

ARTICLE

Synchronizing leadership and culture for breakthrough success

Three tactics for developing inspiring leadership and thriving cultures, even while navigating crises and uncertainty



The current war in Ukraine is a unique, historic story that will be eternally seared in our collective memories. Although the specific dynamics are complex, idiosyncratic, and not readily transferable, fundamental truths about leadership and culture—tenets that are relevant to organizations of all kinds—are clear.

The war in Ukraine, rising inflation, and energy price spikes are just the most recent, extreme, and painful shocks to our global systems. Leaders and organizations were grappling with fast-changing technologies, supply shortages, hybrid work, and a reset of worker expectations before Russia invaded Ukraine. But that conflict, with its vivid and captivating examples of courage, agility, and empathy, has underscored the need for extraordinary leadership to cope with chronic disruption and crisis. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy demonstrates every day that with courageous, agile, strategic, transparent, and forward-looking leadership, it is possible to adapt to even the fastest-moving and most gut-wrenching disruption and trauma. At the same time, the leaders and people of Ukraine show us that a strong culture, reflecting identity, values, and a united purpose, is a powerful motivator in times of upheaval. Furthermore, the empathy and humanity of people in and outside Ukraine demonstrate the force of collective will and intercultural connectivity. As one military trainer wrote after a recent mission to Ukraine: “I was so moved by the Ukrainians I met—their love of one another, their love of country, their pride and selflessness. The motto of Yuri’s hometown translates to something like, ‘We all sleep under the same blanket.’”¹

The current war in Ukraine is a unique, historic story that will be eternally seared in our collective memories. Although the specific dynamics are complex, idiosyncratic, and not readily transferable, fundamental truths about leadership and culture—tenets that are relevant to organizations of all kinds—are clear. What is happening right now is an extreme example of an insight we have garnered over the years: when culture and leadership are interwoven and synchronized, the impact can be profound. Our work with many organizations and our research show how leaders, when embodying the essence of a strong and positive culture, can inspire their own organizations to transcend what was thought possible. Agile, courageous, humane leadership is needed to adapt to uncertainty, disruption, new ways of working, new demands from customers, and digital transformation. When leaders with those traits build a culture with purpose, psychological safety and belonging, they can shape organizations that can accelerate and continuously adapt.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy demonstrates every day that with courageous, agile, strategic, transparent, and forward-looking leadership, it is possible to adapt to even the fastest-moving and most gut-wrenching disruption and trauma.



¹ Zachary A. Burgart “I trained Ukrainians to fight Russia. I’ve never seen a war like this,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2022, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

Inspiration from Ukraine

“You understand that they’re watching. You’re a symbol. You need to act the way the head of state must act.”

Volodymyr Zelenskyy
Ukrainian President

Over the past four decades, we have found that the fastest way to create a positive, self-fulfilling prophecy about culture change is when top leaders individually and collectively shift their own behaviors.² As we see increasing evidence of Ukraine’s military prowess, we observe what we call the “leadership shadow” drawing strength from as well as giving shape to the culture. Marie Yovanovitch, former United States Ambassador to Ukraine, recently described Zelenskyy as “a president who has masterful communication skills and has really met his moment.”³ As we watch Zelenskyy reinvent himself with purpose, courage, and agility, he is reflecting the cultural aspirations and ideals of his country and people. In the early days of the conflict, comments such as “I don’t need a ride; I need weapons” captured the country’s collective culture and spirit. And he has clearly realized the shadow he casts, as he explained to a journalist: “You understand that they’re watching. You’re a symbol. You need to act the way the head of state must act.”⁴

When his entire leadership team showed the courage and commitment to stay and be visible in Kyiv, the message and mindset were poignant and inspiring. And Zelenskyy’s leadership shadow is influencing that team. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Ukraine’s top military commander, “epitomizes a new generation of Ukrainian officers”⁵ who have built a decentralized, empowered, agile way of warfare based on NATO collaboration.

