

# Build a Winning Organizational Culture

By Jon Gordon





## Jon Gordon

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jon is a graduate of Cornell University and holds a Masters in Teaching from Emory University. He and his training/consulting company are passionate about developing positive leaders, organizations and teams.

Jon Gordon's best-selling books and talks have inspired readers and audiences around the world including NFL, NBA and MLB coaches and teams, Fortune 500 companies, school districts, hospitals and non-profits. He is the author of numerous books including *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller *The Energy Bus, Soup, The No Complaining Rule, Training Camp and The Carpenter*. Jon and his tips have been featured on the *Today* show, CNN, *Fox & Friends* and in several magazines and newspapers. His clients include the Atlanta Falcons, Los Angeles Clippers, Pittsburgh Pirates, Campbell Soup Company, Wells Fargo, Northwestern Mutual, Publix, Southwest Airlines, Bayer, West Point Academy and more.

# INTRODUCTION

If you've ever seen a great coach in action, you've witnessed the (near) miraculous. These coaches take a group of individuals with different talents, personalities, backgrounds, opinions and quirks and turn them into a focused force. Each member of the team supports and empowers the others. They work in tandem to relentlessly pursue a common goal. And in the end, countless hours of practice, pep talks and planning combine to result in a championship. Isn't this what small-business leaders want to achieve as well—to inspire, unite and engage their staff under a long-term vision?

I've had the privilege of working with numerous coaches and teams from professional and college sports. I've also been fortunate to work with Fortune 500 companies, school districts, hospitals and non-profits. And what I've found is that the principles that bring success on the playing field can often translate to the workplace.

Coaching a sports team and leading a business team are similar processes, at their core. The cornerstone for both is building and nurturing an aligned, unified culture. Since culture is a common business buzzword, let me briefly explain how I define it: **Culture consists of the shared purpose, attitudes, values, goals, practices, behaviors and habits that define a team or organization.** Everyone at every level shares and shapes the culture, so they must **think, believe, talk and behave in sync.**

It sounds like a daunting task, and it's true that winning cultures aren't developed overnight. But just like perfecting a play, there's a formula to help you get your small business into the big leagues if you're willing to put in the work.

Here are just a few lessons learned about how to win and sustain success:

**FUNDAMENTALS ARE CRUCIAL. BUT CULTURE IS THE KEY TO SUSTAINED SUCCESS.** There's no doubt that technique, strategies, and analytics are important. Even the smallest, most seemingly insignificant changes can give a team the advantage and tip the balance of a game—and the same is true in business. Strategy is important, and execution is imperative.

But what makes a great-on-paper strategy effective and sustainable in business? How can leaders ensure that their teams consistently perform and execute despite setbacks and unforeseen circumstances? By creating a rock-solid culture. This is what will help infuse your team with the resiliency, toughness, passion and attitude to keep pursuing the goal when there are obstacles in the way. Culture drives expectations and beliefs, which drive behaviors, which drive habits—and habits create the future.

It's no coincidence that some of today's most successful organizations and companies are known for having cultures that are value-driven, that demonstrate care for both employees and customers, and that prize innovation and initiative. Since so many business leaders already place top value on their company's core functions, a focus on culture can serve as a differentiator for your brand that may produce wins and sustain success.

For example, if you're operating a retail clothing store, your competitors are likely to be focused on improving their inventory and product offerings, as well as boosting sales. Of course, you shouldn't ignore any of these factors, but if your business also prioritizes having a culture of innovative customer care—like having a try-before-you-buy policy or easy returns—that can give your company a competitive advantage in the market.

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**FOCUS ON THE ROOT, NOT THE FRUIT.** Somewhat paradoxically, success can be your worst enemy if you allow it to change your values, priorities, process, approach and purpose. As vital components of a strong culture, these are all “roots” that need to be continuously nurtured. If you focus solely on results, but ignore the principles that enable you to deliver them, your company may struggle to reach the goals you've set.



HELLA BITTERS  
JOMAREE PINKARD  
MEMBER SINCE 99

*“Culture drives expectations and beliefs, which drive behaviors, which drive habits—and habits create the future.”*



You've probably seen this happen in sports and business: the team that neglects fundamentals, player safety and even ethics in a single-minded drive to reach the playoffs; the company that constantly asks employees to do more with less while using fear as a motivational tool. Focusing on wins can be effective in the short term...but it usually doesn't end well.

