



TRANSFORMING CULTURE CONSULTANTS

## *Conversation Starter Guide*

Is your culture ready for change? Culture provides employees with an organizational identity, motivates, and retains talented employees. However, we know workplace culture is one of the most difficult undertakings for an organization. Also, most organizations possess many subcultures throughout departments or functions, not just a homogeneous organizational culture. Creating a readiness for culture change requires the organization to examine the invisible elements below the surface. If you do not address the underlying beliefs, your culture won't change. An important first step in workplace culture change is to help all employees in the "readiness for change" to overcome barriers of resistance and have a positive mindset towards the culture change. Readiness is the precursor for any change, and a conversation about culture change is more important now than ever.

When managers and employees are fully engaged, these conversations help strengthen trust, respect, and feeling valued. This conversation starter guide will provide you with four effective strategies for getting the culture conversation started:


## **1. Onboarding Leadership.**

First, the conversation must start at the leadership level. Culture starts from the top down. Buy-in from top level executives is crucial. Research shows that employees pay attention to the reactions and emotions leaders exhibit. Culture change, for example, is reinforced when leadership supports change. Positive emotions spread, but negative emotions travel faster which diminishes readiness for culture change.

## 2. Onboarding Management

Acquiring management support, especially with line-level managers or supervisors, can be challenging since they can influence employee's readiness for culture change in a negative or positive way. Gaining their commitment is critical. Management's job is two-fold: their own readiness for culture change as well as their employees.' Management must help mitigate the resistance to change for their employees.

### Levels of Management Support of Onboarding:

1. Practice Skills
  2. Reinforcement
  3. Participation
  4. Encouragement
  5. Acceptance
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- High support
- Low support

**3. Onboarding Employees.** Onboarding employees for culture change helps employees to integrate, assimilate, and transition to new expectations and responsibilities. Support a “we” attitude. Using “we” in conversation reinforces that you are in this together and working towards a shared goal of improving culture at your organization.

Including employees conversations provides many benefits:

- Employee Engagement and Involvement - Active involvement is a prerequisite for readiness.
- Employee decision making - To build a culture of change readiness, people need to feel included and work with you to make the new a reality.
- Foster an open, nurturing environment - create an environment where people are comfortable receiving and giving feedback of the culture change.
- Encourage collective commitment.
- Actively listen to explore multiple or diverse points of view.

## **4. Helpful Conversation Starter using a four-step coaching mode:**

1) Explore -Lead and work from a place of curiosity in the employees. Culture change starts with real talk. A powerful question also has the capacity to "travel well" - to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Questions that travel well are the key to large-scale change. When you ask a great question, your job is to stand back, allow it to unfold, and be patient. Here's an example of initiating culture conversations.

- "If you were CEO for the day, how would you change things around here?" (shift to a broader perspective.)
- "Imagine it's a year from today. What would a healthier culture be like, and what evidence would a video camera record, that lets us know it's real?" (futurepacing with a reality basis.)
- "How would you describe the culture today to a young person who is considering applying for a job in this company?" (helps people consider the legacy they are creating.)

**2) Discover** - Develop and maintain an understanding to work with typical human responses to change at all levels of the organization. Invite creativity and new possibilities.

**3) Plan** - Create structures that enable people to be actively involved in decision making and change process. Generate energy and forward movement.

**4) Act** - Take action. Active listening creates expectations and touches a deep chord of emotion. Once employees take a risk to share their perceptions, they begin watching to see if you've really listened. They'll want to see evidence. This builds trust by acting quickly and shows your commitment to making longer-term changes that may involve the employees themselves changing their behavior.

*References Ashkenas, R. (2011). Let's talk about culture change. <https://hbr.org/2011/03/lets-talk-about-culturechange.html> Crum, A.(2014). Change your Mindset, change the game In: TEDx Traverse City. Vogt E.; Brown, J.; & Isaacs, D. (2003). The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action. Whole Systems Associates. Mill Valley, California.*

Need help navigating the transforming culture conversation with top management?

We are here to support you.

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