Given the shadow a leader casts, however, it is not enough to just commit to the values and behaviors of the culture and communicate them effectively. Based on our research and work, we have identified four characteristics that leaders and cultures need to have naturally or develop to meet this moment: innovation, agility, humanity, and courage. In Ukraine, we see each of them every day.



² Rose Gailey and Ian Johnston, *Future-Focused: Shape Your Culture. Shape Your Future*, Chicago: Networkling Publishing, 2021.

³ Terry Gross, “Former Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch warns Putin will move west if he wins in Ukraine,” NPR, March 15, 2022, npr.org.

⁴ Justin McCurry, “Russian forces reportedly came close to capturing Zelenskyy during first hours of invasion,” *The Guardian*, April 29, 2022, theguardian.com.

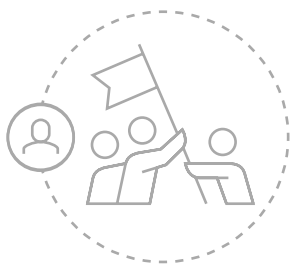
⁵ David M. Herszenhorn and Paul McLeary, “Ukraine’s ‘iron general’ is a hero, but he’s no star,” *Politico*, April 8, 2022, politico.com.



Innovation and agility: The Ukrainian army, according to military experts, is doing as well as it is because it has adopted a modern, Western model of military leadership that relies on the ability of every individual soldier, from the private to the general, not only to understand the mission but to use his or her initiative to innovate on a chaotic and ever-changing battlefield. Tactics such as hitting and ambushing Russian forces behind contact lines with small, light special forces teams have proven to be among the Ukrainian army's most effective field tactics. Off the battlefield, Ukraine's creative use of social media, digital, video, and other digital communication tools has also shown innovation in keeping the country's cause at the forefront of global concern. Meanwhile, a lack of agility is strikingly evident in the Russian military's performance. One Ukrainian leader highlighted the agility of its modern tactics by saying, "We are like a hive of bees. One bee is nothing, but if you are faced with a thousand, it can defeat a big force. We are like bees, but we work at night."⁶



Humanity: A human-centered approach—leaders modeling and others practicing cultural values held in common—is part of what has made Ukraine's resistance possible. Dozens of leaders in Zelenskyy's cabinet, Parliament, and mayors from around the country have been visible, passionate, persuasive, and very human. They speak to us from basements, bomb shelters, and battlefields in army fatigues and with their families. Many are women, and many are young. The younger leaders, in particular, have few memories of life under Soviet rule and are determined to protect the freedoms of the only country they have known. One young member of Ukrainian Parliament, Alyona Shkrum, captured this sentiment in describing the women's battalion, a group of female leaders working to change culture and history. She emphasized that the 2014 revolution that ousted a pro-Russian president "was like a big elevator for people to become politicians, to become leaders."⁷ And that inspiration has gone beyond Ukrainians. Chef José Andrés and his World Central Kitchen began feeding people after an earthquake in Haiti in 2010, and now, in collaboration with local chefs in Ukraine and Poland, are currently providing some 300,000 meals a day, even after one restaurant was destroyed by Russian missile strikes that led to two deaths and several hospitalizations.⁸



Courage: Fundamentally, courage is where the examples of Ukraine's leaders are most moving. Zelenskyy stands out because, as one observer put it, in the face of an unequal playing field he stands his ground and "proves the truth of the adage that one man with courage makes a majority."⁹ But, underscoring the shadow of the leader idea, so many other Ukrainian leaders and people also display courage day after day in the most extreme forms. They are literally putting their lives on the line and taking huge risks—with their agility, humanity, and innovation—in the hope that their strategies work and the world comes to their aid. Although Ukraine's story will unfold over years, their courage is inspiring for all of us.

These fundamental truths about leadership and culture play out far less dramatically—but still with meaningful consequences for countless people and organizations—every day. In what follows, we explore these ideas in the business context.

6 Julian Borger, "The drone operators who halted Russian convoy headed for Kyiv," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2022, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

7 Franco Ordoñez, "War crystalizes young Ukrainian leaders' calls for a future aligned with Europe," NPR, April 17, 2022, [npr.org](https://www.npr.org).

