

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING A WINNING CULTURE



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THE FORMULA FOR BUSINESS EXCELLENCE

Hi. I'm John Spence.

I have been involved in helping businesses be more successful for over twenty-one years and have worked all over the world with every type of company imaginable, from the top of the Fortune 100 to small and medium-sized businesses, associations, not-for-profits, and startups. During this time that I have worked shoulder to shoulder with leaders from hundreds of organizations and read literally thousands of business books, I have discovered very clearly that there is a pattern for business excellence. It has taken me some time to trim down my explanation of this pattern into something manageable and memorable, but after much research and real-life observation, I have developed this formula for business excellence.

$$\text{(Talent + Culture + Extreme Customer Focus) x Disciplined Execution = Business Excellence}$$
$$(T+C+ECF) \times DE = BE$$

As you can see, one of the components of this formula is culture, because building and sustaining a “winning culture” is without question one of the most important elements in leading a successful business.

THE NECESSITY OF A WINNING CULTURE

Why is culture so important to business success? Why should you bother with building a strong organizational culture? It is worth your time and effort because there are three very important reasons for making a winning culture a prime concern for your company.

1. **A winning culture makes a world-class company.**

In the pursuit of business excellence, **culture** goes hand in hand with finding and fostering top talent, being extremely focused on customers, and practicing disciplined execution in order to reach your goals. A world-class company is one that *constantly pursues business excellence*, and your company can never achieve business excellence without a vibrant, aligned, and supportive culture.

2. **The customer's experience will never exceed the employee's experience.**

The atmosphere of your organization will influence the attitude of your employees. If you do not provide your employees with a working environment in which they feel respected, valued, important, and meaningful, then your employees will not be able to provide your customers with fantastic, superior care, and your customers will not provide your company with the sales and revenue you need to succeed.

3. **Culture = Cash.**

My interactions with hundreds of companies around the world have confirmed to me that often times, *the greatest opportunity* to gain revenue and increase profitability within a company lies in the culture.

The competition can copy your products, underbid your pricing, and imitate your marketing, but they will never quite be able to recreate your culture. Therefore, if you are able to build and sustain a superior organizational culture, you will find that your highly engaged, satisfied, and loyal employees will deliver higher levels of productivity, customer focus, revenues, and profitability.

