TRANSFORMING Corporate Culture

9 Natural Truths for Being Fit to Compete

Lisa Jackson
Gerry Schmidt, PhD
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   (Or a Dandelion)

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9 Natural Truths for Being Fit to Compete

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Transforming Corporate Culture

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Gerry Schmidt, PhD
Defining Change

The concept of change is very broad and conveys different meanings depending on how it’s used. Here we offer the context for change that guided the writing of this book.

Random House lists 33 definitions for the word “change.” (Another indication of the vast importance and challenges inherent in this concept). A few are relevant to this book:

**Change** – verb, noun, verb (used with object).

1. to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of (something) different from what it is or from what it would be if left alone: *to change one’s name; to change one’s opinion; to change the course of history.*

2. to transform or convert (usually fol. by *into*): *The witch changed the prince into a toad.*

3. to become different: *Overnight the nation’s mood changed.*

4. to pass gradually into (usually fol. by *to* or *into*): *Summer changed to autumn.*

How are we using the word “change”?

We use change to connote BOTH forces on the outside that create pressure and demand for something new and different, AND your response to those forces. Terms like “adapt, transform, and evolve” indicate your response. In this book we focus on the intersection of external pressure AND internal response.
The best, most adaptive cultures don’t happen through architecting massive changes in strategy or execution, but rather they happen when leaders inspire their teams to make small changes in their approach to planning, decision making, teamwork, and collaboration.

*Transforming Corporate Culture* reflects a simple and profound meaning that is relevant to business leaders: If you look at how nature works, you will see that change happens naturally and without resistance, fanfare, and sometimes without notice.

We believe business can benefit from seeking to parallel the way nature leads change. We chose 9 lessons from nature, and organized this book around them. Together, they will help leaders build more adaptive workplace cultures that are friendly to change and which create shared ownership for making the business grow and thrive.

Most of all, the term change is intended to connote the mantra we use in our work with clients:

“Organizations don't change. People do.”

95% of the population are not “natural-born change agents” - it takes conscious effort, a strong motive, and a lot of practice to become comfortable stepping outside your comfort zone – and leading others to do the same.

A leader’s job is to go first.
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**Introduction**

“Here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

— The Red Queen to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*

Wednesday, 6:00 P.M. The meeting was over and everyone felt the desire to celebrate. Nothing substantive had changed yet. In the background, an almost undetectable, palpable feeling of possibility hangs in the air: “What could happen if…?” “Remember when we…?”

We had just left a crucial meeting with leaders inside an iconic technology company discussing their future.

For four years, they had been attempting to make a strategic shift to more effectively compete in the growth market in their industry. For four years, they had failed to make the fundamental changes necessary to do so. This discussion about the future was not a “nice to have” initiative. This was about securing the company’s future. Their very life depends on getting it right. The client (let’s call him Dan) said it well: “This is like extreme skiing – once you go off the cliff, you have to land on your feet or you die. We have to get this right, or all of our jobs and the future of our company are truly at risk.”
Through a series of 23 in-depth interviews with individuals at this company, we listened to the same story we have seen unfold in dozens of companies over the past several years:

- “Our culture is not friendly to change.”
- “We make excuses all over the place for why our products don’t have what customers want. Our competitors are not making those excuses.”
- “We have no idea what our vision is….We just keep saying the right words and cutting resources.”
- “We have the technical know-how to make this happen. We don’t have the will-power.”
- “We can’t keep going in this direction and be here in 10 years: We’ll be a sadder, smaller ______ by then.” (This one tugged at our heartstrings – this company go away? A sad day for America.)

There were a lot of extremely skeptical people surrounding the latest efforts to make this new strategy work. Too many false starts had buried their energy and hope in a winter-like ground freeze. At the same time, we watch the human spirit in its finest state: A few new leaders, some fresh energy, and once again hope had poked its head out like a spring crocus, “Maybe this time it could actually work.”

6:30 PM. After the last round of checking e-mail, about 12 of us decided to gather at a restaurant for a little wine, dinner and camaraderie (even though no budgets were allowed for such celebrations and hadn’t been for several years). I sat next to one of the leaders (we’ll call him Bill). Bill was charged with making the technology work – no small feat. The company was betting its future on its ability to develop world-class software. But like a field that has been planted for two decades with no tilling or soil replenishment, their software code base was archaic. Amid a multi-billion dollar revenue decline, they were facing life-or-death invest-
ment choices to upgrade their software platform and development processes. But the necessary decisions were not all within Bill’s scope. Nor was it clear who should be making them (people up or across the line?) – or in some cases, what those decisions even were.

Yet, behind this lurking crisis the conversations were lively – lots of healthy, honest dialogue about the future dancing amongst everyone. A match had lit the fire: There was energy; there was possibility. As I listened to Bill talk about his vision and ideas, he described his relationship with the relatively new CEO of the company (to whom he does not directly report).

I turn to him at one point and asked, “What is _______’s (CEO) vision for your organization’s future, amid so much change?”

Bill’s response: “I don’t know. We haven’t heard about that.”

The Perfect Storm and the Power of Culture

We sat with that conversation for weeks, pondering its irony and significance.

Here is a legacy technology company under huge pressure to compete faster and better – and knows it – but is failing to adapt. Their ability to definitively win in their industry’s growth market is at risk. Their story is increasingly common: Between 2000-2010, they fell more than 60 places on the Fortune 500, out of their Top 100 slot (even with a significant strategic acquisition). Savvy tech companies like Amazon, HP, and Apple rocketed past them. Their revenues decreased 21% but more importantly, profits fell a stunning 57%. Here’s the real kicker: This company was featured in the media and leadership books as an example of an effective turnaround – while in decline! Equally disturbing, key leaders inside the company cannot simply describe the CEO’s vision (the most important predictor of speed and focus in any organization). People in the trenches of this company are desperate for a vision of meaningful change to recapture their stardom, and growing increasingly cynical from a constant diet of reorganization and budget cuts and cries to “do more with less!” In a time where a top concern of CEOs and
boards is the shortage of sufficient leadership talent to grow, this organization has no formal talent management process or leadership development program, and has invested well below competitors in developing its leaders. The senior executive ranks are focused on “making the numbers” and have no inspiring vision beyond that. This is no criticism intended for the difficult job of today’s CEOs; a similar story is playing out in numerous companies today.