8 Tamara Hardingham-Gill, "Celebrity chef's Ukraine charity kitchen destroyed by Russian missile," CNN, April 18, 2022, [cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com).

9 Bret Stephens, "Why we admire Zelensky," *New York Times*, April 19, 2022, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

1. Understand that it all starts with the leader

The fastest way to create a positive, self-fulfilling prophecy about culture change is when top leaders individually and collectively shift their own behaviors.¹⁰ A survey we conducted in 2021 shows that CEOs who link culture and performance most deeply—we call them “culture connectors”—live the culture more than other leaders. When asked about how they communicate at scale, for example, 80% of these CEOs selected “personal commitment to focusing on culture” (at companies with less powerful connections between culture and performance, only 45% of CEOs said this.¹¹ And, ultimately, by default or design, it is the CEO whose shadow most influences the culture.

This deeply felt need to transmit culture was central to how Yum! Brands founder David Novak led that company. We observed up close how his view that leadership is a privilege was evident in his humility and passion for unleashing potential in others. He was always seeking ways to grow as a leader and challenged other leaders to personally commit to a culture of growth and development: “Leaders cast a long shadow,” he said. “Because they do so, they must consistently use the awesome power of recognition, especially if they hope to attract and retain committed, loyal talent to their organizations.”¹²

Once leaders have agreed on or developed a clear cultural ambition, active communication as well as personal commitment are required from them. Our research on culture connectors shows that they focus on clear, effective communication, both internally and externally, and that they go the extra mile to engage all people by building high levels of communication and trust. Many of the most effective leaders bring a thriving culture to life via storytelling.

Learning or emphasizing new skills or mindsets is often part of the personal change leaders must make to be authentic role models. Chuck Fallon, currently the CEO of US-based ELM Home & Building Solutions, for example, described being “quite conscious that when you have the title you can rip people’s worlds apart without even noticing it—it’s the negative side of that shadow. I am who I am. I have a work ethic that’s pretty intense, a work–life balance that’s more work than balance—and it’s been important for me to learn that not everybody will reflect that. I needed to understand that teammates around me don’t necessarily need to work that way. I learned to be curious. I spend a fair amount of time asking people questions about how they want to do things, and ensuring people know they have the freedom to get across the finish line in their own way. It doesn’t have to look like me to be right.”

“I have a work ethic that’s pretty intense, a work–life balance that’s more work than balance—and it’s been important for me to learn that not everybody will reflect that. I needed to understand that teammates around me don’t necessarily need to work that way.”

Chuck Fallon

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¹⁰ Rose Gailey and Ian Johnston, *Future-Focused: Shape Your Culture. Shape Your Future*, Chicago: Networkling Publishing, 2021.

¹¹ Rose Gailey, Ian Johnston, and Andrew LeSueur, *Aligning Culture with the Bottom Line: How Companies Can Accelerate Progress*, Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com, 2021, p. 58.

¹² Rose Gailey and Ian Johnston, *Future-Focused: Shape Your Culture. Shape Your Future*, Chicago: Networkling Publishing,

2. Meet the moment with forward-looking qualities

In the context of a turbulent world, with escalating external demands and internal expectations, the four characteristics noted earlier—innovation, agility, humanity, and courage—are critical and must be modeled by leaders and reflected in culture.¹³

Innovation: Adapting and growing to meet, or beat, the rate of change

Our research shows that “creating possibilities from new thinking” is an attribute that differentiates the best leaders from the rest. These leaders are personally curious and adept at identifying novel angles and hidden possibilities. This helps solve problems and spot opportunities for innovation and positive impact. Julie Sweet, Accenture’s CEO, said in a recent interview that she looks for two main characteristics when hiring: “The first is curiosity. The new normal is continuous learning, and we look for people who demonstrate lots of different interests and really demonstrate curiosity.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, curiosity and thinking dexterity are in short supply in most leaders and must be developed deliberately.¹⁵



External innovation requires digital tools, designing new business models, and adapting faster to changing customer expectations for a frictionless experience. Internally, innovation focuses on developing talent faster and better, breaking down barriers to collaboration, and empowering people to take timely decisions closer to the customer. Innovators have a learning orientation. They think and act differently without getting stuck in old ways or fear of being wrong.