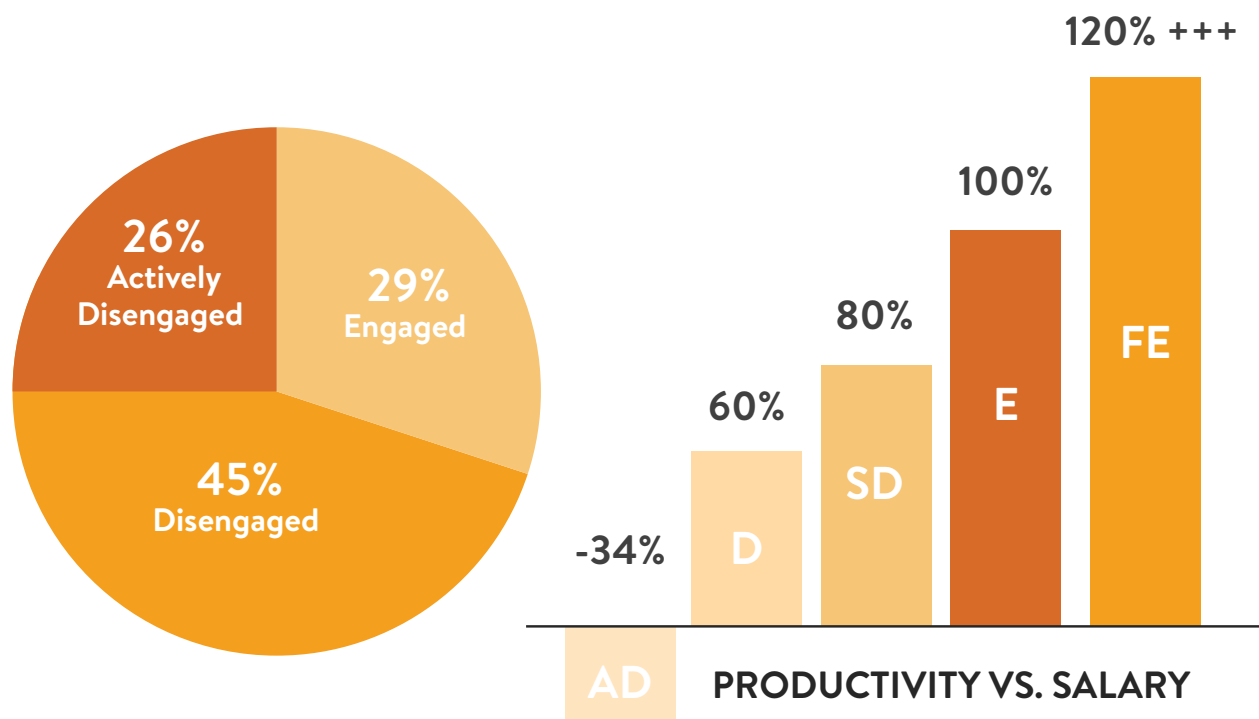


THE COST OF DISENGAGED EMPLOYEES

On the other side of the coin, an average, poor or negative culture in your business will absolutely cost you lost revenues, profitability, and clients. Sadly, in the average American company, only about 30% of employees are truly engaged, meaning the majority of employees in a typical organization are **disengaged** or even **actively disengaged**. When employees don't like where they work and don't like the work they do, they actively sabotage the company they work for and therefore become disengaged. Actively disengaged employees cost companies roughly \$3,400 for every \$10,000 of salary, which means a \$40,000 a-year employee is actually costing you about \$54,000 to keep on the payroll. Therefore, *failing to cultivate a winning culture* could quite easily sink your company into the red in no time.

These graphs represent a collection of research-based statistics that show just how costly disengaged employees can be.

IN THE AVERAGE AMERICAN COMPANY...



Actively disengaged employees cost you
\$3,400 for every \$10,000 of salary



At this point, I hope that you are in full agreement with me that a strong, positive and engaging organizational culture is a key competitive differentiator and a fundamental element of building a world-class organization. Next, I would like to share with you what I believe are some of the critical steps necessary to *building and sustaining a winning culture*.

LISTENING TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

Although a business owner/leader can attempt to simply dictate what sort of culture they want in their organization, this approach usually does not work very well at all. There are also many business “gurus” who assert that cultural values can only be “discovered,” not decided. What I believe is that you can set a few fundamental values as the foundation for your culture, and then the people you hire will dictate a large part of it as they create an organizational culture together. So, I’m a strong believer in the idea that if you want people to have a stake in the culture, then you have to give them a say in what they feel are the most important elements to be included in your organizational values and the kind of culture in which they want to work. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to survey your employees or call them all together for a meeting if your company is small enough in order to have a robust discussion about what they are looking for in a winning culture. To help get you started on this journey, here is some research I did on what top talent and millennials are looking for in an organization where they want to work.



Top Talent

To me, two of the only sustainable competitive advantages left to most businesses today are: **the quality of the people** you can get, grow, and keep on your team AND **the relationships they create** with your customers. This means that talent acquisition, talent development, and talent retention should all be major strategic objectives in your company along with creating the sort of winning culture that engages that talent to consistently exceed the customer's expectations.

Because I saw this as such a critical element in building a world-class organization, I undertook a research study of nearly 10,000 high potential employees at top companies around the world. These were people who are so incredibly fantastic at their jobs that if they quit at 9:00 in the morning, they would have a job with the competition by noon. This is why I call them "voluntary employees": they come back to work every day not because they have to work in a company, but because they choose to do so. They are so good at what they do that they have lots of options for employment, but they feel that out of all of those great options, the organizations they are working at currently are the best. So I asked them this question: "Why do you work where you work?" and they gave me six key reasons:

- **Fair Pay**

In order for pay to be considered **fair**, it must be 10% more or less than what someone could make doing the same job anywhere else. If top talent would make roughly the same amount working for a different company, then pay comes off the table as a motivator.

- **Meaningful Work**

Meaningful work is *challenging, exciting, and engaging* work that encourages employees to bring their best selves to work every day to do important work that they believe makes a difference in business, in society, and in the world.

