



BRIEF

# Culture

By [Mike Frascolla](#)

## Introduction

It's a universal reality — every business has some kind of organizational culture. Companies, after all, are like people. They have strengths and weaknesses, good days and bad days. They have personalities.

We place a high value on culture here at Ninety, both internally within our team and in our [Business Operating System \(BOS\)](#). We see culture as a pivotal piece of the People Competency — one of the 9 Core Competencies an organization must master to thrive and endure as a great company.



## **Context**

Culture may be intangible, but it's not hard to see when we spend time observing a company's dynamics. The relationships between people and groups, what seems to be working (or not), and how people support each other, solve challenges, or resolve conflict are all facets of organizational culture.

The good news is that organizational culture can be taught, learned, and changed for the better. What's more, with some intentional effort, Culture can become an asset that elevates every aspect of an organization.

## **Core Values: The Key to Culture**

Establishing a thriving culture and fostering meaningful connections among team members starts with identifying, implementing, and consistently upholding a small

number (preferably three to seven) of very specific [Core Values](#). These values are among the most important commitments an organization can make.

- Core Values **clarify** who the company is and what it stands for. They immediately give the organization an identity that all stakeholders can internalize and reference.
- Core Values **guide** hiring, coaching, and teaching. They reveal what qualities to look for in a candidate and help ensure you build an organization where people genuinely enjoy working together.
- Core Values **unify** the organization. Gone are the days of people behaving in ways that make working together more difficult than it needs to be. What matters most is now absolutely clear.
- Core Values **shape** the reward and exit processes. Standards make it easier to separate the qualitative and quantitative parts of any feedback or coaching discussion so that how people are doing is easier to talk about objectively.
- Core Values **inform** process. When devising the way a thing should be done, the organization's guiding principles and standards direct how and why.

At Ninety, [our Core Values are G-TRIBE](#): Get Smart Stuff Done, Teamwork, Results, Inquisitive, Best, Extra Mile. These six words (and how we define them) represent the values our company most celebrates in our team members.

Organizations that establish Core Values are one step closer to becoming High-Trust Companies (HTCs). HTCs have cultures where people feel like they belong, contribute meaningfully, and are appreciated. Team members are fully committed because they love why the company exists and where the leaders want to take it.

## The Five Levels of Culture

One of the frameworks we use to help our clients think about, assess, and enhance trust — along with the health of their culture — is based on the book *Tribal Leadership* by Dave

Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright. They describe five levels of organizational culture:

- **Level One (L1) Culture** – The life view held by the majority of team members in an L1 Company is that **life is terrible**. Team members are not just angry; they are hostile. That hostility is typically channeled toward all stakeholders, especially fellow teammates and the leadership team. Working at an L1 company is not fun.
- **Level Two (L2) Culture** – The prevailing life view of an L2 company's team members is that **their professional lives are terrible**. There are far more "Reactors" running around (those who hastily respond to external conditions and often feel victimized) than "Creators" those who actively promote new ideas and focus on generating results). Innovation is non-existent, too many people are frantically reacting to threats, and urgency is only reserved for shutting things down at 5 p.m. Accountability is rare.
- **Level Three (L3) Culture** – This is where most companies exist (more than 50%, according to the authors). These are the companies where **every department is doing its own thing and may or may not be competing with other departments for resources, attention, and respect**. Growth happens, but it takes much more effort than if everyone came together, united around a set of guiding principles (e.g., Core Values), and built an L4 Culture.
- **Level Four (L4) Culture** – This is where we see most HTCs. **People work together for the good of the company**. The leaders have little patience for politics or personal agendas, and they are very open about what's working and not working.

**These organizations excel at:**

- Showing appreciation
- Turning expectations into [agreements](#)
- Giving competent people real autonomy
- Genuinely caring about every [stakeholder](#)
- Being totally transparent about everything (no need for anonymous surveys)
- Investing in their people's growth
- Providing a compelling view of their collective future

- **Level Five (L5) Culture** – In our opinion, these are the super cool companies that are **100% about making a positive impact on the world**. Virtually every team member has bought into the Vision and wants to be part of something special. You know these companies when you see them. Team members take pride in their work and go out of their way for the greater good.

## Hopefully Helpful Hints

**Seek – or seek to become – the kind of company that embodies the characteristics of L4 and L5 cultures.** The kind of company whose culture is steeped in trust, free of toxicity, and all about nourishing growth.

**Assess your current culture.** From there, determine if the [Right People are in the Right Seats](#) to ensure everyone is playing to their strengths.

**Recognize the role groups and trust play in building culture.** For groups to function well internally and with each other, they must consistently honor agreements and commitments made to each other. These are key elements of a strong organizational culture and help ensure you're building a [High-Trust Company](#).

## Takeaway

An organization's Core Values, coupled with the agreements and commitments among its teams, are the framework along which everyone can align. Through clear expression and consistent implementation, these principles and standards create your organization's culture. The organization's value-centered culture is reinforced and perpetuated as great team members are hired, taught, and rewarded.

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