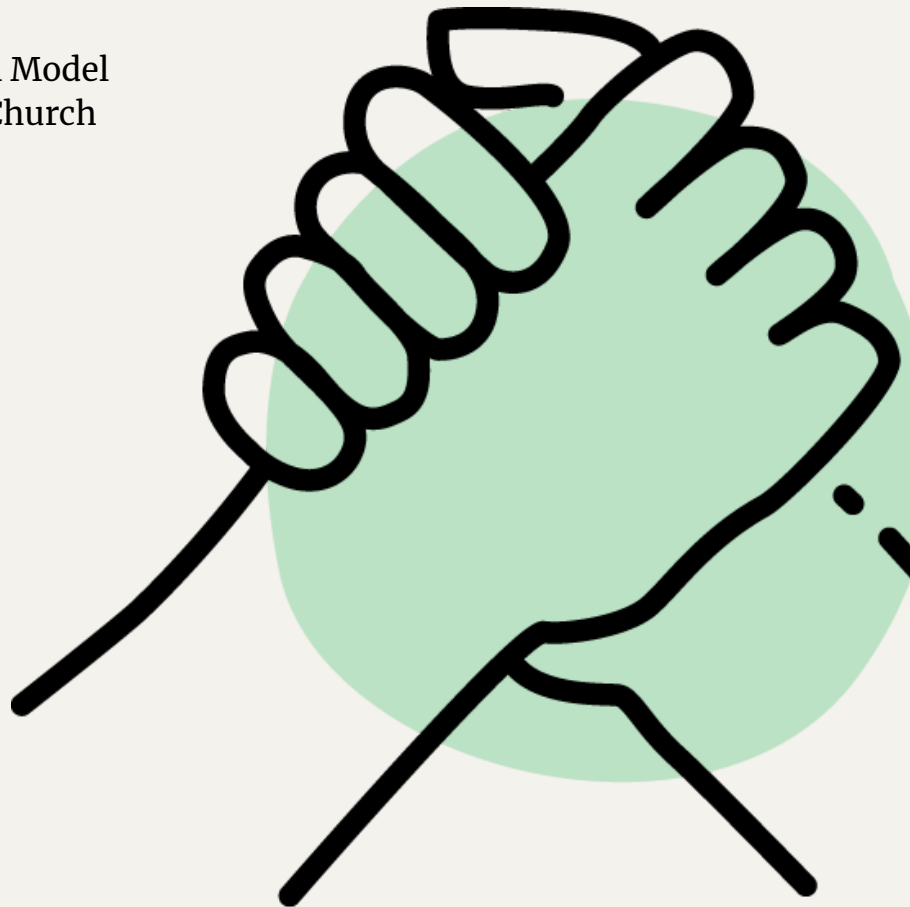


CULTURE DEVELOPMENT PLAYBOOK

FOR CHURCH LEADERS

A Practical Guide Based on a Proven Model
Created by Sun Valley Community Church

THE UNSTUCK GROUP[®]
WE HELP PASTORS LEAD UNSTUCK CHURCHES



Overview

Culture is difficult to define but easy to feel, and it's hard to overestimate the role culture plays in your team's health and efficiency.

A healthy culture can help turbocharge your vision and make progress toward the calling that God has for your church. On the other hand, an unhealthy team culture will actually erode your vision and derail your strategy.

There are countless benefits of healthy team culture.

- It reduces turnover.
- It raises staff satisfaction.
- It attracts the right people.
- It minimizes sideways energy.
- It allows your team to be high-performing.

Unfortunately, culture is often pushed to the side because it isn't seen as "urgent" or directly related to the accomplishing of ministry goals. It's a long term play that gets pushed to the background in the midst of the tyranny of the urgent.

And oftentimes pastors struggle to connect the dots around how much their team culture impacts the desired results they're working towards.

In most organizations, culture is unspoken and unexamined, but the best organizations and ministries are intentional in the articulation of the kind of culture they want to have. After all, culture is not just a way to make people feel good about where they work—It has very positive results in terms of effectiveness and productivity.

Creating and Cultivating a Healthy Culture

At The Unstuck Group, we encourage churches to see their culture as a list of behaviors rather than a list of values. Moving from values to behaviors makes the culture more tangible and practical. Culture-shaping leadership behaviors not only define what you will do, but also define what you won't do.

