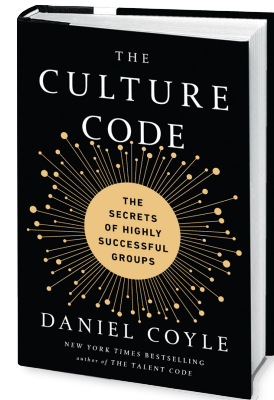


The Culture Code

by Daniel Coyle

Introduction; When Two Plus Two Equals Ten

After detailing an experiment where kindergarten children often outperform business school students, Coyle begins to describe the skills needed to build successful groups. The book is structured around three main skills: (1) Build Safety, (2) Share Vulnerability and (3) Establish Purpose.



Skill One: Build Safety

The Good Apples

Will Felps (University of South Wales, Australia) runs an experiment where “Nick” (Actor) joins a group of 44 people tasked with constructing a marketing plan for a start-up company. In each group, he either plays the role of a Slacker, a Downer, or a Jerk. Felps studies the reactions of the remainder of the group.

Coyle now provides a list of 10 distinct interaction patterns of successful groups, including:

1. Close physical proximity
2. Profuse amounts of eye contact
3. Physical touch
4. Lots of short, energetic exchanges
5. High levels of mixing
6. Few interruptions
7. Lots of questions
8. Intensive, active listening
9. Humor, laughter
10. Small, attentive courtesies

Belonging Cues: Behaviors that create safe connection in groups. The cues sent in the beginning of interactions are more important than anything said. Words don’t matter as much as cues delivered and received.

Psychological Safety: When we realize we’re in a safe place and can stop worrying about dangers. We’re “built to require lots of signaling, over and over.”

Alex Pentland (MIT Human Dynamics Lab), believes team performance is driven by five factors:

1. Everyone in the group talks and listens in equal measure.
2. Members maintain high levels of eye contact (and their conversations and gestures are dynamic).
3. Members communicate directly with one another, not just the team leader.
4. Members carry on side conversations within the team.
5. Members periodically break and bring information back to share with the other.

“We are safe, we are connected.”

The Billion-Dollar Day When Nothing Happened

In 2002, Overture was set take over the multi-billion dollar market of connecting internet-user searches with targeted advertisements. Google however, won the battle after Jeff Dean

responded to a note left on a Google kitchen bulletin board (from Founder Larry Page), stating “These Ads Suck.” Dean spent the entire weekend working on a project nobody knew he was working on, that he took on simply because he wanted to. By the end of the weekend, he had solved the issues the Google search engine was plagued with. Coyle describes the work environment at Google and the concept of their “Friday Forums.” He contends: “Google didn’t win because it was smarter. It won because it was safer.”



Alison Wood Brooks (Harvard Business School), describes two scenarios in an experiment she performs that prove people are more willing to hand their phone over to a complete stranger if that individual provides signals letting you believe you’re in a safe place to connect.

Coyle describes the function of the amygdala (a structure deep in the core of our brains) as performing two important functions, . . . responding to danger and building social connections.

The Christmas Truce, the One-Hour Experiment, and The Missileers

Tony Ashworth’s 288 page account *Trench Warfare 1914-1918*, describes the interactions between English and German troops that led to truces in their battle allowing each side breaks from fighting. The two sides sang across lines to each other and allowed each other freedom to collect the bodies of soldiers who died in battle. Sometimes even meeting in the middle to return items of fallen soldiers, to talk and even laugh together. It is believed it was the proximity of trenches that allowed sides to share “Belonging Cues” that told each side: “We are the same. We are safe. I’ll go halfway if you will.”

WIPRO is a call center in India where an experiment was conducted to compare the effectiveness of training programs that focus on WIPRO’s identity in comparison to programs that focus on the newly hired employee. The latter was more successful.

In contrast to the successes of Google and WIPRO, Coyle describes the setting and considerable failures of The Minuteman Missileers, . . . the 750 men and women who work as nuclear missile launch officers in Wyoming, Montana and North Dakota. The conditions they work under have led to numerous significant errors.

How to Build Belonging

Gregg Popovich, Air Force Veteran and long time coach of the San Antonio Spurs, invested in his players and although he was very tough on them, is described in this section as a coach that will “tell you the truth, with no b.s., and then he’ll love you to death.” He lets his players know there are more important things than Basketball, to which “we are all connected.”



