Define a Roadmap for Your Culture Change Journey

Published: 31 August 2018   **ID:** G00368441

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CIOs recognize that culture is both a barrier and an enabler of strategic business change. But they often fail to address the problem directly by defining a roadmap for their culture change journey and then executing assessments and change activities.

Key Challenges

Most change leaders, including CIOs:

- Do not have a clear understanding of the existing organizational culture beyond a high-level sense.

- Do not assess their culture in any meaningful way and, thus, are often unaware whether the change efforts are effective.

- Do not create or execute an effective, yet flexible culture change program.

Recommendations

CIOs looking to master leadership, culture and people dynamics should:

- Define the culture change journey by leveraging a programmatic roadmap.

- Measure change in culture strength by leveraging multiple appropriate methods and conducting initial and ongoing assessments along the journey toward culture change goals.

- Expand culture change capability over time by allocating time, attention, capabilities, funding and other resources to this significant work. This includes staffing organizational change management roles and communicating repeatedly and effectively.

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Introduction

CIOs and change agents all agree that culture is a significant factor in achieving their goals. Many see culture as a barrier, but others see culture as a large component that ensures digital business success. In the 2018 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey, 37% of CEOs and senior business executives want a significant or deep corporate culture change by 2020 — and this urgency is greater for those with digital business initiatives.[1]

Moreover, CIOs believe this is a key role for them specifically. The 2018 Gartner CIO Survey respondents see their most significant future role as becoming a change leader with wider responsibility across the enterprise.[2] Yet, these survey respondents overwhelmingly view culture as the largest barrier to scaling digital business — 46% of CIOs chose this, well above resources (23%) and talent (13%).[3]

Even our anecdotal inquiry feedback shows that CIOs and other change leaders seem certain about the current and future cultures. However, only 10% of HR leaders have "confidence in the organization's understanding of culture."[4] In addition, there's still the challenge of leading the culture change.
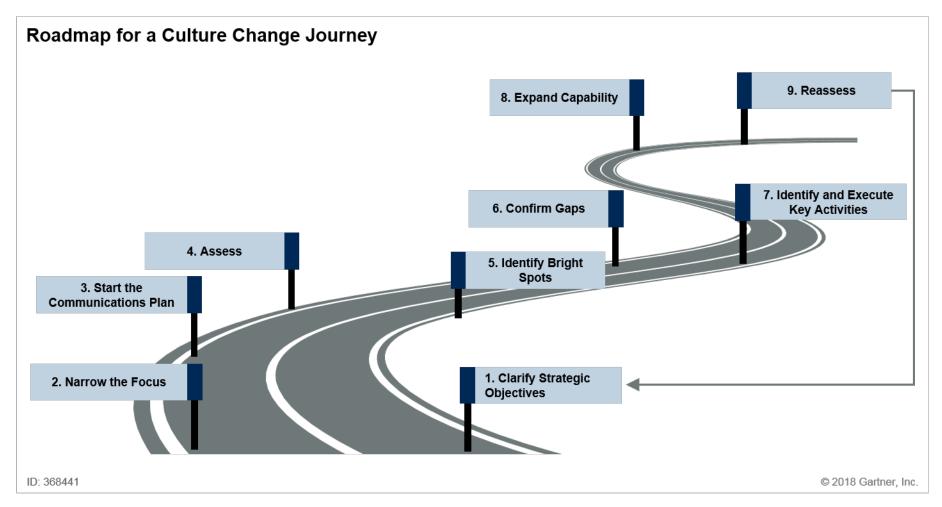
To be successful with culture change, CIOs and other change leaders must create and execute a roadmap for their culture change journey that includes defining and then assessing the needed

future culture attributes (behaviors, mindsets and so on). This means going beyond buzzwords and getting to a more detailed, yet narrow and near-term focus on specific behaviors. This can then be assessed against the first step, and targeted for changing if needed. The companion report "4 Methods to Assess Your Culture" describes how to assess culture and measure progress over time. Culture change must get specific — and quickly. CIOs should define the first few steps and start executing.