I encourage leaders **not** to make their vision or mission statement about winning a championship, because merely stating a goal won't help you achieve it. Likewise, business leaders should avoid focusing on dollar amounts, market share or profit targets. Instead, contagious and compelling visions that motivate teams tend to be about serving others, honoring a tradition, upholding values and leaving a legacy.

One former Fortune 500 company CEO told me that the most important thing he did was to share the vision and mission statement—"Together we will build the world's most extraordinary food company by nourishing people's lives everywhere, every day"—with everyone in the company, in every meeting, as often as possible.

As a business leader, don't allow pressure from stakeholders, employees or even yourself to steer your company away from the values that define it. Make sure everyone in the organization, from recent hires to veteran staffers, understands what your roots are, why they are important and how they directly lead to the outcomes you want.

For example, if your business is founded on the principle of building personal relationships with customers, you shouldn't let a rush of new business during your busy season cause your company to sacrifice that commitment to personal attention for every client.

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### **STAY HUMBLE AND HUNGRY. COMPLACENCY IS A PROBLEM.**

How often have you seen a team crash and burn after experiencing a great season or winning a championship? Frequently, the issue isn't that these teams are "one-hit wonders"—it's that they've become complacent and stopped striving to get better. Business leaders know this, too, and it's why they're as cautious about success as they are about failure. Hard work and passion, as well as constant and consistent improvement—not a past winning record—can guarantee future victory.



FURNITURE DESIGN STUDIOS  
CRAIG MONACO, CHARLES MONACO  
AND NINON TRUDEL  
MEMBER SINCE 95

*“As a business leader, don't allow pressure from stakeholders, employees or even yourself to steer your company away from the values that define it.”*



DOS TOROS  
LEO AND OLIVER KREMER  
MEMBER SINCE 11

*“[Business leaders are] as cautious about success as they are about failure.”*

When I'm working with business organizations, I emphasize that the antidote to complacency is staying humble and hungry. Here are a few ways to do that:

- 1 Don't fall prey to the idea that you know it all. See everyone, including your competition, as teachers.
- 2 When people tell you that you are great, don't let it go to your head. (And when they tell you that you stink, don't let it get to you either.)
- 3 Remember that today's headlines are tomorrow's fish wrap—a single success can be quickly forgotten.
- 4 Love the process and you'll love what the process produces.
- 5 Make your life and work a quest for excellence. Every day ask, “How can I be better today than I was yesterday?”

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**DON'T BE A “GERM” TO YOUR TEAM. BE THE VITAMIN C.** Don't buy into the notion that your bad mood, pessimism and apathy exist in a vacuum. Just like the flu, your attitude is contagious.

Are you broadcasting positive energy and purpose to your team, or are you an “energy vampire” who is sucking the life out of them? Thanks to their passion and outlook, great leaders win behind the scenes first, **then** on the field.

The best coaches I have worked with believe in their players more than they believe in themselves. Their support and encouragement bring out the best in those they lead and together they accomplish more than they could do by themselves. Similarly, good business leaders possess a great deal of technical knowledge and expertise, but the greatest leaders are also powerful motivators and unrelentingly positive thinkers (especially in the face of adversity) who make everyone around them better.

You should be contagious with your vision. You can do this by sharing a simple, clear, bold and compelling vision. Not a string of buzzwords and jargon, but something tangible and exciting to serve as a rallying cry and focal point.

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**STAY CONSISTENT, WHETHER YOU'RE WINNING OR LOSING.** It's easy to stay positive and build your team up when you're on a winning streak. But what message do you send after a string of losses, or when sales are down? Many employees expect their leaders to lambaste them, to silently telegraph disappointment or even to react vindictively.

As a business leader, your challenge is to remain encouraging and to emphasize the roots, not the lack of fruit. Of course, I don't mean that leaders should ignore setbacks and unmet goals. It's important to acknowledge and face them head on. But if you don't keep your people focused on process and purpose, stress and challenges can quickly knock you off track.