Since 2019, Kevin Clark, the CEO of Aptiv, formerly an auto parts manufacturer, has been transforming his organization to be an innovator in response to tremendous shifts in the automotive industry. As he put it, “Fully capitalizing on this opportunity requires comprehensive solutions that enable software to be developed faster, deployed seamlessly, and optimized throughout the vehicle life cycle by leveraging data-driven insights.”¹⁶

The clarity of Clark’s vision and his steadfast perseverance in the face of health, geopolitical, economic, and supply chain challenges have been adopted across the organization. He has pushed teams to embrace innovation, new technology, and new ways of working to fundamentally shift the company’s identity to that of an innovation leader.

Clark’s ability to inspire and build followership for his vision has set the bar for his leadership team, who have risen to the occasion. The majority of leaders received high marks from their teams on leading innovation, showing notable improvement over just two years. Among their tactics were innovative idea competitions open to all employees and an increased focus on product quality innovation, with coaching and feedback on the creative thought process.

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¹³ These four elements of leadership are in addition to those other Heidrick & Struggles research has found to be particularly tied to successful leadership over time, pre- and post-COVID. For more, see TA Mitchell and Sharon Sands, “Future-ready leaders: Finding effective leaders who can grow with your company,” Heidrick & Struggles, on heidrick.com.

¹⁴ David Gelles, “Julie Sweet of Accenture could see her future. So she quit her job,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2019, nytimes.com.

¹⁵ Steven Krupp and Becky Hogan, “Agility for the long term,” Heidrick & Struggles, on heidrick.com.

¹⁶ Aptiv, “Aptiv announces the acquisition of Wind River, a leading provider of intelligent edge software solutions, from TPG,” press release, January 11, 2022, aptiv.com.

Our research on organizations that sustain growth over time shows that agility is a critical factor that has a multiplier effect on other organizational strengths to accelerate performance.

In each situation, the ability of the top teams to learn, adapt, be resilient, and develop foresight in response to the most pressing effects of each crisis or disruption was crucial to their agile response.

Agility: Shifting, adapting, and anticipating

Our research on organizations that sustain growth over time shows that agility is a critical factor that has a multiplier effect on other organizational strengths to accelerate performance.¹⁷ The need for increased agility in today's business world has been self-evident. Some organizations and leaders were particularly agile in responding to COVID-19 by accelerating digital transformation, e-commerce, new customer engagement or business models, and new ways of working. Others pivoted quickly, too, in response to the murder of George Floyd and the calls for racial and social justice that followed. Companies have needed to be agile again in the face of ongoing supply chain disruption, oil shortages, extreme market volatility, and persistent digital disruption. And of course, many companies have been agile in response not only to the war in Ukraine but also to the refugee disaster that has followed. In each situation, the ability of the top teams to learn, adapt, be resilient, and develop foresight in response to the most pressing effects of each crisis or disruption was crucial to their agile response, as we have described elsewhere.¹⁸

Over the past two years, the performance-driven head of the IT function of a large medical devices company has led a culture shift. His organization was central to the digital transformation of the company and has led it through the demanding technological challenges brought by COVID-19 in addition to the broader transformation technology shifts. This leader has strategically built the team culture to be agile, responsive, and collaborative with other functions, elevating the function's prominence and reputation within the broader organization. Emulating his leadership shadow, his leadership team and the rest of the people in IT have furthered their reputation and relationships with other functions because they are responding more quickly, flexibly, and innovatively to the needs of end users. The leadership team embraced their leader's innovative mindset and agility, cascading an eagerness to experiment and openness to change, which has been a critical success factor for the broader transformation. Surveys assessing the function's top leaders show strong alignment between the new, more agile and collaborative culture and the leadership team priorities.