- **Cool Colleagues**

Top talent wants coworkers that are as *bright, sharp, competent, and engaged* as they are. They want to work with **high integrity people** who are focused on delivering excellence.

- **Winning Culture**

They described a winning culture as a professional environment that is *stimulating, encouraging, and enjoyable*.

- **Growth Opportunities**

Opportunities for growth should address *both personal and professional growth*. Top talent wants to know that they are smarter at the end of the week than they were at the beginning. They demand a culture that supports learning through training, seminars, coaching, and mentoring. They also want an opportunity for professional growth, which means that they can see that they have a career path in the organization and that there is a place for them five to ten years in the future. If top talent feels that they are not learning and growing and that there is no long-term future for them in the organization, they will leave as quickly as possible.

- **Admirable Leadership**

Top talent wants to work for a leader that they **respect** and **admire**. Actually, as I did personal interviews with the several hundred people in my survey group, many of them said that this was the most *important factor*. They told me that if the organization did extremely

well on the other five factors, but they worked for a lousy boss, they would quit immediately. On the other hand, if the business did pretty well on the other five factors, and they had a boss that they really enjoyed working for, then their employment situation would challenge them to come back every day and be better than they were the day before in order to live up to and exceed the leader's expectations.

Also, as a side note, 88% of people that quit their jobs do not quit because of the hours, the pay, the workload, the commute, or the culture: they quit because they don't like their immediate supervisor/boss. Several research studies show that *bad leadership* costs some businesses as much as 50% of their total potential revenues.

Millennials

In order to understand the group of individuals who would inherit the industries we are currently forging, I surveyed young adults finishing their last two years of college or moving through their first three or four years in the workforce. This demographic cohort is known as millennials, and they are starkly different than other generations currently in the workforce. Now, a lot of people seem to think that the millennial generation is not a big deal and is not going to impact their businesses very much, but there are actually more millennials (75 million) than there were baby boomers (74 million), so this is a group that every business needs to pay attention to, not only as employees, but also as customers. My research has recognized millennials currently coming into their careers. Therefore, let me share with you what I've learned so far about what millennials are looking for in the type of company for which they want to work.

- **Opportunities for Professional Growth**
Although they do not actually care about big, fancy titles or positions, millennials do want to know that they are *making progress* by moving up in the company and increasing their level of responsibility.
- **Ability to Make a Difference**
Millennials also want to know that they are making a difference with the work they are doing. They want to help change the world by *doing significant work*. As one of their heroes Steve Jobs might say, they want to make a dent in the universe!
- **Opportunities for Personal Growth**
This is a generation that sees **education** and the constant **increase of skills** as their pathway to success. They are interested in taking part in intriguing and stimulating projects, they want to be sent to seminars and training classes, and they expect to have a mentor or coach.
- **Challenging Work**
Millennials want to do *exciting, cutting edge, and innovative work*. They get bored easily and need constant stimulation and motivation through challenging work that pushes them to use all of their skills, knowledge, and abilities.
- **Cool / Competent Colleagues**
Millennials also want to work with people who are super smart and talented so that they feel even more prepared to become better. It is important to them to work with a group of people who impress them with their skills and creativity. Although they prefer to work with people their own age, millennials also work very well with members of other generations.

ENGAGING YOUR EMPLOYEES

Listening to your ideal and future employees will help your company form a collective of formidable skill, but in order to *inspire the best work out of your people on a regular basis*, the culture of your company must keep them **engaged**. Therefore, you should implement these *nine elements for elevating engagement* in your business environment in order to build a winning culture.

1. Fun

In order to keep employees engaged, make your business an *enjoyable place to be*. This does not mean that you need to have a rock climbing wall, a sushi bar, and a keg party every Friday, but you should still check to see if you have a fun workplace. The way I test if a company is a fun place to work or not is by asking the question: “Do employees smile when they come to work in the morning and as they leave at the end of the day?” If people are excited as they come in to work in the morning and are happy when they leave it at the end of the day, then you can know that you probably have a pretty fun place to work.