* This is similar to *What Drives Winning* ideas that help athletes separate “who you are” from “what you do.”

He’s been known to tell his assistants, in regard to their players, “We gotta hug ‘em and hold ‘em.” Most effectively, he creates a “safe place to give effort.”

Psychologists from Stanford, Yale and Columbia had teachers provide feedback to middle school students in response to essays they had written. They found one form of feedback that boosted student performance so significantly they called it “magic feedback.” It was one, simple phrase: “I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know you can reach them.”

The comment provides the following cues: (1) You are part of this group, (2) This group is special, we have high standards, and (3) I believe you can reach those standards.

How to Design for Belonging

Chapter Five begins with the story of Tony Hsieh, his childhood and how he made Zappos successful. He is described in the book as being a “human version of a social app.” He’s well known for creating, what he calls “collisions.” These are “serendipitous personal encounters.” To help these events occur more originally, he suggests people make connections with people he knows to be like minded, re-arranged furniture at their headquarters, closed side entrances so everyone must come in the same entrance together, etc. He does it to create a “mindset shift” for employees to know they’re what matters.



Thomas Allen (MIT Professor) studied “Twin Projects,” where two or more firms are working on the same challenge. The factor he found to be the most effective in building cohesion was the distance (close proximity) of their desks. The closer people were, the better they worked together. Eight meters turned out to be the distance where significant differences were recognized. It wasn’t a gradual rise or fall.

Coyle closes the chapter touching on the methods Tony Hsieh uses to recruit new employees.

Ideas for Action

As Coyle closes each section of his book, he summarizes his main ideas. The first section, Building Safety concludes with discussion on these thirteen ideas.

1. Overcommunicate your Listening
 - Here he reminds the reader of body language in response.
2. Spotlight Your Fallibility Early On - Especially if You’re a Leader.
3. Embrace The Messenger
4. Preview Future Connection
5. Overdo Thank-Yous
6. Be Painstaking in The Hiring Process
7. Eliminate Bad Apples
8. Create Safe, Collision-Rich Spaces
9. Make Sure Everyone Has a Voice
10. Pick-Up Trash
11. Capitalize on Threshold Moments
12. Avoid Giving Sandwich Feedback
13. Embrace Fun

Skill Two: Share Vulnerability

Tell Me What You Want, and I'll Help You

United Airlines Flight 232 (July, 10 - 1989) suffered a catastrophic engine failure, an event that has odds of occurrence estimated at one in a billion. Additionally, there is no training to address this event, because it is considered invariably fatal. Using "notifications" (a term pilots use to describe short-burst communication), Pilots and a Pilot Trainer on board, worked together to land the plane, saving the lives of 185 of the 232 on the flight. Sharing vulnerability, the crew was able to work together and produce what is widely described as a miracle.



Coyle now touches on Pixar's "BrainTrust" meetings, the Navy SEALs' "After Action Reviews," and the atmosphere of Danny Meyers' family of restaurants.

The Vulnerability Loop

Dr. Jeff Polzer (Harvard, Professor of Organizational Behavior): "People tend to think of vulnerability in a touchy-feely way, but that's not what's happening. It's about sending a clear signal that you have weaknesses, that you could use help." "If you never have that vulnerable moment, then people will try to cover up their weaknesses." Polzer further contends that "the second person is the key." He asks: "Do they pick it up and reveal their own weaknesses or do they cover up and pretend they don't have any?"

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) helps America's military prepare for future technological challenges. In a 2009 experiment, they offered \$40,000.00 to the first group that could locate 10 red balloons located in various locations across the U.S. Although it was expected to take a week, a team from MIT found all 10 balloons in eight hours and fifty-two minutes. They did so by developing a system where people created relationships of mutual risk and cooperation.

Coyle closes the chapter covering the findings of Dr. David DeSteno (Northeastern University) who says: "That's why teams tend to do a lot of extreme stuff together. A constant stream of vulnerability gives them a much richer, more reliable estimate on what their trustworthiness is, and brings them closer, so they can take still more risks. It builds on itself."

The Super-Cooperators

Draper Kauffman joined the American Volunteer Ambulance Corps. He would drive through World War battlefields in 1940 to pick up wounded soldiers. While in France, he came across the Corps Franc, an elite group of volunteers tasked with sneaking behind enemy lines to disrupt communications, take prisoners and cause issues.

