

LEADING WITH PURPOSE

Volume 43

February 2026

Chief Randy R. Bruegman, (Ret)



Culture Is Lived, Not Laminated

After 40 years in the fire service, Chief Randy Bruegman founded The Leadership Crucible Foundation to reshape future leadership with a focus on fostering courage, empathy, and humility in leadership positions.

©2026 All Rights Reserved.

“Why Leadership Behavior—Not Slogans—Determines the Future”

Is Your Culture Built for the Future?

What do we mean by “Culture”? Culture is the environment people experience every day. It shapes how leadership shows up, how trust is built or broken, and whether purpose is truly lived within an organization or reduced to words on a page. At its core, culture is the collection of shared beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that define how an organization operates. It reflects what people believe is right or wrong, acceptable, or unacceptable, and it reveals itself daily in how decisions are made and how work gets done.

Most organizations are built on long-standing traditions, both of the organization itself and the profession it serves. Those traditions can provide stability and identity, but they can also quietly anchor organizations to the past. When left unexamined, culture doesn't just influence outcomes; it determines whether the challenges we face are addressed with intention or allowed to deepen over time.

In today's fast-moving, always-on world, where hybrid work, rapid technology shifts, and constant pressure to do more with less are the norm, that risk isn't theoretical anymore. It's real, and leaders are feeling it every day. The same traditions that once provided stability can quietly work against us, making organizations hesitant to accept new ideas, slow to adapt, and inclined to make decisions anchored in the past rather than prepared for the future.

... we must actively engage our people as part of the solution, inviting them into the change that needs to occur ...

If we want to strengthen engagement and performance today, we must intentionally shape cultures that embrace change, encourage innovation, and develop people with the emotional intelligence required to navigate it. And we must actively engage our people as part of the solution, inviting them into the change that needs to occur rather than expecting them to simply adapt to it.

Every profession, and every organization within it, is shaped by its culture.





Over time, we develop traditions, habits, and beliefs that define how work gets done and how success is measured. At their best, those traditions create pride, identity, and connection. At their worst, they become excuses, reasons to resist change, dismiss evidence, and cling to practices that no longer serve our people or our purpose.

Too often, we confuse tradition with effectiveness.

We defend outdated approaches because they feel familiar. We resist new ideas because they challenge how we've always done things. We discount data, research, and innovation because they disrupt comfort. And slowly, almost unnoticed, we place our organizations, and our people, at risk.

Culture rarely fails in dramatic fashion, it fails quietly; (it fails slowly and quietly.)

Culture rarely fails in dramatic fashion, it fails quietly...

A Leadership Lesson I Had to Own

I've seen this play out firsthand. I was hired into five organizations from the outside, and in each case I was brought in to lead a transition. The expectation was clear: change the culture, set a new direction, and move the organization forward. And in each case, we did the work leaders often default to, we clarified our mission and values, articulated a vision, and aligned those around a strategic direction.

But as I look back, there's a leadership failure I have to own.

I did not invest enough time and talent into the deliberate design and development of the people inside those organizations to make that change sustainable over the long term.

The vision was clear, but the cultural foundation beneath it wasn't strong enough. In three of those organizations, the changes didn't last, and that wasn't a system failure. That was a leadership failure.

What I learned is this: if you want lasting change, you have to play the long game. Culture doesn't shift because leaders say the right things, it shifts when leaders invest deeply and consistently in people, capability, and ownership over time. If I had to do it over again, I would spend far less time announcing change and far more time building the human infrastructure required to sustain it.

That lesson has stayed with me because culture doesn't collapse overnight. It erodes quietly when leaders underestimate what it takes to make change endure.

When Culture Becomes a Risk

Since the early 2000s, nearly every profession has faced disruption unlike anything before it, economic volatility, rapid technological change, declining trust in institutions, shifting workforce expectations, and an accelerating pace of innovation. The environment organizations once relied on has fundamentally changed. Yet many leaders are still trying to lead today's organizations with yesterday's assumptions.

That gap matters. We are operating in a new game, and the rules have changed. Across many professions and organizations, paradigms have shifted dramatically, yet too often, we're still trying to play the game using an outdated game plan. We continue to apply yesterday's assumptions to today's realities and then wonder why the results no longer match the effort.

The fact is the paradigm for many professions today has changed dramatically. Paradigms are the framework that defines how success is achieved. It shapes how leaders think, how decisions are made, and what behaviors are rewarded. When that framework shifts, the old rules no longer apply, even if they once worked well.





... a rigid, self-protective culture can become one of the greatest threats to long-term success.

The critical leadership question becomes unavoidable: are we still operating under the same assumptions, or are we trying to succeed tomorrow using thinking shaped by yesterday?

Across most professions, one thing is clear: expectations have changed. Customers, employees, communities, and stakeholders now expect greater transparency, adaptability, accountability, and real value. Organizations that struggle today rarely do so because they lack good people or commitment. More often, they struggle because they remain anchored to assumptions that no longer fit the world they're leading in.

This is where culture becomes a risk. Culture shapes behavior. It influences decisions. It determines how change is received, or resisted. A strong culture can be a powerful advantage, but a rigid, self-protective culture can become one of the greatest threats to long-term success. When paradigms shift and culture doesn't, organizations find themselves defending the past instead of preparing for the future.

Pressure for change now comes from every direction, customers, technology, regulation, economics, and public expectations. When change is internally driven but culturally resisted, progress stalls. When change is externally forced, organizations often find themselves reacting instead of leading. In either case, resistance carries consequences, and those consequences are often felt first by the people doing the work.