2. Family

People are most engaged in a *familial atmosphere*: one that is welcoming, warm, and open. This means that employees show a genuine concern for each other. They ask about each other’s kids, families, weekends, and other personal aspects of their lives not to be intrusive, but because they are honestly interested in what their coworkers are doing.

3. Friends

When coworkers become friends, they develop relationships that extend outside of the workplace and improve interactions inside of the workplace. A great culture is one in which people feel that many of the folks they work with are their friends, and they might even consider a few of them their best friends.

4. Fairness

Engaged employees define **fairness** as fair hours, fair rules, a fair workload, and a fair hearing if something goes wrong. Interestingly, money was not listed in this area, or on the list at all, but if you will recall from earlier in this book, as long as you pay someone 10% above or below what they would make to do the same job at another organization, then pay is no longer a key motivator.

5. Freedom

Freedom is the energizing combination of *independence, training, support, resources, and tools*. No one wants to be micromanaged, so world-class companies hire top talent, give them all of the necessary support, and then get out of their way in order to let them go out and do a superb job.

6. Pride

A company does not have to be well known around the world for people to take pride in working there. This element of an excellent culture simply means that people are proud to tell their friends and neighbors where they work and will even wear a shirt with the company logo. They are proud of the *products and services* their company delivers, the ways in which their company supports the community, and *the values* upon which their company is based.

7. Praise

Your employees will be more engaged if you give them some sort of **genuine, honest, and sincere praise** once every seven to ten days. For many of you, this advice sounds daunting. You may be wondering, “How in the world can I find time to praise everybody that works for me once a week?” Well, here’s the key: the praise does not have to come just from the manager or the leader. Instead, it can come from *anyone within the organization*. Let me make an important point here: in most organizations, if you mess something up, 99% of the time, there will be someone there who will gladly point it out to you. However, if you do something good, 99% of the time, no one will say anything to you. I think this is a very bad way to run a business. To me, one of the fundamental elements of a winning culture is creating an organization where people go out of their way to “*catch people doing things right*.” In other words, companies should sustain a culture in which every employee is looking for ways to give genuine, honest, and sincere praise to their coworkers. People still need to be held accountable for doing substandard work, but it is a lot more fun to work someplace where you are getting a lot of praise for a job well done, too.

8. Meaning

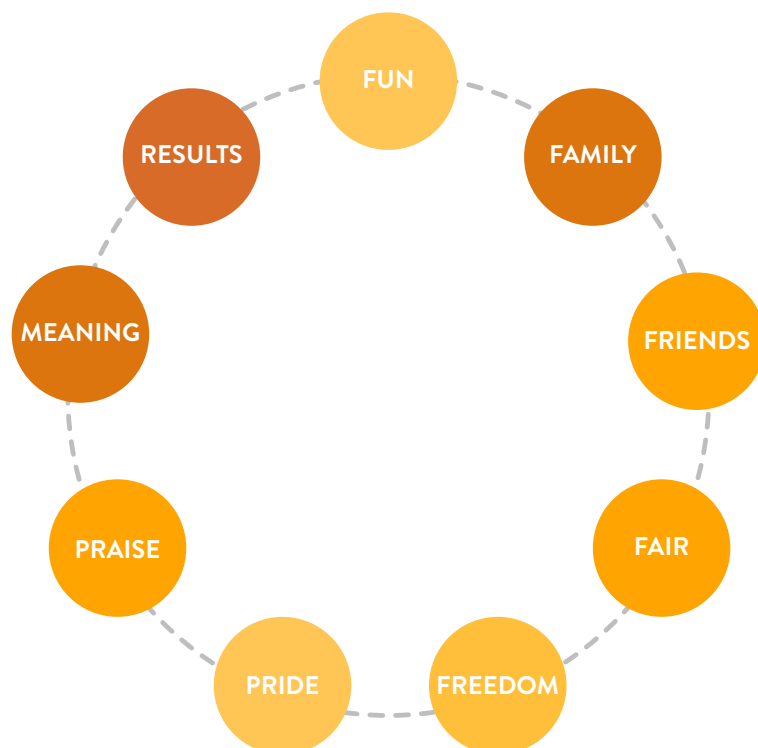
People long to do *important and meaningful* work, but even if the work your employees are doing is somewhat menial, they will still be engaged if your company as a whole is doing something meaningful, such as contributing to the community or charities. In this way, they may not feel super inspired

by their daily routine, but they are excited and engaged about how their organization is making a difference in their area and in the world.