This situation reflects the conditions of a society in a perfect storm: A swirling era of challenging conditions brought on by Internet transparency, globalization, and shifting demographics. In nature, growth and death are normal and natural—an entity either adapts or goes extinct. In an age of increased competition, no business is protected from the storm forces of increased competition for talent, customers. Leaders in companies of every size and in every industry are being called to re-examine Darwin’s credo: To survive and be fit, you have to compete better. You have to take a stand and make hard choices about your market and brand, even while you face greater uncertainty about your future. You must innovate better, execute faster, and grow while becoming leaner.

Culture is at the eye of this hurricane: The calm, powerful, centered ability of your organization to win the Darwin game. Culture is what allows you to be in enough alignment to adapt quickly, build sustained growth, and compete in a global economy (even when you’re local).

Why Culture?

Our opening story illustrates a growing truth and concern in our work: Far too many workplaces are not only ill-prepared to truly compete in a global, flat world—but they aren’t much fun to work for either! People are burned out, suffering from change-fatigue, and tired of assuming greater workloads due to endless leaning efforts. People today are seeking more. We all want to do business with companies who give more, to work for leaders who care more, to create a life that means more. Yes, winning is the game of business. But culture is the condition of your team and playing field—and every coach knows how important these elements
are to winning. Culture underpins your ability to become fit to compete AND to re-engage managers and employees who are frustrated, fearful of change, and fed up with the constant diet of “do more with less.”

Corporate cultures are weak in today’s society—and they are growing weaker. Whether you’re a small family business or a large legacy Fortune 100, culture is the answer to sustainable growth. If you want to win, you must accept that culture really does matter.

Culture is not a big mystery; it’s just a word for the collective behaviors and deliberate practices that build alignment and friendliness to growth and change. It is the single most important ingredient in your ability to detect opportunity and move faster. And, whether you accept it or not, culture is your legacy and responsibility as a leader. Creating a great place to work that is also adaptable pays big dividends (research proves it). And dividends is what any smart investor is looking for.

The lessons from nature in this book aren’t just a metaphor. They were carefully chosen based on what helps an organization’s cultural infrastructure become friendly to change. Unfortunately, the majority of today’s workplace cultures are anything but change-friendly.

Gallup and Blessing White\(^1\) have both done extensive research on “employee engagement” and its impact on business performance.

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### Evidence of a Transformational Era

What does an era of transformation look like?

My great aunt, who was born in Illinois in 1896 and lived to be 105 years old, knew people who had crossed the prairie in a covered wagon and had seen astronauts walk on the moon.

Fast forward and accelerate another century and anything imagined in the 1960’s Jetson’s cartoon will surely be far surpassed!

A few interesting facts to highlight transformation at work—and the need for our leaders to respond:

#### Economy & Business

In 2007, the World Economic Forum dropped America from first to seventh place in its ranking of nations’ preparedness to benefit from advances in information technology.

Foreigners finance approximately two-thirds of U.S. domestic investment, compared with about one-fifteenth a decade ago.
In a recent study of over 100 companies, 70% said they are experiencing “moderate to major leadership shortages; 82% say they expect it to get worse; and 63% say it is starting to impact their business growth and decision making – but less than 1/3 follow leadership development best practices, or even have a talent management program.6

Jobs
Gallup has tracked the engagement levels of the U.S. working population for the past decade. Its most recent employee engagement research shows that 28% of American workers are engaged; 54% are not engaged; and 18% are actively disengaged.

Nearly 60% of the patents filed with the United States Patent and Trademark Office in the field of information technology now originate in Asia.

Eight engineers can be hired in India for the cost of one in the United States. Five chemists can be employed in China for the cost of one in the United States.7

Health
Lousy bosses can kill you – literally. A 2009 Swedish study tracking 3,122 men for ten years found that those with bad bosses suffered 20 to 40 percent more heart attacks than those with good bosses. Many studies show that for more than 75 percent of employees, dealing with their immediate boss is the most stressful part of the job.

Americans are increasingly obtaining health care overseas, where (according to The Washington Post) dentists “charge one-fifth to one-fourth of U.S. prices.”

In 2001, a patient in Strasbourg, France, had his gallbladder removed by a surgeon in New York who was using a remotely controlled robot. (We hope there was a backup surgeon in the room!)

In the U.S., healthcare costs are projected to become 20% of the national economy by 2020. One-third of U.S. adults are obese, and health spending on this group grew 80% from 2001 to 2006, to $166.7 billion. Experts say 70% of those costs could be prevented through lifestyle modification – an opportunity for change if there ever were one!

Science and Technology
American companies spend three times more on litigation than on research.

In 2000, the United States was in first place for broadband Internet access; now it ranks 16th. South Korea has
Engaged employees care about the future of the company and are willing to invest extra discretionary effort. Disengaged employees don’t. Out of 17 million employees surveyed (statistics are from 2010), less than one-third (28-29%) say they are actively engaged at work. More distressing is that 54% of employees report they are not engaged: They float through each workday “doing time” with no passion. And about 17% report being actively disengaged – disgruntled people who are hard to work with, sabotage others’ efforts, and stir up workplace conflict. Gallup estimates this situation costs organizations $300 billion in lost productivity every year. It is deeply concerning that in affluent societies where basic necessities are more than met, people are spending 2/3 of their life energy in situations that fail to tap the one thing everyone cares about: Building something meaningful together.

If you don’t believe the majority of people are burned out and fed up at work, ask 10 people around you “Do you love your job? Do you love your company?” Listen to their answers. There’s your evidence. And in that beleaguered and worn down state, leaders are trying to pump people up to grow faster, make the numbers, and take yet another hill?

Most companies know this but are caught in the trap of needing to adapt but not addressing the real issue. Research shows that

nearly twice the subscribers per capita of the United States.