Leaders can expect the behaviors that they consistently exhibit and the ones they tolerate. In healthy teams, these behaviors are intentionally and strategically decided upon, articulated, regularly inspected, and celebrated.

By the way: senior pastors cannot delegate culture to anyone else. Leaders must view themselves as the CCO of their team: the Chief Culture Officer. You need to understand, champion, advocate for, protect, and model the key behaviors of the culture you desire. There is a huge difference between nurturing culture and mandating it. People have to believe it, see it, feel it, hear stories about it, and be inspired by it before they will own it.

The First Step

Do the hard work of defining these behaviors for your team, in your unique context, with your unique mission. Identify leadership behaviors that are clear, concise, and compelling. Define them in a specific way and identify what those behaviors look like in the organization every day.

A great place to start is to ask: What really matters to our senior leader(s)? What are their personal behaviors and values?

Don't rush. Enter into a collaborative and unhurried process to define your leadership behaviors. Collaboration and buy-in will increase ownership. If you need help, The Unstuck Group has a facilitated process you may want to consider. Reach out to us at theunstuckgroup.com/start.

The win is not to create a list of leadership behaviors: The goal is the implementation and integration of desired leadership behaviors throughout your ministry.

So, how do churches with a clearly defined culture equip all staff to understand and live it out? That's what this guide is going to teach you.

A Real Church's Case Study

[Sun Valley Community Church](#), a multisite church in Arizona, took on the challenge of building a strong senior leadership culture, and then they developed a strategic approach to cascading it down throughout the staff and congregation.

Sun Valley's Process

- 1 The leadership team started by clearly defining Sun Valley's culture shaping behaviors, which they refer to as leadership distinctives.
- 2 Next, they developed an 8-week onboarding class with video teaching and participant guides to clearly communicate all aspects of those leadership distinctives.

Samples from SV's Class Content

[Video Session](#) | [Leader Guide](#) | [Participant Guide](#)

- 3 Then they integrated the teaching into their recruiting and hiring process: They provide a 1-page summary of the leadership distinctives to candidates and focus one round of interviews on just this topic.
- 4 All new staff are required to complete the 8-week onboarding class. They watch all of the videos, fill out the participant guide, meet with their supervisor, and discuss it all in the first 30 days of their employment.
- 5 SV incorporated culture into their annual staff review process, giving each staff member an evaluation (red/yellow/green) on each leadership distinctive.
- 6 Every 2-3 years, during the SV leadership team's strategic planning time, the executive pastor facilitates an exercise with campus and central staff teams to evaluate actual behaviors they have noticed. They identify strengths to build on and areas of opportunity.
- 7 All director-level staff and up are required to lead one leadership cohort each year with high-level volunteers that they personally invite to their cohort, and they teach through the same content.

Positive Outcomes

- ⇒ Staff become experts in the culture (because they have to train it).
- ⇒ Staff must be always spending time with and investing in volunteer leaders.
- ⇒ It formally pushes culture down into the congregation.
- ⇒ It creates a "fishing pool" for future hires: It's not uncommon for staff to identify great people to hire from their cohorts.

"The real success factor: It all starts with doing the real work to be clear about what your staff leadership culture really is."

– Paul Alexander, executive pastor, Sun Valley

Playbook

Drawing on learnings from Sun Valley's proven 8-week process, use this guide to create a sustainable culture development system for your church.

Step 1: Define Your Staff Leadership Culture

Before you can teach culture, you must define it clearly.

- **Identify Core Leadership Distinctives:** Work with your leadership team to articulate 4-8 key leadership distinctives that define your staff culture.
- **Document Specific Behaviors:** For each distinctive, identify concrete, observable behaviors that demonstrate that value in action.
- **Create Assessment Criteria:** Develop red/yellow/green indicators for each distinctive to enable consistent evaluation.

Step 2: Build Your Training Materials

Create comprehensive resources that can be used across multiple contexts.

