others.

You may be successful in some of those conversations, or you may not be, but if you keep having the conversation, you keep demonstrating that change you want to make. It's one that's going to matter to the organization; somebody will embrace that and help you accomplish that.

For somebody sitting at the cubicle level, there's going to be some discouragement that comes with that. Still, I would say if you feel strongly about that, and if you feel like that's going to make a difference, and it's something that's important to others in your organization, then certainly drive that up into your next level of management.

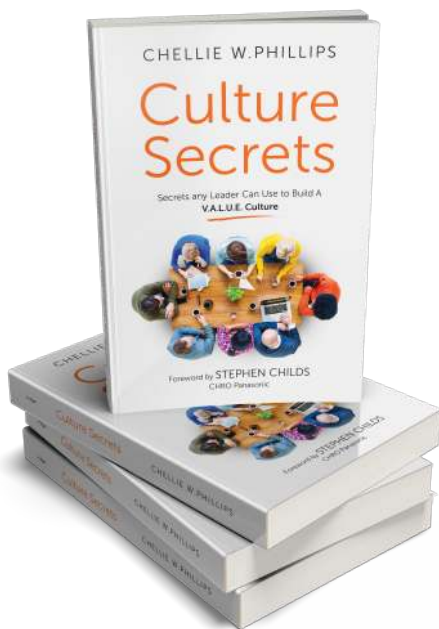
Drive it up. Drive it wide. In terms of having that conversation, do it respectfully. Provide examples of how that's valued in the organization already. I think in today's culture, leaders are looking for and sometimes have that expectation that some of that change is going to come from the experiences that teams have.

Once that's recognized, and you have a few successes in driving change that way, that becomes easier to do. But I think discouragement is the biggest factor that prevents that from happening.

I couldn't agree more. Discouragement, or the doubt we feel in ourselves, needs to be in check to have these crucial conversations. What do you think about the advice here? Has this encouraged you to change the culture from the cubicle to the water cooler all the way to the corner office? Or, perhaps you might be thinking about specific employees you lead who can help push your culture efforts forward if they knew how or had the confidence. Share this section with them.

Sometimes *flying solo* can feel impossible, but I hope this encourages you to begin that journey. What is one thing you can do, on your own, that will make the difference? Write that down, and make your first steps toward moving forward. I invite you to share what happened with me at [contact@chelliephillips.com](mailto:contact@chelliephillips.com).

To learn more secrets any leader can use to create a people-centered culture in the workplace, check out my book, [Culture Secrets, Secrets Leaders Can Use to Build a V.A.L.U.E. Culture](#) and scan the QR code to hear my Culture Secrets Podcast.



**SCAN ME**