The United States is a net importer of high-technology products. In fact, Americans now pay almost as much to foreign firms for imports as they pay to their own government in taxes.

iPod was a game-changer but who would have thought it would make Apple the #1 music company (as of June 2010)? We predict within 5 years (Hello iPad!), Apple will be the world’s #1 or #2 publishing company.⁸

Political

A city in Pennsylvania not long ago considered adopting the slogan “Pittsburgh can become the Bangalore of America.”

In just 7 years the United States has tripled its foreign debt. The United States’ bargaining power at the global table is weakening.
70-75% of all change initiatives FAIL\(^2\) – whether an acquisition, reorganization, technology implementation, or any new direction or idea to improve the business. (No study we found quoted better than a 60% success rate for change efforts – including project management.) Either initiatives do not produce the expected growth or gain, or they simply don’t work (i.e., the change never takes hold and is abandoned).

What other business activity has such a high rate of failure, but still we attempt it over and over using the same methods that don’t work? Decisions are still being made every day inside companies of every size to initiate risky changes that will not and cannot work, primarily because the culture won’t be adapted to support them. As a result, many promising growth initiatives have a negative impact on leaders’ efforts to build positive morale, execute their mission, and secure financial performance.

For these reasons (massive workforce disengagement, high failure rates of change efforts AND the accelerating pace of change), becoming adaptive is a crucial capability for every leader and organization today. And, since only about 5% of people are truly “natural born change agents” and the known failure rate of businesses is about 40% in 10 years - it is urgent to train and develop leaders who can lead change … or find yourself at the mercy of bigger, better competitors.

Eat on YOUR terms. Or BE eaten. Take your pick.
Table 1. Changing Expectations in Global Work Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In The Face of Change Employees Want …</th>
<th>In The Face of Change, Leaders …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More information about: “Where are we going?” and “What does success look like?”</td>
<td>Are unclear why people don’t commit and understand the priorities – when everyone was told (once, in an email).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity about changing/conflicting priorities and objectives, but often lack the skill to effectively prioritize, especially in today’s rapid-change environments.</td>
<td>With 100% (+) responsibility for goals and meeting the numbers, often don’t effectively transfer responsibility and hand-offs to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To avoid feeling “in the dark.”</td>
<td>Are over committed and frustrated about how to build commitment and get others to own the results.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This book was written to show you how – and boil it down to small, simple practices and ideas used by successful change leaders who have done it.

**Myths of Culture**

During the past 15 years, we have coached and trained hundreds of leaders seeking to align their organization’s culture with their efforts to grow and change.

In our experience, there are three common myths we see leaders and their teams hold related to change and culture – which must be addressed if culture change is going to truly stick:

*Myth #1: Culture change is necessary – but it’s long-term, difficult, and expensive.*

**Truth:** Culture is not separate from you as the leader. (Proof: Where does your culture go at night when nobody is in the building?) Culture is how people work together that either helps or hinders achievement of vision and strategies. Creating an adaptive culture is like building a healthy body: There is no magic pill or universal approach that works for everyone. Adopting change-friendly habits in planning, communicating, teamwork, decision making, and rewards/incentives
teaches people to embrace change. This works best when leaders embed habits that blend with the existing DNA, versus attacking it. (That being said there are some companies and industries that need new DNA.) Leading a large-scale culture change across a company is not for the faint of heart. But leading an effort to make your culture faster, more adaptive and better able to compete is simple and anyone can do it.

**Myth #2 – People fear and resist change.**

**Truth:** People do not resist change. People resist being changed. The constant suspense and pawn-moving that goes on in most organizations today leaves little stable ground to stand on. The problem with most change initiatives is not the people – it's the process. The way change is initiated creates a tendency in people to resist, drag their feet, and engage in turf battles. When you lead an intelligent process focus on telling the truth, make people part of the solution, and consciously provide a way to grow and learn, you see anticipation, exhilaration, relief (someone is leading!), and excitement about the future.

**Myth #3 – Our culture must change so we can “do more with less.”**

**Truth:** If there is one modern-day leadership trap of our times, it’s the belief “we can do it all.” You *may* be able to do it all (depending on how you define “all”), but not all at once. Change succeeds by narrowing your focus, your timeline, and your target. Change fails when leaders keep starting things and stop nothing. Lisa has a rule in her household: Every time she brings home something new (clothing, household item, furniture), an equivalent number of items must leave the house – thrown away, donated, sold. Less really IS more – it’s about doing more *better*, not just more! (we are talking about projects not people – we do *not* mean when you hire someone, you fire someone!).

If you want your company to be competitive, innovative, and sale-able, bust these outdated myths. In a global, flat economy, culture is the true north that will help get all hands on deck to ensure you sail out of the storm.
“Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born. We are currently living through just such a transformation.”

— Peter Drucker, 1993

In “Leaders at all Levels,” thought-leader Ram Charan says we are currently in a “crisis of leadership.” He highlights the lack of development of true leaders who can manage increasingly diverse styles of people, situations, and opportunities – regardless of title or level.

Leadership development, talent management and succession planning endeavors are sprouting up everywhere – evidence of the growing agreement in our society’s corporations that we need to develop true leaders.

But we do not believe the central issue at stake will be addressed simply by creating programs to develop more leaders. With the stakes higher than ever, we must address this question: “Are we allowing true leaders to emerge and take responsibility for driving massive change in an era of transformation across our global society?” It’s not easy to lead change. It requires a great reservoir of courage and commitment to adapt and change the way people work together, the way we govern, and the way we create value in our society - especially when such leadership means a major disruption of a system that measures success and value by one yardstick: Quarterly profit and growth.

We need a growing power base of leaders to courageously address essential questions with new solutions:

- How do we manage stability amidst efforts to reinvent economics, government, and corporate power?
• How do we prepare the next generation to lead in conditions that are mostly unknown?

• In a global society (or company) how do we create unified purpose and local empowerment?

• How do we build better products with less cost and waste?

• How do we better connect people inside companies with the needs of their customers?

Leading Transformation and Change: A Role Model

*It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.*

— Charles Darwin

To provide a role model for the leadership needed to truly transform and change the way we work, we turn to the top expert at change: Nature herself.