Even for the most narrow scope — changing the mindset and behavior of a single team, for example — this roadmap can help change leadership efforts avoid common pitfalls along the way. The roadmap should be continuously adapted along the journey. Here, we describe a simple programmatic roadmap for a culture change journey, a model that CIOs can leverage and alter as they see fit (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. CIOs Should Continuously Adapt Roadmap Steps for Culture Change

Roadmap for a Culture Change Journey

8. Expand Capability

9. Reassess

6. Confirm Gaps

7. Identify and Execute Key Activities

4. Assess

5. Identify Bright Spots

3. Start the Communications Plan

2. Narrow the Focus

1. Clarify Strategic Objectives

ID: 368441

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Analysis

Culture change leaders, including CIOs, should develop an overall culture change journey plan or roadmap, and cycle and adapt it as needed along the change journey. Gartner has defined a multistep roadmap for a culture change journey. These steps are based on customer cases, as well as academic research and other sources.[5]

Step 1: Clarify Strategic Objectives for Your Culture Change Journey

Do you know if the changes are critical to business success, or are highly aligned with or enable key specific strategic business objectives? Don't start a culture change journey if you're not clear. A recent Gartner Research Circle Survey shows that 70% of organizations that are successful in changing culture have their culture goals and their digital business strategy directions completely aligned (24%) or somewhat aligned (46%).[6]

Get clear on the value for the change — and leverage this as the "why" any change is needed. (See "How to Start a Transformational Change Initiative" and "Compose the From/To/Because Story to Convey a Behavior Change Journey.") After you do this, determine how to focus your target culture more clearly as well.

The target culture you set should be one that you believe is critical to business success — as well as provides success on an individual level and team level. Make sure your organization's chosen target culture is strategic and directly acknowledged by enterprise leadership (and other key stakeholders, including HR) before proceeding.

As described in "A CIO's Guide to Strategy Development," talent and organizational culture are aspects of strategy. Consider these permutations that might apply in your case:

- **Culture is the strategy.** For example, we need an innovative culture, or else, we won't create the products or services that will create or save the business. This isn't common, but it does happen (consider Zappos,[7] Southwest Airlines[8] and other companies that elevate culture above many other aspects of strategy). The more your business model is differentiated from those of your competitors, the more likely the culture that supports this is strategic in itself — the culture is a primary means of getting the strategy implemented in the organization.

- **Culture enables the strategy explicitly.** For example, we need an agile culture to do digital business. Here, culture is seen as a specific target change to increase future business success.

- **Culture supports the strategy implicitly.** For example, if you don't focus on culture at least in part, you will suffer the consequences. This may be a sign of poor alignment. Culture is just an afterthought, or is seen as a problem.

- **Culture doesn't have any connection to strategy.** For example, if you're already making money well enough, but other aspects of culture seem to counteract the business model in many ways, you may have a disconnected culture. This is clearly a sign that things are not aligned. It is also a missed opportunity — imagine if your culture were aligned. And this can apply both to the current-state culture (we are out of alignment and need to regain alignment)

and the future-state culture (the target we've picked is not aligned, and so our journey will likely meet with less success). Regaining alignment or just ignoring this situation both can be options, but status quo may not last forever in today's more uncertain climate.

No matter which situation, any culture change effort must make progress on the journey toward the culture you seek, to strengthen the culture you seek within your organization or team. At this point, however, the target culture may seem rather general, a buzzword even. That's OK. We'll narrow this down in later steps.

Step 2: Narrow the Focus of Your Culture Change Journey

Many culture change journeys suffer from having much too broad goals or, more specifically, from letting those broad goals actually inhibit change, because it's hard to see what to do to get there. This requires that change efforts get more specific; they must narrow their focus in a variety of dimensions.

Narrow the Focus From Buzzword to Behavior

Most culture change initiatives start with a buzzword. For example, "we want a 'collaborative,' 'agile,' 'innovative' or other hyped term culture." That's fine as the general goal — but it's too general by itself to lead to change.

There are so many target culture choices — and they are often espoused at a broad level. For example, David Rock and Khalil Smith from the NeuroLeadership Institute recently suggested that three target cultures or culture attributes are most useful:

- An independent entrepreneurial culture

- A collaborative culture

- A changing culture (agility or adaptability)[9]

In our client inquiries, we also find many organizations have highlighted these targets in conjunction with their digital business transformation strategies. They have also defined other more-specific goals, such as building a growth mindset (see "A Growth Mindset Can Help CIOs Reboot Leadership and Culture for the Digital Era") — which Rock and Smith include in the changing culture case. Or they define more-general goals, such as building a more diverse and inclusive culture (see "Maverick* Research: Embrace Inclusion to Improve Team Performance"). There are so many different targets across different organizational situations. Even within the context of digital business, the types of culture changes we see vary widely. But no matter which target, the focus is too broad to clarify near-term change needs.