Kauffman, in 1943 was put in charge of selecting and training what later became known as Navy SEAL Teams. He created a number of methods (based on what he learned from Corps Franc) well outside the accepted program, including Hell Week and an event called Log PT (Physical Training). The exercise exposes vulnerability and created connectedness.

Coyle then studies the Upright Citizen's Brigade, a very successful comedy troupe that has developed many famous comedians, comedy writers, and more. The group commonly performs what is called a "Harold." Harolds are very difficult improvisational events where eight people perform nine scenes over a period of approximately forty minutes. The result is often failure and

each Harold concludes with a review to bluntly discuss how it went. Coyle describes the event as a “painful intersection of vulnerability and interconnection.”

The author now closes the chapter by telling the story of “The Pink Panthers,” a ring of jewel thieves who depend on each other and are described as thinking “with one brain.” The story reveals their individual roles, training, and their genuine closeness.

How to Create Cooperation in Small Groups

Dave Cooper led the Navy SEALs Team 6 through the capture of Osama Bin Laden. He creates “Leaders among Leaders” and pushes his team members to speak up. He was ready to admit when he made mistakes and even presented ideas to his team and followed them with the question: “What’s wrong with this idea?”

Coyle explains the idea behind “AARs” (After-Action Reviews), the goals and tone of good interactions. He then details the training leading up to and execution of the plan to take out Bin Laden.

How to Create Cooperation with Individuals

Bell Labs opened in 1925 and housed very creative scientists who each filed patents for dozens of inventions. When studied, it was discovered the one thing in common the most successful scientists had was the fact that they commonly ate lunch with a Swedish engineer named Harry Nyquist. Nyquist is described as having two important qualities, (1) Warmth, and (2) Curiosity.

Roshi Givechi works at the New York office of IDEO. Her title is Designer, but she is tasked with the challenge of helping teams navigate the design process. She interacts with teams during “Flights” (all-team meetings that occur before, during and after all projects). She describes the act of asking questions meant to dig up tensions and help expose clarity about both themselves and the project itself, as “Surfacing.” She commonly uses the word “connect” and is described by colleagues as never confrontational, . . . someone “adept at gentle guiding.”



As a child she was interested in studying how small inflections in communication and timing could change the meaning of words and phrases. She would record herself reading books and listen to changes she practiced. Today, she connects with fear, ambition and motivation to improve effectiveness of groups.

Dr. Carl Marci (Harvard Neurologist) studied the synchronicity of people in discussion. His findings uncovered what he refers to as “concordances.” This happens when galvanic skin responses indicate emotional arousal that data proved fall in perfect sync. Its about “understanding in an empathic way, then doing something in terms of gesture, comment, or expression that creates a connection.” The more concordances occur, the closer two people in discussion will feel.

Ideas for Action

Closing the section on sharing vulnerability, Coyle details his thirteen ideas for action.

1. Make Sure The Leader is Vulnerable First and Often
2. Overcommunicate Expectations

3. Deliver The Negative Stuff in Person
4. When Forming New Groups, Focus on First Vulnerability / First Disagreement.
5. Listen Like a Trampoline
 - He details four things a good listener does.
 - “What I’ve found is that the first response you get is usually not the answer, it’s just the first response.”
6. In Conversation, Resist the Temptation To Reflexively Add Value
7. Use Candor Generating Practices (like: AARs, BrainTrusts and Red Teaming)
8. Aim For Candor; Avoid Brutal Honesty
9. Embrace the Discomfort
10. Align Language with Action
11. Build a Wall Between Performance Review and Professional Development
12. Use Flash Mentoring
13. Make The Leader Occasionally Disappear

Skill Three: Establish Purpose

Three Hundred and Eleven Words

Three hundred and eleven words refers to the 1943 Credo written by (then) Johnson and Johnson Chairman Robert Wood Johnson in respect to the company’s values. Seven years before Tylenol products laced with cyanide caused a nationwide panic (1982), James Burke gathered senior managers to challenge the credo. In response to the crisis, J&J decided to take action that would lead to the loss of millions of dollars in a nationwide recall they were advised against. The action fell in line with their values and put consumers first. The gesture, in the end saved the company.