Experts estimate there are between 5 and 100 million species of plants and animals on earth. Only about two million species are known (The National Science Foundation’s “Tree of Life” project).

Each of these life forms has a different purpose and set of requirements for sustaining itself. In the thick of all this complexity, life goes on without a great deal of complaint or resistance. Overall, the natural world works in pretty good harmony and order.

Contrast this complex, chaotic situation – which somehow works perfectly – with the fundamental paradigm on which we have built our societies (and organizations) for 200 years: the universe as a machine (which emerged from the Industrial Age). A machine paradigm says “If I do X, Y will predictably happen.” If a part is broken, it can be fixed and the whole system will work again. If I take the
system apart, I can understand the whole system by analyzing each part. We have attempted to map a machine paradigm onto managing people; separated “thinking” from “doing” in organizations; created an addiction to productivity; and broken organizations into disconnected pieces. This paradigm still dominates how modern-day business is conducted. But as the storms of change gather intensity, this paradigm is cracking under the pressure.

If you study nature and how it evolves – particularly in fast-growth, chaotic environments with extreme conditions – you gain powerful insight into how today’s leaders can structure and run their teams and companies more efficiently and effectively. Through the paradigm of nature, we see that adapting happens best through small, manageable changes made gradually – with occasional sweeping big “shots” of change (e.g., tsunamis and hurricanes). Biological science and the history of evolution offer great lessons that we can apply to a revolution of leadership.

In the decades we have been working with leaders and companies (many in great trouble), we have seen the power of migrating toward leadership based on the natural and biological world. This migration requires openness to mindsets and attitudes that most leaders are not trained in. But courageous and committed leaders who want to learn will find they achieve their strategies and goals more effortlessly.

These are the leaders who say, “Change begins with ME.” And mean it.

All great innovations in our world have been born from such a choice.
A Final Word … Before We Begin

“People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains, at the huge waves of the seas, at the long course of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and yet they pass by themselves without wondering.”

— St. Augustine

Volumes have been written about leadership and culture – what it is, how you identify and cultivate it in people, and what’s required to make it a systematic, measurable driver of your business.

We did not set out to invent a new formula for leadership and change here. There are several approaches already, many of which are not working well (often built on outdated paradigms about learning, control, and hierarchy). Second, every leader is different. You have to find what works for you: What works for one person won’t work for someone else in a different set of circumstances.

In writing this book, we thoughtfully considered two questions based on seven combined decades of observing and modeling leaders:

1) “What do the leaders we knew – who have succeeded in leading change – do that is replicable?”

2) “What are the fundamental mindsets that lead to an ability – and responsibility – inside a person to lead others on a successful journey of change?”

Our purpose in this book is to offer a menu of shortcuts and practices to embed change-friendly culture behaviors within yourself, your team and your organization. We chose to highlight the characteristics of successful change that leaders often miss: lesser-known and little-practiced gems of real cultural change in action. Our research is not academic: It’s based on real actions from successful leaders
and change agents – whether they are managers or individual contributors (both can be leaders). They hail from all walks of life. Through their stories, we hope you can find your way. Out of respect for their privacy, we have chosen not to use real names of people or companies we have worked with.

Maybe you are leading inside a big corporation, a community church, a nonprofit, or a small family business. Maybe you are a teacher, professor, doctor, or owner of a daycare center. Maybe you are simply a person with a desire and curiosity to make things a little bit better in your world.

Whoever you are … if you want new ways to steer your boat in a storm …

This book is for you.
SUMMARY of Introduction

Expert change and innovation is demanded of leaders today amid “a perfect storm” of constantly shifting conditions.

Growing a Fit Culture is the solution for leaders to help organizations speed up and compete better.

There are simple, small changes you can make to become more fit.

Whether you are a leader who wants to improve the health of your organization’s culture or you are facing a mission critical strategic shift and are concerned about it “sticking” – this book is for you.
Overview: 9 Truths from Nature for Fit Cultures

Drawing from discoveries in recent fields of advanced Neuroscience, Evolutionary Theory, and Anthropology, this book defines nine fundamental truths from nature and applies them to building a stronger culture that is more fit to compete in a fast-moving economy, as well being more, fulfilling and fit to work in for employees and managers.

I. CREATE: The Foundation

Chapter 1: The Seed is the Tree … or a Dandelion. In nature, everything has a clear purpose to fulfill, encoded in its seed. In business, you must be intentional in reminding people of the clear purpose behind activity, to avoid it becoming random or bureaucratic.

Chapter 2: Vision - Fire Lights the Way. In nature, movement typically follows the path of least resistance. In business, movement forward catches on through a shared vision: the fire of motivation.

Chapter 3: Trust is like the Sun. In nature, the sun is the source of all life. In business, trust is the essential energy in which lasting growth occurs, continuously. The ultimate workplace is one where 100% trust is completely assumed.
II. GROW Through Cultivation

Chapter 4: The Structure of Growth - Boundaries, Governance, and Guardrails. In nature, structure and rules interact perfectly with dynamic, constant change. In business, structure and governance need to create collaborative, empowered, and self-accountable workplaces: That leads to better results both in the soft elements of the business (people) and in the hard results (ROI).

Chapter 5: Collaborate: Power up the Tribe! In nature, everything interacts as part of a system – fruitful harvests are the end of the chain. In business, boundaries across the chains must be dissolved to foster interaction and cooperation. This allows faster adaptability.

Chapter 6: Communication: Water Always Flows. In nature, communication flows like water – endless, non-stop, and essential for life. In business, communication is the life force of profit and wealth, but must flow more naturally – leaders need to build bridges and break down dams behind which meaning and information are often stuck.

III. EVOLVE Through Learning


Chapter 8: Mindsets: Navigating the Icebergs. In nature, the truth may not be obvious or easy to spot – such as icebergs. In business, mindsets are the hidden force of our thinking that keep us stuck or help us change when progress is needed.