¹⁷ For example, see Alice Breeden, TA Mitchell, and Becky Hogan, "Bringing your organization up to speed," Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

¹⁸ For more on this, see Steven Krupp and Becky Hogan, "Agility for the long term," Heidrick & Struggles, on heidrick.com.

Humanity: Being purpose driven, inclusive, and empathetic



Other Heidrick & Struggles research shows that purposeful leadership is one of the top three aspects of culture that has a positive effect on performance. But purpose alone isn't enough. Leaders always influence their organizations, but those who are actively inclusive are more effective at doing so.

Our analysis of more than 30,000 surveys taken by 3,000 organizational leaders and their teams shows that inclusive leaders seek out and value individuality to gain different perspectives and create a sense of belonging for all team members, as well as building deep alignment on a clear purpose.¹⁹

In corporations, attention to the human side of enterprise has long been a performance differentiator, even if one practiced by few leaders. But now it is critical—and more complicated than ever—to retain the trust and commitment of employees and customers. Decent pay, safe working conditions, and a generous vacation policy would once have been enough for many workers. Now, as much recent research has documented, people are demanding more personal value and purpose from both life and work.²⁰ Corporate leaders are facing the “great reflection and resignation,” with significant increases in the number of knowledge workers and leaders who are shifting to working on demand to get more flexibility and control.²¹ Human-centered leaders must design environments and ways of working that are flexible, inviting, and attractive to people who want more autonomy about the where, when, and how of work and the societal engagement of their employer.

Back-to-office planning is an area where many CEOs faltered in taking an inclusive approach. Some demanded that everyone be back in the office and then had to backtrack many times. Others seemed unsympathetic to the fundamental ways people's lives have shifted through the pandemic.

But some are getting it right. For example, the consumer goods conglomerate Helen of Troy crafted a human-centered purpose long before COVID-19: “Elevating lives, soaring together.” CEO Julien Mininberg and a handpicked team of top performers then defined the company's core values in very human terms: they are in touch, have mutual respect and integrity, share success, and have exceptional people who feel and act like passionate owners.

These values were subsequently embedded into the company's return-to-work approach so that the plan and messages for a predictable hybrid work model supported living the company's purpose. Benefits were refreshed to support a healthy work-life balance, with specific accommodations for people who are working in hybrid arrangements. Clear, factual communications about navigating in the workplace for vaccinated and unvaccinated employees with a respectful, safety-first approach were another element of the planning. Because the situation has been fluid, plans emphasize testing and adjusting as needed.

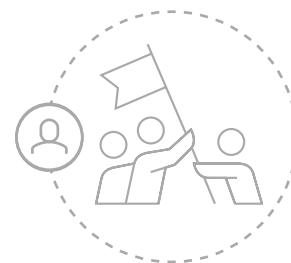
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¹⁹ Alice Breeden, TA Mitchell, and Becky Hogan, “Bringing your organization up to speed,” Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

²⁰ Jackie Wiles, “Employees seek personal value and purpose at work. Be prepared to deliver,” Gartner, January 13, 2022, gartner.com.

²¹ 2022 Talent Lens: *Insights from Inside the Rapidly Growing High-End Independent Talent Economy*, Business Talent Group, March 2022, resources.businesstalentgroup.com.

Courage: Making bold choices and taking risks based on deep commitment to a cause



To be agile, human centered, and innovative takes courage for most CEOs. When Indra Nooyi, then PepsiCo's CEO, introduced the idea of purpose being core to performance, before the era of ESG, it was a radical change that required courage to persevere in the face

of internal and external skeptics. Today, she is lauded for that move, which included a focus on healthy foods and nutrition generally for the company.²² And leaders can build the necessary courage. ELM's Chuck Fallon has recently undertaken a major culture shift, from a command and control culture that created a lot of fear of speaking up to one of transparency and respect for every employee. Fallon has led such work at other companies, and explained that this time it took less courage to take a values-driven stand and persevere in the face of pushback than it would have 10 years ago because "if you have faith in the character of your people, you'll get through anything."