Leverage the methods defined in "4 Methods to Assess Your Culture" to decompose the general buzzword into more-specific behaviors that can be observed, measured, talked about, and even if needed, surveyed on. Pick a few more-specific behaviors or hacks to work on, and build experience and strength in those (see "The Art of Culture Hacking").

> Start small. Ideal choices are smaller changes that have larger effects. As your efforts progress, see if these cases can be amplified more widely.

One useful technique is to let each group that needs to focus on culture change identify some of the detailed behaviors themselves. Don't let the culture change leading group specify for everyone all the detailed behaviors that might match, say, a "more collaborative culture" goal. Instead, let the teams that need to adapt the new culture work from the high-level goals and translate those into behaviors that are manifest and meaningful to them.

One organization, for example, was trying to be more collaborative. The narrower behavior target was to use the new Skype system for some collaboration, instead of just email. Each team could then define when this collaboration technology might work in its typical work activities. The teams could translate the buzzword into specific behaviors. This operationalizing approach is discussed in more detail in A Leader's Guide to Building an Organizational Culture That Performs.

Another key to operationalizing the culture is to focus on not only individual or team behaviors but also the key processes and systems, even corporate policies, that instantiate the behaviors. These might be called organizational behaviors. "4 Methods to Assess Your Culture" has examples of these as well.

Narrow the Focus From Completion to Iterations

The starting point is just the departure point for the whole journey. All you need to be clear on is the first few steps along that path. After completing those, define the next few steps. In fact, admit that you don't know everything and that each set of steps, each iteration, will be an experiment to see if the identified behaviors can become more habitual or strengthened. Each iteration's steps are important to describe more specifically.

> If there are 10 new behaviors to emphasize, start with two or three behaviors as the first step for the next month or three.

The intent is to strengthen the culture that you want, and leave less effective behaviors behind. Still, some current behaviors should not be minimized — in fact, they should be strengthened, too. Don't portray the current culture as wholly bad. Instead, the new target should be set as an addition or improvement to the existing culture (see "Compose the From/To/Because Story to Convey a Behavior Change Journey").

Narrow the Focus From Everywhere to Somewhere

Organizations often start a culture change with the lofty goal of changing the corporate culture. But, while thinking globally is good, the actions must be local. Start with a single team or two. Learn as

you go what works — and note that one area may need different behavior changes toward the same target.

A CIO, for example, could focus first on changing the culture of just the CIO's direct reporting leadership team. Next, the focus could shift to the entire IT organization that the CIO leads. Later, the CIO could work with other executives to spread culture change more widely. Culture change doesn't have to be an enterprisewide effort.

In fact, no single culture can be the right one for everyone. So even at the organizational level, you might proceed by letting business units pick their main target (or maybe more than one target) and proceed that way. This varied-target approach is discussed in more detail in A Leader's Guide to Building an Organizational Culture That Performs.

Step 3: Start Your Culture Change Journey Communications Plan

Your first steps on your journey need to be communicated. A first-level communications plan and related stakeholder analysis will describe the general value of the work that's commencing and help convince people to contribute authentically and swiftly to the assessment itself. Without effective communication, you may not get the level of participation you'd hoped for, and this can handicap or derail the overall efforts. In fact, inadequate communication is often faulted for culture change efforts that fail.[10]

You do not have to flesh out communications about additional steps of work — that work can come later. But assessment-specific communication must be created and executed before the next step and for each iteration as the journey continues around corners and up new hills. Be authentic when communicating: This is a long journey, this is just the first step (or the next step) and all the steps are not yet known. All will have a chance to contribute to the journey ahead and change at different rates as things progress. In fact, make sure to show that the culture change journey will be easier because everyone will participate and that valued colleagues are also on the road. The journey up a hill looks easier with company and especially with friends.[11]

Start thinking about the key stakeholders who need to be involved, informed and interested. Consider who will have to help in communicating if the scope is larger than a single team or two that you can do yourself. Consider leveraging peer advocates, for example.[12] This might involve getting executive leadership engaged, cascading via middle management, and directly engaging individual employees and teams. For more on building communications plans, see this research:

- "Toolkit: Power Mapping Your Stakeholders"

- "A Practical Guide to Stakeholder Management"

- "Effective Communications: A Strategy"

- "Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Plan"

- "Effective Communication and Influence Strategies for Data and Analytics Leaders"

- "Ignition Guide to Creating a Change Communication Plan"

Step 4: Conduct Targeted Culture Assessments

Execute the assessment itself. See "4 Methods to Assess Your Culture" for more detail on how to use multiple assessment methods: observation, metrics, interviews and surveys. To start, have a baseline measure to compare changes with later on. You may find also that you don't really know the culture you have today — or you want to be clearer on what that culture is. Any CIO or change leader probably has a sense, but the assessment should give a deeper and more nuanced view.