Chapter 9: Procreate: Spread Leadership DNA. In nature, survival is about passing on your DNA. In business, leaders are the carriers of DNA and need to see a fundamental part of their job as passing it on to the next generation.
The Best Way to Use This Book

Each chapter in this book is designed to stand on its own – like nine short essays that provide unique insight and suggestions for building a great culture.

And the book as a whole can be a comprehensive approach to building a more adaptive culture.

We recommend that you stop trying to super-size leadership and change.

In the case of change, bigger is not better.

Choose one or two practices that personally resonate for you, that stretch you, and do them consistently.

Small change is the evolutionary way to have a lasting impact.
The first truth we explore from nature is what establishes a healthy system. Nothing in nature can sustain, evolve or grow without a catalyzing force that infuses it with energy – that provides a solid foundation for growth. In the business world, this is expressed through a leader’s intention, vision, and the presence of trust.

Through stories of a local Starbucks trying to win the designation “world’s fastest service” or a law firm formed with the intention to create a great place to work (which happens to make money too), we illustrate how a strong foundation can be built from a passionate idea.
Chapter One: INTENTION
The Seed Is the Tree (or a Dandelion)

In Chapter 1, we explore “Why intention?” People bring passionate energy to what they are inspired by – and passion is what drives commitment: the foundation of a healthy culture. You can call it engagement, call it involvement, call it empowerment – it’s the essential “seed” that creates the tree.
Chapter One: INTENTION

The Seed Is the Tree (or a Dandelion)

Nature’s Truth #1:
In nature, everything has a clear purpose to fulfill, encoded in its seed.

In business, you must be intentional in reminding people of the clear purpose behind activity, to avoid it becoming random or bureaucratic.

“The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.”
— Socrates

June 2005 was when the bottom dropped out.

We had been working non-stop training and coaching leaders for a combined total of 40 years. One day we came to the end of a 10-year run of a very busy stage of work, and there was no “next thing” on the horizon.

During the two years which followed, a very, very small number of projects came our way. This was puzzling, given we had worked with hundreds of clients who claimed we had changed the course of their lives and businesses. In our industry, boutique firm marketing is primarily based on referral. Having been in
business together for over a decade, we wondered what it meant that referrals had
dried up. We did the conferences, the articles, the phone calls. We made a few key
strategic shifts, resulting in more than our fair share of distractions and missteps.
At a few low points, we entertained a host of alternatives – for example, opening
a burrito stand (as a talented cook, Gerry felt this could be a simpler and more
satisfying way to serve people).

During this time, Lisa – the single head of household – faced a series of wrench-
ing personal changes, including the traumatic death of her father. Our support
circle felt sympathy for the plight we were going through, but didn’t know what to
do. Some grew more distant, not knowing how to support – maybe concerned our
lack of success might rub off. Most suggested to us both at some point, “Perhaps
you should consider a new career.” (Watching how people respond when someone
they care about is sinking is a very important lesson in compassion.)

No matter what we did, we seemed to be caught in our version of a perfect
storm: a combination of misreading key trends in our field; lack of “luck” in busi-
ness development efforts; and a growing trend to replace what we do with internal
organizational development staff.

We gave thorough consideration to important questions like: “What is the true
value and service we are meant to bring to others?” “Do we really want to do this
work, in this way?” “What does it mean to be invested in the change efforts of our
clients, but not care too much?” “What can we do to maximize our true talents
and minimize our weaknesses (i.e., partner with someone who already has client
relationships)? Still, the “magic bullet” answer remained elusive.

When faced with relentless worldly evidence that is contrary to your core
purpose and vision…when everyone around you is questioning your ability and
judgment, where do you turn for answers? What do you place your trust in?

The answer in our situation was both unlikely and obvious, marked by the tiny
presence of a nagging, persistent voice that never stopped or let up: “Keep going.
This IS your work. There is a need for new ways of developing leaders, for different
ways of doing business in turbulent times. You have to help people discover it.”
Through the doubt, the crises, and the questions, what kept us from giving up? We expanded our definition of success, changed how we delivered our work, simplified our finances, and became more humble and empathetic to the challenges our clients face every day.

We came to see each obstacle – frustrating as it was – as a reminder of our responsibility to make this business work. We came to see that for us to serve clients who faced unrelenting change, risk, and challenge, we had to do so ourselves. Weathering our own storms helped bring into clear focus both how we define success for ourselves AND what we are not willing to do. Teaching and leadership is our purpose. The only true failure would be in giving up.

It forced honesty. Clarity of intention. And deeply personal lessons about change and adaptability.

It was our seed. It was our commitment.

**Intention Is the Seed of Everything.**

Everything is the product of its seed.

While “intention” is the most abstract concept we approach in this book, it is the most important. You cannot grow a powerful oak tree from a dandelion seed.

When the culmination of a person’s history, values, and personal passion intersects with a significant opportunity or problem, the seeds of greatness are germinated.

**Where Does Greatness Begin?**

Proper attention to the starting point of anything is a *crucial* predictor of its success or failure. This can be as small as a meeting or as big as a new business venture.

Too often, leaders barrel ahead with tasks and goals in business without being aware of their real intention – also known as commitment. Change efforts in today’s organizations are often a “dog-chasing-tail” problem. The executive decides
on an improvement to grow the business or cut costs. His commitment is driven by pressure from the boss for quarterly numbers and awareness that his bonus is at stake – along with his career trajectory. The executive throws the responsibility to implement it “over the fence” to the next layer in the hierarchy – the managers. Possibly with a business case that frames how it will “help us serve our customers better” (but maybe not…and even if that exists, nobody really believes that’s the true intention). Then, the managers are left to figure out how to translate the meaning of this latest “good idea” into employee commitment. Doing this initiative will most likely threaten several jobs, and while nobody is talking about that element, employees aren’t idiots.