- **Video Content:** Record teaching videos (10-15 minutes each) that explain each culture behavior with practical examples and stories.
 - **Leader Guide:** Develop a facilitator's guide that includes teaching notes, discussion questions, and application exercises for each culture behavior.
 - **Participant Guide:** Create a workbook that participants can complete, including space for reflection, notes, and action steps.
 - **Summary Documents:** Prepare 1-page overviews of your culture for use in recruiting and quick reference.
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Step 3: Integrate Culture Into Hiring & Management

During Recruiting & Hiring

- Provide candidates with your 1-page culture summary early in the process.
- Conduct a dedicated interview focused specifically on cultural fit.
- Share expectations about ongoing culture training and development.

During Onboarding (First 30 Days)

- Video Training: Require new staff to watch all training videos.
- Participant Guide: Have new staff work through the entire participant workbook with reflection questions.
- Discussion: Schedule dedicated time for new hires and their supervisors to discuss the material together.

During Annual Reviews

- Assess each staff member using red/yellow/green indicators for each culture behavior.
- Celebrate green areas (strengths) and create development plans for red/yellow areas.
- Use this assessment to inform promotion decisions and professional development priorities.

During Strategic Planning (Every 2–3 Years)

- Facilitate team-wide exercises to assess organizational culture health.
 - Red/yellow/green actual team behaviors and practices.
 - Identify cultural strengths to build on and gaps to address.
 - Update training materials based on learnings and organizational evolution.
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Step 4: Integrate Culture Into Congregation

Your staff culture should cascade to volunteer leaders, and ultimately to the entire church.

Leadership Cohort Program

- **Require Director + Level Participation:** All directors and above must lead one leadership cohort per year made up of members of the congregation. Directors personally invite high-potential volunteer leaders to their cohort.
- **Use Same Materials:** Leverage your existing leader guide, participant guide, and videos.
- **Meet Regularly:** Gather cohorts for 8 weeks (or adapted timeframe) to work through the content together.
- **Create Community:** Build relationships among cohort members for ongoing peer support.

Expected Outcomes

When implemented consistently, this process produces multiple benefits:

For Staff Development

- **Staff Become Culture Experts:** Teaching the material forces staff to internalize and model your culture at a deeper level.
- **Consistent Leadership Standards:** Everyone operates from the same framework and vocabulary.
- **Clear Performance Expectations:** Staff know exactly what behaviors are valued and how they'll be evaluated.

For Volunteer Engagement

- **Ongoing Investment:** The cohort system ensures staff are continuously spending time with and developing key volunteers.
 - **Leadership Pipeline:** You're systematically raising up leaders who share your culture.
 - **Hiring Pool:** Cohort graduates often become excellent staff hiring candidates.
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For Organizational Culture

- **Culture Cascade:** Your staff leadership culture formally spreads throughout the congregation.
- **Aligned Decision-Making:** Shared values lead to more consistent decisions at all levels.
- **Cultural Sustainability:** Your culture is documented, taught, and reinforced systematically rather than maintained only through informal means.

Key Success Factors

- **Senior Leadership Buy-In:** Your senior pastor and leadership team must champion this initiative.
 - **Consistency Over Time:** Culture development is a marathon, not a sprint—commit to the process for multiple years.
 - **Quality Materials:** Invest in creating professional, engaging content that people will want to engage with.
 - **Accountability Systems:** Build culture assessment into reviews and performance management.
 - **Model It First:** Staff must live out the culture before teaching it to volunteers.
 - **Celebrate Stories:** Regularly share examples of people living out your culture behaviors.
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Getting Started Checklist

-  Schedule culture definition workshop with leadership team.
-  Review Sun Valley's sample materials for inspiration.

Remember: The goal is not to copy Sun Valley's exact model, but to create a systematic approach to culture development that works for your unique church context. The key is moving from informal culture transmission to intentional, documented, and sustainable culture development.

-  Budget for materials creation (video production, design, printing).
-  Identify pilot group for testing initial materials.
-  Communicate vision and timeline to all staff.
-  Update job descriptions to include culture development expectations.

Resources & Next Steps

For additional support in developing your staff leadership culture, evaluating structure, and investing in team health and performance, consider having your team complete the [Unstuck Teams Assessment](#), available in the [Resource Hub](#), or engaging The Unstuck Group to support you with our [Staffing & Structure Review](#) process.