

# Culture Code: Building a Company YOU Love

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## **Culture? Why should we care about that? We're too busy building a company!**

When my co-founder, Brian Halligan and I started HubSpot almost 7 years ago in the halls of MIT, that was our general thinking. We knew that it was important to *have* a culture, but we weren't exactly sure what creating a culture really meant.

Now, years later, I'm fascinated with the topic of culture. And, as CTO of HubSpot, which has grown to over 450 people, I've spent more time on culture than any other area in the last few months. More than I care to admit. I joke with my colleagues that the "T" in my CTO title stands more for talent than it does technology these days.

If you're curious, I recently published to "public beta" the HubSpot Culture Code deck. This was developed for internal use several years ago, but we decided to share it with the community. You can access it below or go to [CultureCode.com](http://CultureCode.com). Every company culture is unique, but chances are that there are parts of the deck where you'll find yourself nodding your head.

Back to why entrepreneurs don't invest enough calories on culture. I think the reasons are usually one of the following:

a) Culture? We don't need no stinkin' culture! We're putting a dent in the universe. *That's* our freakin' culture.

b) Culture? Relax. We've got this one covered. We have free beer and a ping pong table. And, as an added bonus, we do cool things like go see a movie premier together in the middle of the day.

c) Culture? You can't really create that. It has to be built organically. The founders just have to lead by example and "set" the culture.

All of those are reasonable positions to take. I think they're misguided, but they're reasonable.

Lets look at each one.

a) Most of the startups that did end up putting a dent in the universe didn't really know for sure that they were going to succeed at it. And, one of the few common characteristics of super-successful companies is that they have a distinct culture. Google. Facebook. Zappos. Netflix. The list goes on and on. **The best companies are deliberate about culture. They design it and defend it.**

b) Maybe you can't create a culture -- but you can certainly destroy it through neglect. The 2nd Law of Thermodynamics applies here. Left alone, most things degrade. In the early days, it's OK to rely on the behavior of the founders and early team to set the culture. That works great. The problem with this model is that as you start to grow, there's a fair amount lost in translation. **Leading by example is necessary, but not sufficient.**

### **Culture improves decision-making**

Yes, you could just let people make decisions organically based on their best interpretation of whatever they think the right model/framework is. But, why not help it along? Why leave things to chance? Culture helps make a large body of small decisions quicker -- and a small body of large decisions easier.

### **Product : Marketing :: Culture : Recruiting**

Product is to marketing as culture is to recruiting. Just like attracting customers is much easier with a great product, attracting amazing people is much easier with a great culture. Yes, you might be able to do amazing marketing -- but it's not going to matter if the product isn't amazing. It's a tough slog. Similarly, if you're looking to recruit amazing people (who isn't?), you're going to need to a great culture. The kind of culture that will appeal to the right kinds of people and get them to self-select.

### **The interest on culture debt is really high.**

You've heard about technology debt. That's when you take short-cuts today, because you *\*need\** to get something out the door. You willingly take these short-cuts, because time is super-valuable (just like cash is valuable when you take on financial debt). But, you understand that there will be a time to pay off that debt. And, the debt carries an interest rate. Culture debt is when you take a short-cut -- hire someone now because they have the skills you need and you're *\*hurting\** for people -- but they're not a good culture fit. You let the "culture bar" down. You might do this for logical reasons. For the same reason you might incur technology debt or financial debt.

I'm going to posit that the effective interest rate on the culture debt you take on is often higher than that of technology debt. That is, when it comes time to pay off the debt -- a lot of damage is done. There are a couple of reasons for this:

1) When you incur technology debt (like not adding sharding to your database), you generally will start feeling pain at some point, and you'll then decide to pay off that debt. It's a *\*known\** problem and when you solve it, you'll sort of know you did. That's not the case with cultural debt. Culture debt is insidious. It creeps in slowly. It's hard to measure.

2) Technology debt is often "forgiven". This happens when a short-cut you took ends up not being a bad thing anyways. An example might be that you hacked together an MVF (minimum viable feature) for something in the app. The code is ugly. You're not proud of it. Then later, you decide to abandon that particular feature. Guess what, your tech debt on that feature was just forgiven. That almost never happens in cultural debt.

If you bring on people that aren't a fit, they'll *infect* other parts of the organization. **Even after culture misfit hires move on, their corrosive effects on the company live on.**

**Create the culture you want, not the one you think you *should* have.**

There's a lot of content out there regarding "winning" company cultures. Some will advocate for an open/transparent culture. Some for a design-focused culture. Some for a service and customer-centric culture. Fact is, any of these will likely work. The key is to understand what it is that defines your culture (and importantly, what makes it *different* from other companies) -- and to build alignment around that culture. And, in order for the culture to survive long-term, you need to *love* it. You need to believe in it. If you simply try to tweak the culture based on what you think the right answer is, you'll lose steam and lose conviction. Game over.

## **Summary**

You *can* nudge your culture. It's worth it. You're going to have a culture anyways -- might as well build one you love.