

Zipp's tips: Why team culture matters and how I build it



Team culture is one of those touchy-feely things that

managers who live in the real world don't have time for, right? Wrong — according to experienced manager and Jhana contributor [Michael "Zipp" Zippiroli](#).

Here's Zipp's take on what team culture is, why it matters and how to build it, in his own words:

Culture: Hard to define, dangerously easy to ignore

When I ask managers about their team culture, I often hear something like, "Oh, we do a team outing every Thursday after work." So what? Team culture isn't about having a happy hour, it's about what your team says and does at those outings. Are they spending an hour after work complaining about the previous eight? Or are they bouncing ideas off each other and talking about how to solve problems?

Team culture is about what your team collectively believes in — and how all of you act as a result. This includes how your team talks about the organization and their manager (yes, you). It's what they think is important about their work. And maybe most of all, it's how they respond to problems. Because let's face it: It's easy to rally when things are going well, but if you have a team with a weak culture, when things go wrong it's going to turn into a gripe-fest.

I'll admit this is all pretty ambiguous. Don't let that stop you from being proactive. Build a strong team culture, and chances are your team will be strong in getting things done, whether it's fixing bugs or closing sales deals. On the other hand, mess up team culture and all the best processes in the world won't get you very far.

So what can you do as a manager to build team culture?

Take ownership of shaping your team's culture

If you're not doing anything to shape team culture, no one else is. Do you really want to be one of those managers who's always wondering, *Why are people acting this way?* Instead, maybe you should be wondering, *What am I doing to cause them to act this way?* And if your answer is "Nothing," you're still accountable. Nothing is something, especially when you're leading a team.

The question then becomes *How do you actually shape culture?* Here are a few things I proactively do:

1. Define your team's purpose and core values — together.

Even if you've been managing a team for a while and haven't directly addressed team culture, it's not too late. You can sit down with them and establish, in no uncertain terms, what your team's core purpose is — and which three to five things best describe how you, as a team, fulfill that purpose.

You could start by saying something like, "I've noticed this gap — we haven't really defined the kind of team we want to be. I take full accountability for not having done this. I want to hear from you about what you think our team values are. I'll tell you what I think is important, too. Let's establish the three to five values we think are important and commit, here and now — myself included — to those things." If you try to just dictate it without getting their input, it won't work. They'll be like, "What's all this?" But if you ask for their input, you have a starting point.

For example, one of the main values that a past sales team of mine committed to was self-improvement. We were the top sales team, but we never rested on our laurels because we'd decided we should always be doing better than ourselves. That attitude didn't just happen. It happened because we'd consciously decided as a team that it was our culture to be that way.

2. Don't forget to incorporate your company's values into your team's culture.

You don't want to create an us-versus-the-company culture. To avoid that, when I'm developing values with my team, I might pull up the company's website and look at the values page with them. I'll ask, "How do we see these translating to our team?" Maybe you can't include everything on the list — some companies have a whole laundry list of items — but you might decide, "OK, these are the five most important things we need to do to live up to our piece of these organizational values." So if I'm managing a sales team, and one of the organizational values is collaboration, that might mean not fighting over leads.

3. Spell out your values to new hires.

Once my team has a set of core values, when someone new joins I sit down with them and say, "I want to make it really clear to you what this team is all about. We're about three things: taking responsibility for your own results, continuous improvement, and helping your teammates. You'll probably hear me reference one or more of those three things in just about every meeting and just about every 1-on-1." This approach can help your new hire get the lay of the land, while helping you get the culture you want.

4. Try using tangible things — names, icons, mascots — that people can rally around.

There's a reason why, no matter how much a city is struggling, people still show up for the football games with their faces painted and their favorite players' jerseys on. It's something they take pride in. I sometimes create a similar kind of rally point with my teams. While this approach certainly isn't for everyone, there are teams that respond well to things like a name.

Uphold the culture with consistent messages and hands-on course corrections

Culture isn't one of those things you establish and then just forget about. It's your job as a leader to sustain it. I think there are a few key ways you can make sure the culture you've worked so hard to create doesn't go off the rails:

1. Send consistent, continual messages that reinforce the culture.

I try to use elements of the team culture as anchor points that I continually refer to. So when I'm in 1-on-1s, for example, I might give someone feedback and tie it back to self-improvement, if that's part of our culture: "I don't care if we're at 50 percent or 100 percent of our goal. As long as you're getting better, that's what matters on this team." You can do this in team meetings. You can do it by recognizing people who live the culture. You can link goals to the culture. If you've done a good job defining your culture, there will be multiple opportunities to both celebrate and protect it.

2. Call people out when they violate the team culture.

When you see things that don't align with the culture you've set, you need to have the courage to do something about it. For example, if one of the team's values is teamwork, and you see people being overly competitive or quarreling, I don't think it's enough to just say, "You need to figure this out on your own." In that situation, I would get them in a room and talk through why their behavior wasn't aligning with the value of teamwork that the team had decided to make part of our culture.

3. Pay attention to signs that your culture is broken.

There are two big ones. The first is when people quit. I take resignations as a commentary on me and my team's culture. The second sign is hearing things primarily through the grapevine. If you never get direct feedback, there's a good chance you've created a suppressive culture. Healthy cultures are open and honest. Teams that know their manager can take feedback maturely and respectfully will be more open with you. So if you're like, *Why am I always hearing this stuff from a third party?* something's probably off. Maybe your team is afraid of you, or knows you aren't open to their opinions. People react to the environments that their leaders create.

Of course, there are a few situations where you might not be entirely to blame for culture lapses, like if your organization is going through a rough patch or a tough change. In those kinds of situations, I still think you need to be proactive. Instead of letting the issue fester, you can ask your team what they're feeling, and what you can do to make things easier for them.

Another might be inheriting a team with bad morale. I've stepped into turnaround situations like that, and what I found is you need to give people the chance to let it out, to tell you what was broken in the past. People need to be heard. In one case, I spent a long period — it was a few months — of just listening. It finally got to the point where they ran out of stuff to tell me. And once the team saw how much time I'd spent listening and trying to understand their point of view, I was in a great position to start rebuilding. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.

Don't miss Zipp's straight talk on other key issues:

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- [Connecting your team's daily work to the company mission](#)
- [Taking the fear out of firing](#)