Don't use the results to demonize the current state, but only to establish clarity about the starting point. Allocate the time and budget for this specifically. Manage it as a project, no matter if it is being done by your own people or by an external consultant. Any change leader should be interested and indeed invested in this step — learn how it works and observe the execution even if you're not doing the detailed assessment work personally. Make sure to observe the experience of those being assessed, as well as your own and other key stakeholders' experiences, perceptions and behaviors.

Step 5: Identify Bright Spots, and Share Stories

After any assessment, identify the bright spots that are uncovered. Your investigations (particularly by observations elicited from interviews or identified by metrics like good project outcomes) may show good examples of the new target behaviors. Document these outcomes as the great stories they should be. Be sure to show the experience of people involved, showing their emotional engagement, rather than just more traditional outcome metrics. Get those doing the new behavior to talk about that experience — video the story to make sharing easier and the experience more first-person personal. Also, be sure to show everyone what the assessment might reveal about current culture strengths: Honor the past and present as appropriate. Collect those good stories as well.

Add this storytelling work to your communications plan explicitly. Do sharing sessions as a group — breakfast is a good time. Have those getting the outcomes or value of the new behaviors talk about that, too — the customer's view is always critical to engaging the employee to change. Share these stories widely and repeatedly, and specifically in situations where the contrast to existing current culture behaviors is needed. For every current way of working, have a story about the new way.

Step 6: Confirm Gaps and Intermediate Cues, Behaviors and Rewards

Identify the behavior or culture gaps to address with first or next steps in your culture change program. Which specific aspects need improvement or strengthening? Be as specific and detailed as possible. You know the longer-term targeted behaviors, but you may need to identify intermediate or next levels of change for each behavior.

Define the most immediate next steps. You don't need to know all future steps upfront, since you'll conduct the change journey situationally as needed, given the expected and unexpected turns ahead.

As you identify the reasons why current less effective behaviors happen, leverage those same triggers, but identify the new routine, process or behavior as an alternative to choose for that same

trigger. Then focus on what the rewards for choosing the new behavior will be — including immediate recognition by team members and managers. The recognition may even be superhero capes and plastic "swords of leadership" as one case illustrates.[13] This cue-routine-reward cycle is well-illustrated in Charles Duhigg's book "The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business."

You likely will need to develop new triggers as well, along with new behaviors and rewards for those. As you do more assessments (see "4 Methods to Assess Your Culture" for many examples), you can look at measuring any of these triggers, behaviors or rewards.

Step 7: Identify and Execute Key Change Leadership Activities

Key change leadership activities can increase the opportunities to execute and the likelihood of success of the new targeted behaviors identified in the gap analysis. Identify and prioritize those activities. See these reports detailing key activities:

- To get started, leverage "How to Start a Transformational Change Initiative."

- Leverage the structure described in "Use the ESCAPE Model to Develop Change Leadership" and the specific practices and tactics (practix) collated in "Change Leadership Research Index."

Identify the first few target culture areas specifically, and define the most immediate next steps (and don't expect that you can determine upfront all the steps necessary). Communicate the planned activities (update the communications plan started before). Then execute those activities. In fact, plan on this becoming just a regular practice to improve the organization's capability to change — to build change fitness.

Step 8: Expand Culture Change Capability

Identify needed roles and skills, and allocate funding and time budgets. Clear the way with leadership to support the time needed by all targeted employees. You can and should start small if you can — but if executive leadership is strongly behind the change, then you have a fast-start opportunity to exploit. Even if you start small, your journey will need to develop more capacity to support larger-scoped activities over time.

HR departments are often a shared services center of excellence (COE) for key training or learning opportunities. Many organizations will add organizational change management roles and allocate them to support projects. Expanding your capacity for culture change and changing project methodologies to encourage culture change might be one way to scale your culture in the future.