Coyle here details the actions of Starlings, . . . birds that act with amazing cohesion through attention to sets of small signals.

Mental Contrasting is the concept of deeply considering a realistic goal you’d like to achieve. After painting the picture, you then put just as much effort into considering the obstacles that would keep you from successfully achieving that goal. The method can trigger changes in behavior (and motivation) to more likely ensure you stay on track.

The use of stories creates deeper meaning and impact for listeners (versus simply stating facts). Stories are “the best invention ever created for delivering mental models that drive behavior.”

In 1965, Robert Rosenthal (Harvard) completed an experiment where he tested elementary students to find individuals with high potential for academic success. When sharing his findings with teachers, he chose 20% of the tested students (at random) and labeled them with high potential. The experiment painted a picture for teachers that led them to treat the 20% with more attention and in turn (many) had the most enjoyable year of teaching they had ever experienced. At the end of the year, the 20% had significantly higher improvements than the remaining students.

Sharing (1) Warmth, (2) Input, (3) Response, and (4) Feedback were the main forces leading to the improvements.

Coyle then details the effort of the University of Michigan to improve the success of their donation call center by sharing stories of students who were impacted by receiving scholarships.

The Hooligans and Surgeons

Portugal hosted the 2004 European Soccer Championships and had reason to be concerned of English Hooliganism. Clifford Stott (Liverpool University Social Psychologist), suggested a unique approach that included keeping riot gear out of sight, choosing officers for social skills over riot control skills, etc. At the end of the three week tournament, just one English Hooligan had been arrested. At one point, an officer who broke protocol and became abusive with a fan (an action that commonly would start a riot) was met with English fans enlisting the help of other officers to calm the agitated officer.

Sixteen surgical teams were studied after learning how to perform minimally invasive cardiac surgeries (MICS) in the late 1990s. The team with them most improvement in a short period of time was not the group many would ave expected to improve so quickly. They did so by (1) mastering “Framing” how they viewed the procedure, (2) defining “Roles” for each member on the team, (3) “Rehearsing” the event through dry runs (4) providing “explicit encouragement to speak up,” and (5) going over each event with “Active Reflection.”

How to Lead for Proficiency

“Survival depends on putting all of it together, night after night.”

Danny Meyer has opened twenty-five restaurants over the past thirty years and twenty-four are considered successful. Shake Shack alone is worth \$1.5 Billion. He closely watches employee interactions and is focused on creating an environment where people take care of each other (employees and customers).



After a couple “nightmares,” he realized he could “no longer just model the behavior and trust that people would understand and do it.” He decided to “start naming stuff.” He set (with the help of staff) the companies priorities and began creating maxims to use when describing the companies direction. The catchphrases, as Coyle states, “create a larger conceptual framework that connects with the group’s identity and expresses it’s core purpose: we take care of people.” His maxims use “vivid images” to paint pictures making it easier to connect. “The trick is not just to send the signal, but to create engagement around it.”

Coyle shares similar maxims from New Zealand’s All Blacks and KIPP.

How to Lead for Creativity

Ed Catmull led Pixar and was eventually tasked to save Disney after they purchased Pixar. His BrainTrust meetings take struggling first runs of pictures and encourages open / honest discussion from everyone involved to make improvements. He lets his teams have creative control (vs typically giving executives the final say). He “celebrates when groups take initiative without asking permission” and defends them when they make mistakes.

Catmull also has a number of maxims he leads with. For example, “Hire people smarter than you,” “Fail early, fail often,” “It’s more important to invest in good people than in good ideas,” etc.

Through Cartmull's contributions, Disney "learned new ways of interacting, and they changed their behavior."

Ideas for Action

"When leaders of these groups reflect on those failures now, they express gratitude."

After sharing failures of highly successful groups, Coyle closes his final chapter with a summary of ideas for establishing purpose.

1. Name and Rank Your Priorities
2. Be Ten Times as Clear About Your Priorities as You Think You Should Be
3. Figure Out Where Your Group Aims for Proficiency and Where it Aims for Creativity
4. Embrace the Use of Catchphrases
5. Measure What Really Matters
6. Use Artifacts
7. Focus on Bar-Setting Behaviors

Before closing the book completely, . . . Coyle relates a story of the Quinnipiac Hockey Team and their coach's focus on reinforcing "effort."