9. Results

Employees want to feel a strong sense of **accomplishment**: they want to feel that they are doing important work, and they want to have the chance to point to something at the end of the day or week and say, “I did that: that is my work.”

As you review this list of items that inspire engagement, I want to point out that these are all what I call atmosphere issues, which means, they do not cost companies any money. As long as you are paying your employees fairly, then building a winning culture will not involve increasing company expenses. It will instead involve the implementation of positive and empowering company habits that will motivate your employees to make the most of their time at work by being fully engaged.



SUSTAINING A WINNING CULTURE

Once you put all of the elements of a winning culture in place, then you must create an atmosphere that *sustains and grows* that positive culture. Much like creating the values that underpin your organizational culture, this is not something you can simply dictate. Instead, culture lives or dies through the *efforts and focus of your employees*. Therefore, one of the main factors that sustain a superior culture is employees with an **ownership mentality** that treat the business as if it were their own and are personally committed to the success of the organization.

Ownership Mentality

It is absolutely critical to remember that a winning culture is not just a great place for the employee to work, but it is also a place that delivers **business results**. Yes, you want to construct a culture that attracts top talent and where employees are engaged, excited, and enthusiastic, but at the end of the day, they also have to make their numbers. As they like to say in the nonprofit world: no money, no mission.

As I talk to CEOs and business owners around the world, one of the main things they tell me they look for in someone they want to bring to their organization is an ownership mentality. This is the mark of a highly talented and skilled employee who is a fantastic team player and who focuses on *creativity, innovation, proactivity*, and most importantly, *accountability*.

Employees with an ownership mentality will become what I like to call **intrepreneurs**, which means that they will be entrepreneurial inside of the company. Intrepreneurs think of their place of work as

their own business, and they do their best possible work to deliver superior products and services while treating customers with terrific care. Employees with an ownership mentality are constantly trying to figure out how to increase market share, decrease costs, improve customer satisfaction, eliminate waste, innovate new products, outmaneuver the competition, and do everything they can to make the business more successful.



Two of my favorite books about how to build a world-class culture where employees have a strong ownership mentality are *The Orange Revolution* and *All In*, both written by Chester Elton and Adrian Gostick. I won't go through all of the details of these books, but in a massive research study, Elton and Gostick uncovered *four primary factors*, plus one additional *key factor*, that created **highly successful organizational cultures**. Here is my interpretation of what I learned from these two brilliant business thinkers.

In order to create an organization that fosters an ownership mentality, your company must focus on the following:

- **Trust**

High levels of trust in an organization are paramount to propagating an ownership mentality. There are many different models that demonstrate how to build trust, but to me, trust comes down to “Consistently Communicating that you are Competent and you Care” – what I like to call “**The 4 Cs of Trust.**” To build a high level of trust across your organization, people need to see that you are highly competent at your job and that you are working to get better every day. They also need to see that what you are doing is not just for your own personal success, but also for the success of the team, the company, the community, and frankly, the world. I can summarize the entire idea of building trust in this phrase: “*I’m good at what I do, and I do it because I care about you.*” This sort of trust is the foundation of an ownership mentality.

- **Accountability**

The most important idea about accountability in an organization is that it must be **mutual accountability**.

Everyone in the organization must hold themselves personally accountable for achieving the goals they have set for themselves; they must hold everyone else mutually accountable for the goals that the company has agreed upon; and they also must expect to be held accountable for their personal goals and for the company goals by everyone else. When your company contains these three factors – *personal accountability, mutual accountability, and organizational accountability* – you have high performance teams, a high performance organization, and a high performance culture.

- **Goal Setting**

In order to instill an ownership mentality into the minds of your employees, you need to teach everyone in your organization to set **clear, specific, measurable, and binary** (one or zero – black or white – yes or no – no guessing) **goals**. Binary goals are important because *ambiguity breeds mediocrity!* To achieve consistently exceptional work, you must create very clear expectations about what great work looks like and how it will be measured. Also, when you are rigorous about setting clear, specific, measurable, and binary goals, this practice allows you to remove the politics, the personality, and the emotions that can make holding people accountable very difficult for many people.