Aptiv's shift, described earlier, took agility, innovation, and humanity, but it was also courageous and risky to lead a radical reinvention. In March 2020, when Aptiv leaders in Wuhan, China, heard that some ambulances weren't usable because of missing parts, they took courage to the next level. Working under considerable constraints—and in the face of the fear of a then-little-known virus—the team came together to manufacture critical components for ambulances, even though the city was on lockdown and all roads leading in and out of it were closed, disrupting supply chains. Managers risked their lives and came back to their work site to adapt their operations to include new safe operation protocols. Once they tested the protocols themselves and learned enough to be sure they could bring people back safely, they communicated the procedures to their teams and offered them the option to return. And the teams did. Enough people returned to the work site that the critical ambulance components could be produced and delivered.²³

Most leaders and cultures today face disruption and the need to reinvent. Even if you have the agility, humanity, and innovation to let go of the old model to forge the new one, it will require a great deal of courage, a leap of faith, and taking significant risk without any certainty on how it will play out.

"If you have faith in the character of your people, you'll get through anything."

Chuck Fallon

CEO of ELM Home & Building Solutions

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²² "Leaders with Lacqua: Business leader Indra Nooyi," Bloomberg, April 13, 2022, bloomberg.com.

²³ Yulia Barnakova and Steven Krupp, "The future is now: How leaders can seize the moment to build thriving organizations," Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

3. Synchronize leadership and culture in real time

As leaders commit themselves to shaping a positive culture and find the courage to support agility, humanity, and innovation in the face of ever-changing turbulence, they must be intentional to keep themselves, the culture, and the organization in sync. We have written extensively elsewhere about systems and processes designed to support and assess culture.²⁴

Two particularly important tactics to sync culture and leadership are developing future leaders and engaging those with influence or leadership potential as culture champions.

Targeting, developing, and advancing future leaders who reflect the culture

Future-ready leaders must be encouraged and given opportunities to step up, reinvent themselves, and shape—or reshape—the company culture as needed.

Senior corporate leaders looking to find talent with new leadership mindsets and the ability to learn fast must:

- Build trust with potential leaders
- Shape flexible, individualized career paths that support constant learning
- Help these potential leaders shape the broader networks that will allow them to see and respond to constant change

Leveraging future leaders as culture champions

Champions role-model and live the company's values in their day-to-day work, in real time, and at key moments that matter. Making sure that these culture champions are also the potential leaders of the organization aligns leadership and culture and ensures they stay synchronized.

Such champions move the organization or their team toward the new culture with tactics such as:

- Keeping cultural ideals and values top of mind
- Assisting leaders and teams to set the right tone in meetings
- Pointing out the connections between results and culture—and when cultural messages may need to be tweaked as conditions are changing
- Transferring knowledge to leaders and teams and equipping them to be self-sufficient

²⁴ For more on building a thriving organizational culture, see Rose Gailey and Ian Johnston, "Building a road map to improve culture metrics—and financial metrics," in *Future-Focused: Shape Your Culture. Shape Your Future*, Chicago: Networkling Publishing, 2021.

Senior corporate leaders must find talent with new leadership mindsets and the ability to learn fast. These future-ready leaders must be encouraged and given opportunities to step up, reinvent themselves, and shape—or reshape—the culture as needed.

Even the most successful cultures must be tweaked and refreshed where misalignment threatens. Likewise, systems and processes have to evolve as needed to sustain alignment.

Targeting, developing, and advancing future leaders who reflect the culture

Developing future leaders has always been important, but it has grown far more complicated as what it takes to lead has been changing—and will likely continue to change—so rapidly. Senior corporate leaders must find talent with new leadership mindsets and the ability to learn fast. These future-ready leaders must be encouraged and given opportunities to step up, reinvent themselves, and shape—or reshape—the culture as needed. This involves rethinking how to identify potential leaders, including people who are younger, more diverse, and female and who have more agile mindsets.²⁵ Senior executives must build trust with them; shape flexible, individualized career paths that support constant learning;²⁶ and help them shape the broader networks that will allow them to see and respond to constant change.²⁷

One company has identified key P&L roles critical to its growth aspirations. To accelerate people in these roles for success, the company assesses them against future requirements and creates development plans to build new capabilities. These leaders are surrounded with a support system of coaches and mentors, as well as provided targeted learning to add future-ready skills in agility, digital innovation, collaboration, and high-impact communications. They are accountable for demonstrating how they live the culture as part of their developmental success. Such systemic alignment is crucial to maintaining a thriving culture over time.

