**Changing Culture: 5 Principles for Interdependent Leadership**



**Leading and Managing Culture Change Starts With a Shift in Thinking**

In our complex and interdependent world, collaborative work across boundaries is increasingly seen as a requirement. But collaboration in most organizations isn’t a natural act. A shift in thinking — alongside a change in behaviours — is usually needed for genuinely collaborative work.

History and experience suggest that accepted change management techniques aren’t up to the task of transforming the way we work. What’s needed is a culture-change process that combines leadership strategy with business strategy. Changing culture is about changing minds.

We recommend an approach to organizational culture change based on 5 principles, 4 phases, and 3 types of leadership culture.

**5 Principles of Organizational Culture Change**

**1.  Culture change is a guided, public-learning process.** People can’t simply be “managed” into change. To truly lead culture change, guides must become trusted partners who help steer change and engage in a learning process.

Public learning includes truth-telling, revealing mistakes, admitting when you don’t have all the answers, and sharing confusion and even uncomfortable emotions. This is an inside-out experience of our imagination, emotions, and human spirit.

**2. Executives do the change work first.** Executives must lead by engagement and example in the transformation process. Senior leaders must own and model the new behaviours before engaging numerous key leaders in the change process.

**3. Develop vertical capability.** Dealing with the increased complexity across organizational boundaries and market systems requires maturity, moving over time towards an interdependent leadership culture. We call this the [vertical development framework for changing leadership culture](https://www.ccl.org/articles/white-papers/vertical-development-culture-beats-strategy/). This allows people to grow increasingly capable of sophistication in the face of complexity.

**4. Leadership culture changes by advancing beliefs and practices simultaneously.** Best beliefs drive best practices drive best beliefs. Like an infinity loop, beliefs and practices are mutual and interdependent.

**5. Managing sustainable culture change is a learn-as-you-go process embedded in the work of the organization.** Leaders need to learn new beliefs by inventing and testing new ways of working together. Culture work is just as important as the organization’s focus on technical systems and processes. Culture development *is* the work, not a separate “training exercise.” [Transforming your organization isn’t simple, fast, or easy](https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/transforming-your-organization/).

Based on these 5 principles, we’ve seen executives, leadership teams, and entire organizations “grow bigger minds,” creating an organizational culture capable of learning, changing, and succeeding in uncertain, complex times.

Managing Culture Change: 4 Phases, Not 4 Steps

Our approach is focused on growing bigger minds and fostering the thinking that allows for creative action in the face of complexity. Based on the above 5 principles, we use 4 broad, overlapping, and reinforcing phases:

* **Discovery learning** — *determining willingness*. What’s the feasibility of entering the culture-change process? This is a mutual learning phase between CCL (as facilitators) and the client (as change agents and organizational leadership). It begins with an assessment of the current level of leadership culture and a look at the capability required by the business strategy.
* **Players’ readiness** — *developing understanding*. What are the long-term implications of integrating a new culture into the organization’s work? What is senior leadership’s ability to engage in the change process? It requires a commitment to participate in public learning.
* **Game board planning** — *framing the change process*. What does culture change look like? How does interdependent leadership play out in business and leadership strategies, the learning process, and organizational work targets? What are the beliefs and behaviours required? As senior leaders’ understanding of the change process grows, they’re better able to frame the change challenge and engage other leaders.
* **Playing the Game** — *building capability*. Once senior leadership has internalized the change work and discerned the way forward, they begin to spread the new culture into the broader organization. The same beliefs and practices that moved the leadership culture at the top are taught, practiced, and required elsewhere in the organization.

These 4 phases aren’t simple. Many traditional step-by-step change management methodologies regard human beings as things to be managed. Yet people aren’t things. They’re complex beings with minds and imaginations and beliefs. They have to engage and participate in order to learn and change.

That’s why this work isn’t for everyone. But if senior leadership is fully engaged, they become adept at their own collaborative learning. Then the senior team is able to immerse larger numbers of leaders from across the organization and develop toward a critical mass for enterprise-wide change.

Our goal is eventually to involve everyone in the organization in a learning process that creates trust, ownership, and increasing forms of interdependence.

**The Most Mature Leadership Cultures Are Interdependent**

Organizations that grow from dependent to independent to interdependent leadership cultures become increasingly capable of creative action in the face of complexity.

* **Dependent:** A form of leadership culture or mindset based in conformance or tradition.
* **Independent:** A form of leadership culture or mindset based in heroic individual achievement.
* **Interdependent:** A form of leadership culture or mindset based in the collaboration of otherwise independent leaders and groups.

Learn more about how [you can identify your organization’s leadership culture](https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/whats-your-leadership-culture/) and maturity.

**Ready to Take the Next Step?**

***Is your organization growing in maturity towards an interdependent leadership culture? Partner with the experts in our*** [***Organizational Leadership practice***](https://www.ccl.org/leadership-solutions/organizational-leadership/) ***to assess your culture and ensure it supports your business strategy.***