- **Communication**

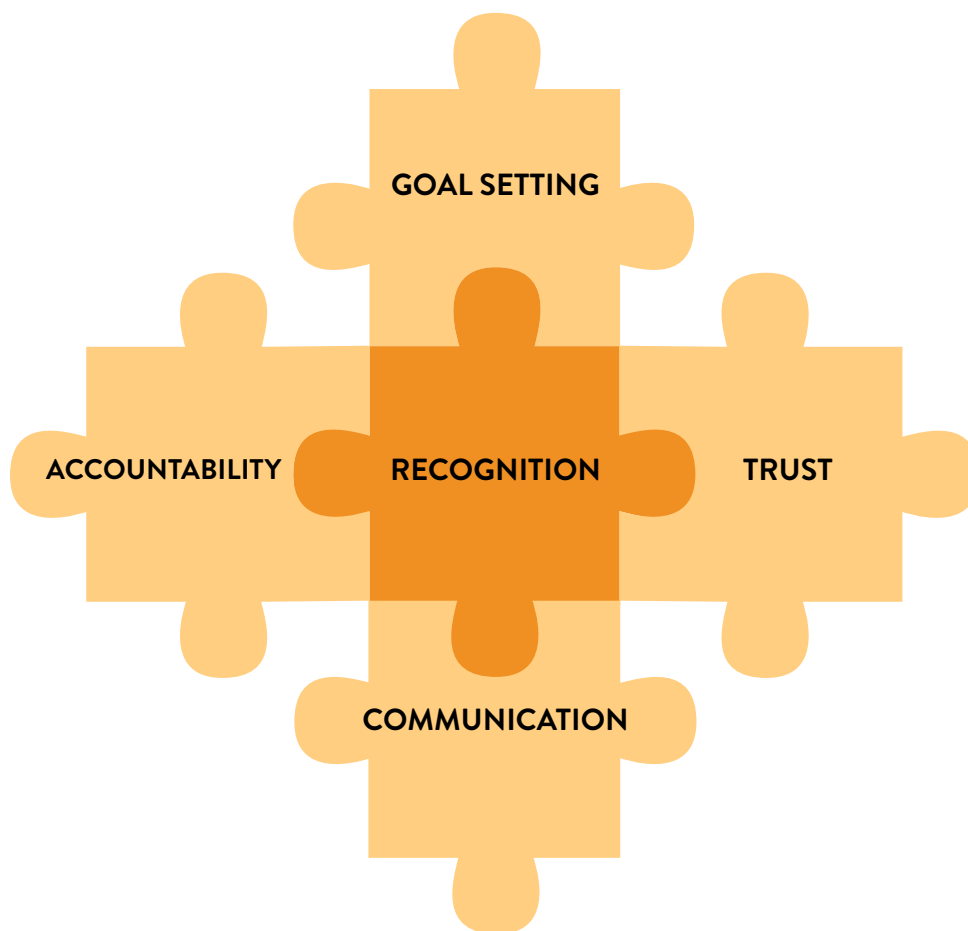
The key words for the communication that supports an ownership mentality are **open, honest, robust**, and most importantly, **transparent**. In order for your organization to practice this kind of communication, you should share *as much information as you humanly can*

with everyone in your organization because people without access to information do not have to take accountability for their actions. When you have provided an employee with all kinds of information and everything you can share, then you can hold them to a very high level of accountability. The lack of open, honest, robust, and transparent communication creates a void that soon fills with the fear, rumormongering, politics, and finger-pointing that destroy morale and productivity.

- **Recognition**

In order to encourage your employees to take ownership for their work, it is critical to *celebrate wins of all sizes*.

No matter the accomplishment, whether big or small, find a reason to say “thank you”, and say it in a variety of ways. You can recognize exemplary performance with rewards other than money: try offering a Starbucks card, dinner out with their partner, some flex time, or even, the most valuable thing a leader can give an employee, a handwritten note.