One of the most dangerous places for any organization is in their comfort zone. Routine feels safe. Bureaucracy replaces innovation. Maintaining the status quo becomes more important than preparing for what's ahead. It can feel stable, familiar, even successful, for a time. But complacency rarely announces itself. It shows up gradually through missed opportunities, declining engagement, and the slow erosion of trust. By the time the warning signs are impossible to ignore, options are limited and change becomes painful.

Leadership requires seeing that danger early and acting before circumstances force the issue. At its core, this is a leadership responsibility, and it is also a matter of paying it forward. So, what must leaders do differently?

The answer isn't a new program, a rebranded value statement, or another round of engagement surveys. The work begins with leadership behavior. When paradigms shift, leaders must be willing to shift with them, how they think, how they decide, and how they lead their teams.

Leaders Must Acknowledge Reality

First, leaders must acknowledge reality as it is, not as they wish it were. That means listening more than defending, asking better questions, and being honest about what is no longer working. It requires moving from protecting the past to preparing for the future.

Leaders Must Engage People As Partners

Next, leaders must intentionally engage people as partners in change, not passive recipients of it. Engagement rises when people understand the direction, see how their work matters, and believe their voice has influence. When employees are invited into problem-solving and trusted to help shape solutions, ownership replaces disengagement.

Leaders Must Restore Clarity

Leaders must also restore clarity and consistency to the system. People can handle change. What they struggle with is ambiguity, mixed messages, and uneven accountability. Clear expectations, fair standards, and visible follow-through rebuild trust faster than any initiative ever will.

Leaders Model the Behavior They Expect

Finally, leaders must model the behavior they expect. Culture shifts when leaders demonstrate adaptability, curiosity, accountability, and humility, especially under pressure. People watch what leaders do far more closely than what they say, and alignment between the two is what restores credibility.

This is not easy work.

It requires courage, self-awareness, and sustained commitment. But it is the work leadership demands right now. **Engagement doesn't return because leaders ask people to care more, it returns when leaders lead differently.** Leadership is not about preserving what exists today for our own comfort. It's about positioning organizations, and the people within them, for long-term success. It's about leaving behind cultures that are healthier, more adaptive, and more future-ready than the ones we inherited. That means making decisions with tomorrow in mind, not just managing today's pressures.

Short-term thinking isn't enough. Annual planning cycles may check a box, but they don't prepare organizations for long-term realities. We only have to look at the challenges facing the federal government: recurring budget crises, aging systems, leadership turnover, and declining public confidence, to see the results of short-term thinking. Leaders must take a broader, more intentional view, aligning resources to real risks, questioning outdated operating models, anticipating evolving expectations, and shifting from reactive problem-solving to proactive value creation.

Excellence doesn't happen by accident. Cultures that thrive are built with intention. Innovation, adaptability, and accountability must be modeled, reinforced, and consistently expected. And none of it works without the right people, individuals with the character, mindset, and capacity to grow alongside the organization.

Culture is a leadership responsibility.

If organizations are going to thrive in the future, leaders must be willing to examine what they've normalized, challenge what no longer serves the mission, and lead change before change leads them.

Because what leaders tolerate today is exactly what they pass forward tomorrow.

Final Thought

Culture is the legacy leaders leave behind, whether they intend to or not.

Long after strategies change, leaders move on, and circumstances shift, culture remains. It carries forward what was modeled, tolerated, and prioritized. That's why culture work can't be delegated, postponed, or reduced to slogans. It demands intentional leadership, sustained investment in people, and the courage to let go of what no longer serves the future.

The question for every leader is not whether culture will shape outcomes, it will. The real question is whether the culture being built today will strengthen the organization tomorrow, or quietly make the work harder for those who come next. Paying it forward in leadership means leaving people and organizations better prepared for what lies ahead. That starts with how we lead today, how we engage our people, and how willing we are to evolve when the game changes.

That work doesn't start with policy.

It starts with leadership.





Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways

- Culture is never neutral, leaders are always shaping it.
- What leaders tolerate becomes the standard.
- Comfort feels safe, but it quietly erodes sustainability.
- Tradition matters only when it still serves people and purpose.
- Engagement grows where trust and clarity exist.
- Disengagement begins long before people leave.
- Culture reflects leadership behavior, not stated values.
- Building your culture is the most enduring decision leaders can make.

Recommended Reading

If you're looking to go deeper into the themes of leadership, culture, engagement, and organizational health, here are five powerful books that align closely with the challenges and opportunities we explored this month:

The Culture Code – Daniel Coyl

A highly readable exploration of how strong cultures are intentionally built through everyday behaviors and signals. Particularly helpful for leaders who want a practical understanding of how culture is shaped, reinforced, and sustained over time.

Turn the Ship Around! – L. David Marquet

A powerful account of transforming a culture of compliance into one of shared ownership and leadership at every level. A strong reminder that engagement grows when leaders intentionally create space for responsibility, trust, and decision-making.

Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter – Liz Wiseman

An insightful look at how leadership behavior either amplifies or diminishes the capability of others. Especially relevant for leaders seeking to elevate engagement by fostering growth, ownership, and discretionary effort.

An Everyone Culture – Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey

An in-depth examination of organizations that intentionally build development into the work itself. This book aligns well with the need for emotional intelligence, long-term investment in people, and sustainable culture change.

Drive – Daniel H. Pink

Helpful context on motivation and engagement, reinforcing why autonomy, mastery, and purpose matter in creating environments where people are willing to give their best.