Six months later, executives wonder why the efforts at training and implementing the change have not realized the cost reductions or growth predictions. Confused and facing increasing pressure, they move to one of the Big-Three tools in their kit: Layoffs (or reorganization resulting in layoffs). Program freezes. Budget cuts. (In one organization we worked with, the first program to be cut was a company-wide initiative based on the popular Stephen M. Covey book *The Speed of Trust.*)

The mixed messages of “growth, personal accountability, serving our customers” versus “decisions about cuts with little input from those affected” can be traced to the original quality of the commitment: the seed. In an organizational context, the most powerful intentions – those that drive sustainable growth and success over the long haul, address three important questions:

1) Are leaders *conscious and transparent* about their intention?  
(Do people know WHY you are doing what you’re doing?)

2) Does it *serve* something larger than the need for money or power?

3) Will it make the business – or world – better?
The bigger the “Yes!” to these three questions, the bigger the potential for growth – and the more fruitful the harvest. Whether adopting a new software program, reforming healthcare, or running a strategy session – the quality of the “seed” will determine the fruit – its quality, its form, and the timing of its harvest.

High potential “seeds” – i.e., ideas – draw committed people and foster trust. This helps them grow stronger and faster. Seeds planted from self-serving or small interests such as greed, fear, or power are like weeds – they suck resources from the soil and choke out fruit-bearing plants.

To further complicate matters, advances in the field of neuro-science (which we describe in depth in Chapter 3, “Trust Is Like the Sun”) show precisely where and how our brain detects the nature and quality of people’s intentions, whether or not they are stated. Even if you fool yourself into believing you are serving a higher agenda with a self-serving intention, people will know the difference. There is a brain structure inside us that is dedicated to just such detection: It’s called spindle cells. These help you gauge whether someone is trustworthy or not – and does it within seconds.

Ever heard of Minute Clinic? They are at the front end of a fascinating wave of healthcare reform called “healthcare retail.” It all began when Rick Krieger endured a 3-hour emergency room visit for his son’s sore throat in 1999. One thousand people would have sat in that waiting room and had different responses to the experience – but Rick saw opportunity. His Eureka! moment didn’t stop with fleeting annoyance at the ridiculous time involved in a strep throat culture. Rick recognized it as the seed of an entire crop of new ways of delivering healthcare. After this experience, he began to wonder: ”Why isn’t there a quick and convenient way to get treatment for simple medical problems?” This seed turned into the launch of a handful of nurse-practitioner clinics, inside Cub Foods in the Minneapolis area, to treat basic medical issues during retail store hours. Two years later, after overcoming gigantic obstacles and a buyout, CVS Caremark – the largest retail pharmacy in the United States with 6,000 retail and specialty stores in 43 states in 2007 – will ensure that Minute Clinic’s bright kiosks and unprecedented customer service will be nearly everywhere.
Even if you don’t have a dream to revolutionize healthcare – or anything else – you can sow powerful seeds in a venue as simple as your weekly staff meeting. One of our clients is a senior executive in a major pharmaceutical company. Even though this isn’t a strategy for everyone, at the time we worked with him, he began every meeting with mystical poetry reading. He planned the reading to illustrate a relevant issue, theme, or problem the group was struggling with. By the way; he is one of the most effective leaders we’ve known.

Keep walking, though there’s no place to get to
Don’t try to see through the distances
That’s not for human beings
Move within
But don’t move the way fear makes you move.

— From The Illuminated Rumi, 1997, translation by Coleman Barks

Be clear what you want. Plant your seed carefully. Tend it without fear.

Cultivating the Seed

Every seed has an encoded DNA: A dandelion seed will never become an oak tree.

And, every seed has the potential to achieve its destiny (but not every seed grows).

Having observed and studied great leadership for several decades, we have noticed that intentions (seeds) of seemingly equal promise create remarkably different results. An idea or concept succeeds brilliantly in one situation, and the same strategy falls completely flat the next time. The promising acquisition looked so good on paper, but in reality it became a nightmare – draining people’s energy and morale and choking the promised growth projections.

Too often, in the zeal to grow, little attention is paid to the environment in which you are planting the “growth opportunity.” Lisa’s gardener recently told her
“I spend most of my time preparing the soil. I let my clients know that so they’re not wondering why the results don’t show visibly, sooner. My neighbors used to knock on my door and ask why my plants were bigger and healthier than theirs. Nothing died in my garden. The secret was taking the time to prepare great soil – that’s the process that allows a plant to grow to its full potential. The quality of the plant is important, but the soil is the environment in which it thrives or withers.”

In the Colorado foothills, most soil is hard clay...not a conducive environment for planting and growth. It struck Lisa that this is exactly parallel to an organization’s culture. Too often growth opportunities and talented people are struggling in hard-packed soil that is not prepared for the challenges it must endure: the systems, processes, structure, and communication practices are often not set up to support dynamic, fast-moving strategies and constant change.

This is culture: It is the soil for your seed.

What does the alignment between seed quality, soil preparation, planting, and cultivating mean in action? Lisa met Derek in a business community roundtable in Denver. She was struck by the alignment of his intention, his actions, and the results he created, having planted and cultivated the seed of a “law firm that transforms the way legal work is done.”

Derek’s Story

In 2001, Derek was seven years into his career as a top merger and acquisition lawyer for a Colorado branch of a national law firm, having launched his career in NY at one of the top 10 firms for “deal-makers.” He relates the story of how he left it behind to build his vision of a different way to practice law. We share it with you here, as a powerful reminder of the importance of intention.

“As a lawyer, I was always different. I was trained as a traditional lawyer but I grew up in our family business; we owned a furniture retailer and a bicycle retailer, and I started working for the business at age 11. Later, I got my undergraduate degree in business.
I always saw myself not just as someone providing legal services, but in the business of creating satisfied customers. Our family furniture business put food on the table and put me through college not because we sold a reclining chair to one customer. We sold a recliner; we made a customer happy; they came back and bought a kitchen table and chairs. Later, they came for a living room set, still later they came for a bedroom set.

It’s pretty easy to figure out how to build a business by delivering value to your customers.

Throughout my career I paid close attention to how the “business of law” worked. How the office was set up. How interpersonal relationships worked between employees. How the business interacted effectively with its customers. Most lawyers don’t ever think about these aspects of their job – it’s definitely not taught in law school, and lawyers are not trained to take the client’s perspective. On many occasions during deals, I felt like I was “in the middle,” bridging a gap between lawyers and businesspeople. I had a knack for understanding what clients were saying and needing in plain English.