And developing leaders themselves must be willing to shatter old mental models, create ideas from new thinking, and experiment to see what works. Companies must support them in doing so, rather than penalizing failure, plus ensure new habits are embedded in day-to-day work and culture. Another company has designed a leader development experience focused on adopting mindsets and behaviors. This is aligned with ongoing culture change goals to be more agile, digital, collaborative, courageous, and risk tolerant. The program includes a robust learning journey that equips participants to practice and apply their new skills to current business transformation challenges.

Finally, current and potential leaders must realize that this work is a marathon, not a sprint. Metrics, assessments, and communication are needed to continuously develop talent and culture consistently. Even the most successful cultures must be tweaked and refreshed where misalignment threatens. Likewise, systems and processes have to evolve as needed to sustain alignment.

²⁵ For more on this, see Steven Krupp and Becky Hogan, “Agility for the long term,” Heidrick & Struggles, on [heidrick.com](#).

²⁶ For more on the role of career development in talent retention, see Lisa B. Baird, Steven Krupp, and Dorothy Badie, “The overlooked weapon in the war for talent,” Heidrick & Struggles, [heidrick.com](#).

²⁷ TA Mitchell and Sharon Sands, “The leadership kaleidoscope: How organizations can help leaders meet their new mandate,” Heidrick & Struggles, [heidrick.com](#).

Leveraging future leaders as culture champions

In any context, culture is best supported, we have found, by an active network of culture champions who understand the links between the strategy, the culture, and the organization; are committed to nurturing the culture to drive performance; can embed culture in everyday ways of working; and are able to communicate clearly. As other Heidrick & Struggles' research demonstrates, "the most effective way to lead culture-shaping work ... is to engage as many as possible of those leaders—and particularly trusted frontline leaders—in playing visible roles as champions and carriers of the culture across the organization."²⁸

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Champions role-model and live the company's values in their day-to-day work, in real time, and at key moments that matter, often out of the limelight, away from headquarters and senior executives. Making sure that these culture champions are also the potential leaders of the organization aligns leadership and culture and—because of the feedback loops between the two—helps ensure they stay synchronized.

When Chuck Fallon was CEO of FirstService, a US-based residential property management company, he was faced with the challenge of creating a newly unified organization that had been built from 19 different brands. He needed to address questions such as "What does the new name mean? And what do we do here?" After developing a set of values and behaviors with his leadership team, they established what they called the "FirstCall," in which every team across the company would huddle and discuss a topic related to those values and behaviors. This fostered people engaging with the values every day and quickly "blossomed into individuals volunteering to lead and facilitating culture shaping across the organization with their peers." The daily topics have always been driven by a feedback loop, and individual team leaders can raise their own topics as well, specific to their teams or locations.

Conclusion

Now and in the future, innovation, agility, humanity, and courage are not optional for leaders. They are required. For most companies, the commitment and example of the CEO and top team are necessary now. Developing future leaders in this mold—and ensuring they're agile and courageous enough to see when more change is needed and take inspiration from the world around them—is what will sustain culture change and success over time. In this way, culture shaping and leadership development can stay in sync.

²⁸ Rose Gailey and Ian Johnston, *Future-Focused: Shape Your Culture. Shape Your Future*, Chicago: Networkling Publishing, 2021.

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We partner with our clients around the world to develop future-ready leaders and organizations, bringing together our expertise in:

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- CEO, board, and team acceleration
- Organization acceleration and culture shaping
- Building diverse organizations and inclusive cultures
- Digital acceleration and innovation

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