I've always enjoyed one football coach's comment to his team after they lost their fifth game of the season. He didn't say, "What happened?," "This is hopeless" or "We might as well give up." He said, "Men, we are getting closer." This coach's consistent guidance and ability to highlight how, despite the losses, the team was improving led his team to an 8-8 record that year, and ultimately to three championship appearances.

Similarly, when you lose a customer or suffer a sales decrease, position it as an object lesson to your employees. Use these setbacks as a chance to evaluate what you did well and what you could do better as an organization, and reinvigorate your staff to better focus on your company's strengths, rather than its weaknesses.



THE HIVE  
DEEANN BUDNEY  
MEMBER SINCE 90

*“Great leaders win behind the scenes first, then on the field.”*





FORTRESS BUILDERS  
BILL SINNETT  
MEMBER SINCE 91

*“Be sure to set a regular time aside ... to get into the trenches with your staff members.”*

**GET ON THE FIELD BEFORE YOUR TEAM DOES.** Most leaders expect their team to be completely committed to the job—but how many of them demonstrate commitment themselves? If you look at coaches who have been able to achieve success—and sustain it—you will find that they tend to be the first on the field, and the last to leave. They are prepared to make unpopular decisions. They spend time developing each player’s strengths and gifts, and show genuine concern for those players’ personal lives. They listen as much as they lead.

Energy, effort, enthusiasm, improvement and engagement are not things you can simply delegate or assign. The only way to cultivate them in your people is to publicly commit to them yourself. One fitness company CEO showed his company’s commitment to its people by making it mandatory for executives to train at their centers (instead of in private with personal trainers), and to work for a week each year in one of their locations. The experience helped leadership to not only better serve their teams, but also to understand their team’s needs. It demonstrated their commitment to everyone, and contributed to the organization’s growth into a fitness industry leader.

It’s difficult to unite employees under a singular vision if you spend all of your time on big-picture planning and long-term strategy, so be sure to set a regular time aside every month (or even every week) to get into the trenches with your staff members. Hit the sales floor at your retail shop for a day, or be a server at your restaurant—the experience will help you learn what your team needs from you as a leader.

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**PRACTICE “LOVE TOUGH,” NOT TOUGH LOVE.** What’s the difference? Love comes first. Because they care, these coaches, CEOs and other leaders push their teams, hold them to high standards and do not allow them to settle for less. They’ve invested so much in their teams that they’ve earned the right to challenge them and help them accomplish more.

This stands in stark contrast to demanding or autocratic leaders who claim that their harshness is the result of caring.

I’ve noticed that one major difference between leaders who love tough and those who practice tough love is the presence of a “caring trademark,”

which is a unique way to show they care. For instance, one women's college basketball coach treats each player like family—to the extent that she once remained in the hospital during a sick player's entire stay. Because this leader demonstrated love, her toughness—when it was called for—motivated team members to try harder instead of causing demotivation and burnout.

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### **COMMUNICATE ONE-ON-ONE, NOT JUST WITH “THE GROUP.”**

Pep talks, halftime huddles and team-wide strategy sessions all have value, but on their own, they are not enough to drive success. Winning coaches communicate one-on-one with each player. And no, I'm not talking about the occasional “Great pitch!” or “Nice tackle!” They ask hard questions about the team's cohesion, drive and rapport. They ask players for their unvarnished insights and advice.

Initially, this type of one-on-one communication usually results in guarded, clichéd or politically correct answers. But over time, it nurtures honest, engaging dialogue from people who want their team to get better.

The same strategy works in business. I know that it's not easy to consistently have one-on-one communication with everyone in an organization, especially if you lead a large group. The key is to meet with your leadership team and the employees you lead directly and then make sure they are communicating well with the people they lead. If everyone does this throughout the organization, teamwork and performance will improve dramatically.

Just as it often takes underdog teams many practices, games and even seasons to achieve success, your business's trajectory won't transform overnight. Remember, building a winning culture is about playing the long game by sparking and nurturing positive leadership, communication and action throughout the organization.

Once the principles I've shared are firmly entrenched and you've achieved buy-in from all the members of your team, these new ways of thinking and acting have the power to help propel your business further and higher than you ever hoped.



***“[These leaders have] invested so much in their teams that they’ve earned the right to challenge them and help them accomplish more.”***



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