One of the central issues that bothered me about the legal world was the financial structure. Most of the largest national firms – considered to be the most successful law firms – are still operating on a business model founded around the time of World War II. They have a pyramid structure, are slow to adopt technology, and their fee structures incent inefficiency. The billable hour as a measure of service and payment was a way to offload the risk of inevitable variances in projects (a reasonable premise for a service business), but it has created a perverse incentive. The more inefficient a lawyer is (as long as the client doesn’t complain), the more money the lawyer makes. The potential of attorneys being rewarded for being inefficient struck me as antithetical to providing the best service to clients.

From the side of the employee, a top performer in a national firm is typically paid the same as a bottom performer of the same seniority. The only data most people inside large law firms know about you are your “stats”
– based on billable hours. The most highly prized lawyers billed the most hours. They were the best worker-bees), but they were often not the best lawyers. Bottom line, firms were unwittingly hoisting some of the worst legal talent on their best clients.

I spent a lot of time thinking, “There must be a better way.” Law firms in general are not change-friendly places, so I knew I would not have a receptive audience for my ideas. Finally, one day in 2001, the impetus came for me to act on my years of thinking.

In 2001, the firm was suffering from the dot-com bust and only one corporate associate made partner in a firm of 900+ attorneys. I had concerns about the firm’s ability to grow in Colorado (a necessity for more partners to be added in the Colorado office) and had little confidence in the leadership in the Colorado office. In fact, I became famous for remarking to my colleagues at one point: “The partners don’t know what the %&## they are doing.” In order to deal with the firm’s economic issues resulting from the dot-com bust (too many lawyers without enough work), the firm offered voluntary buy-out packages to employees. I opted to take the money and run in December of 2001. The buy-out money gave me the capital I needed to start my own firm in the beginning of 2002. I felt much more comfortable betting on my own abilities than staking my future on the management team of the Colorado office. At the time I made my decision, I kept recalling a random quote I had seen at the bottom of an e-mail once: “The weak quit and stay put; the strong quit and move on.”

In hindsight, I was absolutely right in doubting the prospects of the Colorado office. Within two years of my departure, the entire firm broke apart. I understand some of the partners may still be mired in lawsuits related to the demise of the firm.

Everyone thought I was crazy to start a business in 2002 with the uncertain economy, but I know that when things are less certain – that’s when people are open to change. I chose to found my firm on two specific premises:
(1) **Create a better environment for lawyers to work in.** Develop a fair compensation scheme for everyone who works at the firm and make sure it is based on merit and contribution, not based on title and seniority. This eradicates the stratified class system that (i) is typical of big firms, and (ii) results in a less friendly work environment. (I am a big believer in looking at the incentives in a deal – if you look at the incentives you learn a lot about why people act the way they do.)

My belief was this: If you treat employees fairly and with respect, they’ll be happier, and that will accomplish two things: (i) Retention of good employees, who, in turn, help you recruit the best candidates—the system feeds on itself; and (ii) Happy employees who provide good service to your clients. And, happy clients recommend your service to others. It’s a sustainable model that can grow; and everyone wins.

(2) **Create a better model to deliver service to the client.** Consumers of legal services are not getting what they need and want, due to a financial model and archaic administrative practices. For me, the goal was for employees to earn a good living and for clients to receive top-notch legal services they considered to be a good value. We constructed a firm based on the most productive assets a law firm can have, and provided a different environment to succeed. We hire people who are experienced (already trained in national law firms) and technologically adept, and remove the administrative burden. Instead of three administrative pass-throughs for every document change, if I’m negotiating a document on a conference call, I make changes real time. The client asks “[David], when can you have a revised draft to me?” I’d say – “Are you in front of your computer? I’ll send it to you right now.” We focus on less waste, on project-based and fixed-fee billing, and monthly retainers where clients can budget and call any time to get all their questions answered.

Has it worked?
• In 2008, we were selected by Denver Business Journal as “Best Place to Work in Denver” in our category. Not many law firms make that list!

• We started in 2002 with one lawyer and have grown to 11 lawyers... and counting! In 2009 and 2010, in the midst of the “Great Recession” when most firms reduced corporate groups by 20%, we hired attorneys.

• The majority of clients are referred to us by other clients.

One of our top private investors told me recently:

I’ve never worked with a lawyer like you. Working with you has completely changed my perception of what lawyers are. You are practical. Every time I pay my legal bills, I feel like I got a good deal.

I am proud of what we have accomplished. We said we could do it better, and our clients and the community have validated it: We’re doing the work right and making the customers happy.”

No question that Derek planted the right seed, has worked at preparing his soil (culture), and cultivates its growth by thinking always about the initial purpose and how he can best enable it in his law firm.

**Will Your Seed Grow...Or Wither?**

We’ve all heard the wisdom: “A mediocre idea well-executed will outperform a great idea poorly executed.” In our experience, both the idea and the execution are of equal importance: You don’t need home-run ideas every time, but the quality of the original idea is very relevant. And unless the leader’s intention can draw commitment in the form of a host of gardeners, there will be no harvest.

What makes the difference in two “oak tree” seeds planted, where one thrives and one dies?
Based on research and decades of working with leaders – we have defined two personal attributes leaders can cultivate in themselves to ensure they are planting their best seeds (intentions) in good soil. We will explore them in more detail in Chapter 9 – but are planting the seeds of the ideas here.

1) **Self-Awareness.**

In February 2007, Harvard Business Review featured an article *Discovering Your Authentic Leadership* reporting that the key to great leadership is authenticity. In the largest in-depth study of leadership development ever undertaken, the authors asked: "How can people become and remain authentic leaders?"