Even if you start small, you'll want to keep building up the resources of this capability to develop more strength — more coverage, more coaching and so on. Leverage your HR partners, but take responsibility to make culture change work for you and your team and organization.

Step 9: Continue to Assess Progress on the Culture Change Journey

Re-execute the assessments you've done before for comparable results, but consider adding new methods along the way. Continue to adjust new behavior choices as you find what works in your

own organization and, crucially, what does not. Not all approaches work for all specific target behaviors, nor in all global or corporate cultures. Be eclectic. Iterate incrementally, one step at a time. Keep reinforcing the current level of achievements to avoid backsliding. Gather in more people over time. Keep changing.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"4 Methods to Assess Your Culture"

"How to Start a Transformational Change Initiative"

"Driving Business Transformation by Changing the Culture"

"Use the ESCAPE Model to Develop Change Leadership"

"Change Leadership Research Index"

"The Art of Culture Hacking"

Evidence

[1] "2018 CEO Survey: CIOs Should Guide Business Leaders Toward Deep-Discipline Digital Business" — specifically Figures 22 and 23.

[2] "The 2018 CIO Agenda: Mastering the New Job of the CIO." Specific findings about change include these:

1. "Nearly all CIOs (95%) expect to change, or 'digitally remaster,' their current job as a result of digitalization."

2. "Survey respondents see their most significant future role as becoming a change leader with a wider responsibility across the enterprise" (and top performers chose this 23%, 3% more than typical).

3. "With 78% of all CIOs reporting that digital business is making their IT organizations better prepared to change (93% of CIOs at top-performing organizations …), now is the time to implement change to the IT organization, as it is likely to accept a new direction. This, in turn, makes transition to the new job of the CIO easier."

4. Some industries even see change as a more onerous responsibility (see "2016 CIO Agenda: A Higher Education Perspective"). "The first startling finding is that 'change agent' is the top item in the love category for higher education CIOs (19%), but 'change management' is also at the top (16%) in the hate category."

[3] Figure 9 in "The 2018 CIO Agenda: Mastering the New Job of the CIO."

[4] Gartner's HR practice, A Leader's Guide to Building an Organizational Culture That Performs.

[5] Our listing is a simplification of approaches we've observed. Gartner content includes CEB Ignition Guide to Assessing Corporate Culture, "Ignition Guide to Creating a Change Management Plan" and "Toolkit: Assess Your Organizational Culture for a Successful EA." Another is the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) as described in K. Cameron and R. Quinn, "Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework," John Wiley & Sons, 2005. Another approach is Edgar Schein's one-day workshop that identifies artifacts, espoused values and shared underlying assumptions. It is described in his book "Organizational Culture and Leadership," John Wiley & Sons and is summarized in the #hypertextual blog entry "Edgar Schein: Organizational Culture and Leadership."

[6] Gartner's Research Circle survey on culture in digital business. This research was conducted via an online survey from 27 June through 12 July 2018, among Gartner Research Circle members — a Gartner-managed panel composed of IT or IT-business professionals, and an external sample source. In total, 249 participated (149 Research Circle members and 100 external sample participants). Qualified participants included business end users with an IT or IT-business focus as a primary role. The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and was reviewed, tested and administered by Gartner's Research Data and Analytics team.

[7] About Zappos Culture.

[8] Forbes.com "Behind the Southwest Airlines Culture," as well as Southwest Airlines' Purpose, Vision, Values, and Mission page.

[9] "Three Types of Work Culture and How to Hire for Each of Them," Fast Company.

[10] See, for example, the advice to say it seven times and check for understanding in "Tell-Listen-Adapt: Create Communications That Connect Employees to Successful Outcomes."

[11] A friendship study with University of Virginia students involved a steep hill, a heavy backpack and 34 university students. Students were fitted with a backpack full of free weights equivalent to 20 percent of their body weight. They stood at the base of a hill on the University of Virginia campus with a 26-degree incline. Wearing the heavy backpack, they had to imagine climbing that hill and guess the incline. When students stood alone, they tended to guess that the hill was very steep. But when they stood next to a friend, the hill didn't look as daunting. Overall, students in pairs consistently gave lower estimates of the hill's incline compared with students who were alone. And the longer the friends had known each other, the less steep the hill appeared. The lesson: The world does not look as challenging with a friend by your side.

[12] "Leading From the Heart: Peer Advocates Make Organizational Change Easier."

[13] "Drive a Creative Culture Through Activities, Education and Attitude."

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