EMPHASIZING THE TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF AN OWNERSHIP MENTALITY

Due to the amount of questions and concerns business owners, executives, and managers constantly bring before me about these two subjects, I would like to deliberately hone in on the priorities of **trust** and **accountability**.

Trust

Recently, I had a senior executive from a Fortune 100 company say to me, “We talk about trust all the time, and how important it is to business success, but can you tell me specifically what I have to do to build more trust?” Here is what I told him were the *seven keys to building trust*.

1. **Tell the truth**

Tell the truth *all of the time* no matter what. Telling the truth is fundamental because where there is no honesty, there is no trust; where there is no trust, there is no leadership; and where there is no leadership, there is no lasting business success.

2. **Be transparent**

I have said this before, and I will say it again: *share as much information with your people as you possibly can*. Short of things that are truly proprietary or information you cannot legally share, you should tell your employees everything you can because the more information you share, the more accountability you will have and the better culture you will create.

3. **Extend trust and respect**

This is a really tough idea for some people to embrace, but if you want to build strong trust and respect, you

have to *extend full trust and respect first*. You cannot withhold your trust and respect until the other person “earns” it, because that may take months or even years. Instead, you must learn to give your employees your full trust and respect right away. Now, I’m not telling you to be naïve and let people take advantage of you; if they violate your trust, you can take it away, but giving your employees the benefit of the doubt and extending full trust and respect to them is indispensable to *sustaining a winning culture*.

4. **Be vulnerable**

Some people believe that to be an effective leader, you have to have all of the answers, always know what to do, always be in charge, and always be in control, but this is simply *not true*. Believe me, everybody knows you don’t have all the answers because nobody does. Everybody also knows that you can’t handle everything all by yourself because nobody can. You absolutely need to be strong, decisive, and confident 85-90% of the time, but during the 10-15% of the time when you really need help, *be vulnerable* by telling people, “I need your help. This is why I put you on my team: you are much better at this than me, and I need your best ideas, advice, and assistance.” Make your employees feel valued by being vulnerable enough to admit that you’re not Superman or Superwoman. This kind of vulnerability will enable you to build trust.

5. **Eliminate drama**

Distractions take time away from productivity and ruin culture. Games, politics, rumors, finger-pointing, and cliques destroy productivity, teamwork, camaraderie, and eventually, business success. Refuse to tolerate drama and

politics in your organization because *it is impossible to have a winning culture* with these sorts of elements within your business.

6. **Keep your promises**

The key word here is: **integrity**. Do what you said you would do. Keeping your promises also encompasses consistency because an inconsistent person is very hard to trust. If you act one way today and another way tomorrow, no one will have any confidence in your character, and *no confidence = no trust*.

7. **Communicate clearly**

One of the most evil enemies of clear communication is *being in a hurry*. You think you're being efficient by using as few words as possible and finishing the conversation quickly, but this is actually a recipe for communication disaster. People who are excellent communicators take just a few extra seconds or an extra minute or two in order to establish *clear expectations* and *shared meaning*. Trust is terminated when one person feels like the other person didn't tell them the truth because they thought they understood what the other person meant, or they thought the other person understood what they meant. These assumptions leave people with incorrect expectations that eventually cause big problems, but if you are careful to communicate clearly by committing more time to the conversation, you will be able to avoid future accusations of lying or misleading, and your foundation of trust will be secure.

Utilizing these seven keys to building trust in your organization will strengthen the sense of an ownership mentality amongst your employees and will continuously bolster the winning culture you have built.



Accountability

Delivering business results is one of the primary functions of a winning culture; however, this is one of the major areas with which nearly every company I have worked with struggles. There are numerous companies that have excellent strategies, superb products and services, and a great culture of innovation, yet they fail to achieve the success they are capable of because they have a hard time holding people accountable for delivering on what they are assigned to do. So, after exploring the subject of accountability for years and years throughout my career, I have unearthed the *five fundamentals to creating high levels of accountability* across your organization, and I will share them with you.