The study singled out leaders who achieved superior results over a sustained period of time, and showed that self-aware leaders demonstrate two important change-friendly qualities:

- **Transparency.** They examine and craft their life story in a way others can relate to, to show how they have been tested, overcome adversity, and exercised courage. (Whether written or not, you have a life story). Great leaders also use their own setbacks to identify their core values and principles, which they don’t waver from when tested. This is also how they become fearless – so great intentions become great deeds, versus being degraded by the fear of approval or failure. They understand that a satisfying life is less about "rewards" on the outside and more about the character you cultivate on the inside. This takes a commitment beyond simply knowing it’s important.

- **Surrounded by Strength.** They hire people smarter than themselves. They choose highly trustworthy confidants who can do what they cannot. The self-aware leader knows his or her strengths and weaknesses, accepts that he or she is not perfect, and looks for people who can fill in the gaps. These folks may be personal advisors or members of their team. Weak leaders hire people they
Like. Courageous leaders often hire people they don’t like because they bring a different point of view. Either way, the authentic leader is both confident and humble enough to know they can’t turn a seed into an oak tree by themselves.

2) Commitment.

When the going gets rough (which it always does over the long haul), how strongly do you stay connected to where it all began? When passion for your purpose is greater than the challenges you face, your commitment will cultivate the seed into its best expression.

There may be a collective hunger for the harvest (how many people have sat in emergency waiting rooms and wished what Rick Krieger of the Minute Clinic did?) but a leader’s commitment – symbolically and practically – drives his or her willingness to persevere.

The reason most efforts to lead change fail can be traced to too few seeds planted in weak or harsh soil, with expectations of instant growth or harvest. Some leaders toss their seed over the fence and hope it grows in someone else’s yard. Others don’t tend the seed once planted. Self-discipline means staying engaged, even when you don’t want to. Even when the plan falls apart. Even when the adversity becomes unbearable.

After Thomas Edison’s seven-hundredth unsuccessful attempt to invent the electric light, he was asked by a New York Times reporter, “How does it feel to have failed seven hundred times?” The great inventor responded: “I have not failed seven hundred times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving those seven hundred ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work.” Edison finally found the one that would work, and invented the electric light.

When Rick Krieger “invented” retail healthcare, he faced tremendous opposition from doctors and traditional healthcare institutions that felt the only safe treatment came from physicians. He held the intention and found a way – even after all 14 venture capitalist investors abandoned ship.
The antidote for the forces that test you is clear intention. The formula is simple, even if not easy. (And it helps if you surround yourself with people who remind you of your intentions from time to time, in a positive way.)

Start with healthy seeds and soil.

Cultivate commitment – yours and theirs.

Reap the harvest.
In nature, everything has a clear purpose to fulfill, encoded in its seed.

In business, you must be intentional in reminding people of the clear purpose behind activity to avoid it becoming random or bureaucratic.

To ensure your change efforts have a strong start, address three important questions:

1) Are you conscious and transparent about why you are doing what you’re doing?
2) Does it serve someone besides yourself?
3) Will it make the business – or world – better?

Leaders can cultivate powerful intentions by improving:

1) Self-awareness – the ability to learn from adversity and tests.
2) Commitment – the will to return to your intention and keep going, and surround yourself with people who will help remind you.
Making It Work! Small Changes for Developing Your Intention

Here are a few practices for setting powerful intention:

1) **Quiet mind.** You need a regular practice to quiet the busy-ness of your mind. A mind that is incapable of rest has no room for new ideas and insights. Ideally, meditate daily, even if it’s just for a few minutes. Just find the method you will do regularly: for some it’s yoga or pick-up basketball. For others it’s prayer and church. For still others it’s painting or playing music. A colleague of mine has an aerial studio in her backyard, and climbs to practice the art of trapeze.

2) **Meta-intention.** Great leaders have an intention to do something great, that serves. The ultimate intention is to find a pathway to make a difference and a contribution. What is that for you?

3) **Play.** Research proves that the balance between work and play drives better innovation. Regular open space for fun and games will make it more likely the seeds of greatness will arrive in a steady stream at your doorstep. According to a recent interview of one of Apple’s technologists, the way they solve the big software problems involves lots of play. “We have a ping pong table, a pool table and a basketball court next to our programming work rooms. When the programmers have hit a block, they outline the issues, then play a very competitive session of hoops, or one of the other games, for a while. When one of the programmers has an insight, they call out a signal, and everyone stops playing and gathers at the conference table. They then outline a solution to the current problem and everyone writes code for 4 or 5 hours. If they get stuck doing that, they go back to play and the cycle repeats.”
4) **Symbol.** A common coaching exercise for someone who is trying to strengthen an intention is to affirm it through a visual reminder every day. While I (Gerry) have had many exciting sports cars in my life, more recently the garage has contained only the practical kind that haul lots of people, sheets of plywood and my two boats. Recently, and with the prompting of my car-happy and very influential son, I’ve found myself again craving a 996 (for the uninitiated, that’s a 1999 – 2002 Porsche 911 Carrera). I printed a picture of the model and color I have in mind and it sits right above my business phone and is in my line of sight daily. By the time you are reading these words, it will be under my house. That’s the power of intention.
In an era of unprecedented transformation, today’s workplaces are stressed, overloaded, and burned out. We have only touched the tip of the iceberg of what sustains great human performance in a collaborative, service-driven economy. Now more than ever, Presidents and their teams need to understand what culture is, how it drives competition, and how to re-shape their company’s ability to:

- **Lead and enable ongoing change**
- **Grow sustainably**
- **Serve demanding customer needs better, faster, and with greater value**
- **Foster greater employee ownership and commitment**

*Transforming Corporate Culture* draws 9 lessons from nature as a unique and relevant lens for today’s business challenges. Drawing stories and practical examples from culture changes led by CEO’s and Presidents, this book shows that “survival of the fittest” is not just a science theory, but a principle for gaining a competitive edge in business.

Testimonials – in process

Lisa Jackson and Gerry Schmidt, PhD, have dedicated 20 years to helping Presidents and executives grow adaptable workplace cultures. They have a unique process for linking culture to business performance and creating widespread ownership for shaping culture across the business. Their mission is to de-mystify culture and show leaders it is NOT soft or fluffy, but an essential DNA of their company’s ability to be adaptable. They can be reached at: www.CorporateCulturePros.com.