1. **Provide 100% clarity plus the appropriate authority and resources**

When you are going to hold someone accountable for a particular project or responsibility, you must sit down with that person and provide them with **extreme clarity** about what you expect. In order for you to properly prepare them to be accountable, you must make sure that they know what success looks like; how success is going to be measured; what the timeline is; what the budget is; what they will be held accountable for; how many resources they will have; and how much authority they will have. It is especially critical that you supply them with authority and resources because there is nothing more frustrating to top talent than to be assigned a mission-critical project and have no authority or resources with which to complete it.

2. **Confirm complete agreement**

When you are talking directly to the person you will hold accountable, you must confirm **complete agreement** with them. They have to be able to say that they understand the timeline, the budget, the due dates, the metrics, the measures of success, and your expectations, and they have to accept 100% accountability for what they feel is a reasonable goal.

3. **Track and post**

If you are going to hold someone accountable to a very specific and measurable goal, you need to make sure that they understand exactly where *they stand against that goal* at all times. A great way to accomplish this is to create some sort of a dashboard where you track everyone's progress against their goals. There are two key ideas around tracking goals. The first is that you have to make it *extremely simple* for people to understand how they are doing on their goals. For example, you might use green for good progress, yellow for danger, and red for problems so that everyone can tell at a glance exactly where they stand against their goal. The second important issue is that this track record must be posted *where everyone in the organization can see everyone else's goals and progress*. Cut down all of the trees: don't leave any place for someone to hide, but instead, make the dashboard **highly visible** and **very easy to understand**.

Now, when you begin to track and post the progress of everyone in your company, you will likely receive mixed reactions from your employees. Typically, about 10% of your employees will freak out about this practice because they know that they do mediocre work, and now everyone

else will know it too! Another 10% will be thrilled because they are your best performers and will get clear credit for all of the great work they do. Finally, the middle 80% will be shocked because most people equate tracking with punishment, so you need to show them that you are tracking them not to get them in trouble, but to make sure that they don't get in trouble, and you can accomplish this with step number four.

4. **Coach, mentor, train, and support**

As soon as someone slips from green to yellow on the dashboard, rather than getting upset with them and giving them a hard time, you should give them *as much support, help, and assistance as you can*. You can offer to send them to training, get them a mentor, supply them with additional resources, or whatever else you can do to help them get back to green as quickly as possible. After you do this several times, people will begin to shift their thinking, and instead of equating tracking with punishment, they will begin to see *tracking as a tool* with which they can get more support, help, and resources. Once they understand this, people will embrace the idea of tracking and posting because they see it as a way to make sure that they never get in trouble and always stay in the green.

5. **Reward success and punish failure**

When someone delivers on their promises and goals, you want to reward this positive behavior with **strong positive reinforcement**. Become an organization in which people who hold themselves accountable are promoted and celebrated. At the same time,

deal decisively with mediocrity. If you don't really hold people accountable for failing to deliver on their responsibilities, then you are telling everybody else that you were just kidding about accountability. Instead, set clear, specific, measurable, and binary goals that people agree upon; accept accountability; track and post their progress; coach and support them when they struggle; and do everything you can to set them up for success.



The information I have introduced here is the compilation of my own extensive fieldwork and many insightful facts from organizations such as Great Places to Work, Gallup, and Firms of Endearment, as well as two exceptional books by Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton, *All In* and *The Orange Revolution*. The studies, surveys, and experience of myself and these genius groups and individuals verify the tremendous value of a winning culture, and the points I have presented in this document detail how to build and sustain a winning culture in your organization.



ABOUT JOHN SPENCE

John Spence is the author of four books, a business management consultant, an executive trainer, and a speaker with a client list that includes numerous Fortune 500 firms, small to medium-sized businesses, and other organizations around the globe.

At twenty-six, he was the CEO of an international Rockefeller foundation, overseeing projects in twenty countries. Just two years later, he was an Inc. Magazine Up and Coming Young Business Leader. Today, John is recognized as one of the Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America, one of the Top 100 Small Business Influencers in America, and one of the Top 500 Leadership Development Experts in the World. John is also one of the American Management Association's Leaders to Watch in 2015 along with Sergey Brin, Larry Page and Jeff Bezos.

He has been a guest lecturer at more than ninety colleges and universities including MIT, Stanford, Cornell, and the Wharton School of Business. He has been the owner or CEO of ten companies and has made a career out of "Making the Very Complex... Awesomely Simple".

