

# A Blueprint for Building a Disciplemaking Culture

a **CULTURE BUILDING** resource



## Introduction

“Do you know what’s the most important part of my job?” a ministry leader asked. A lot of answers can come to mind but here’s the one he was fishing for. “Managing the culture in our ministry is the most important thing I do. If I don’t lead and manage the culture, our focus and values will slowly disappear.”

Disciplemaking in a church or ministry doesn’t happen by osmosis. Pastors and ministry leaders must be committed to building, nourishing, and sustaining cultures of life-to-life disciplemaking. What we teach, model, and talk about sets the culture for our congregations and ministries. Effective leaders do not take existing cultures for granted; rather they intentionally shape and build them.

Why think about building a culture? If a leader doesn’t build a culture, someone or something else will. Like nature, culture abhors a vacuum. If we don’t cultivate a culture, our churches and ministries will be infested with the weeds of half-hearted choices, the current ministry fad, or the competing agendas of dominant people. When culture building is neglected, leaders find themselves managing programs in a three-ring circus atmosphere where we focus on events rather than essentials of evangelism and disciplemaking.

*The creation mandate inevitably leads Christian believers to a transformative engagement with the culture in which they find themselves.*

James Davison Hunter

## God’s heart

Culture building is on God’s heart. In his book, *Culture Making*, author Andy Crouch writes, “Transformed culture is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, and it is the call of God’s redeemed people.” Crouch advocates that culture creation is rooted in the “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:26-28 where we create culture as “gardeners and artists, cultivators and creators.” We were created to partner with God in culture-building.

The gardener cultivates what already exists so that it can flourish and multiply. The artist looks at the same canvas and imagines what could be made new. Cultivators “tend and nourish what is best in human culture,” writes Crouch. Creators are “people who dare to think and do something that has never been thought or done before.” These roles adopt a posture of purposeful work, effort, and partnership. Our roles as partners, or co-laborers, with God is anchored in Genesis (Genesis 2:15), expressed in the Great Commission (Matthew 9:36-38; 28:18-20), and essential to the growth of the church (1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 4:16).

Acting as a cultivator and a creator is at the heart of building a disciplemaking culture. We quietly and

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methodically help men and women live as Jesus' disciples. Relationships, not programs, are the vehicle for discipling in the church. Building a discipling culture means that we partner with God, starting small, going slow, and building deep. The Apostle Paul calls this the work of a "skilled master builder" (1 Corinthians 3:10). A skilled architect does not construct a building overnight. A gardener does not expect instant produce. A good cook may choose to use a crock pot instead of instant pot, allowing food to simmer over time rather than appearing in a minute. Culture building takes time.

## Defining Culture

Culture is often compared to an iceberg. Just as an iceberg has a visible portion above the waterline with a larger portion below the water line so culture has both visible and hidden qualities. The visible cultural qualities are the shared behaviors and practices of people. The hidden qualities are those values and deeply held beliefs which govern the visible behaviors. When we build a discipling culture we want to emphasize not only the visible practices but the hidden values and convictions of people.

This definition of culture will guide this paper: ***Culture describes the shared behavior and values of people in a given setting.***

Culture exists at both a macro and micro level. A macro level is the culture of a country, such as the American culture. A micro culture can be the culture of a workplace, church, or a family. Macro and micro intersect and influence one another. This intersection and influence speaks to the malleability of culture and the opportunity for influence and change.

We swim daily in the American culture and the local cultures of neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches. These cultures become second-nature to us and we seldom reflect on their composition or influence, the life below the water line. Because these cultures are so familiar, we need to stop and take a look at a culture's component parts. What are the elements that describe a culture? It's hard to influence, lead, and build a discipling culture without understanding what marks a culture. Understanding the following four markers will help us think about, build, and nourish a discipling culture.

1. Cultures have a **shared language**. The obvious examples are found in national cultures—Americans speak English and people in France speak French.
2. Cultures have a **shared set of values**. Values describe what is important to us. In the United States, we have adopted social values in such diverse areas as to how we dress, eat, date, or think about money.

*A key, perhaps the key,  
to leadership . . . is the  
effective communication  
of story.*

Tom Peters

3. Cultures have **shared practices**. People of a common culture do things in a certain way; this is often found in procedures and policies. For example, American businesses have a shared way of marketing, branding, and customer service.

4. Cultures have a **shared vision or story**. School children are taught the American story—a country formed by a band of revolutionaries who broke from England. We have an "American Dream," the ability anyone has to achieve a degree of wealth and success. Our social structures reinforce and teach our shared story or dream.

## Cultures are built through four simple strategies.<sup>1</sup>

All of us are born into a culture. Over time, we assimilate the culture around us, taking on its beliefs, values, and behaviors. Sometimes we are transplanted from our familiar culture to one that is different and unfamiliar. We consciously and unconsciously follow the same four simple strategies to assimilate this culture. These four strategies are employed when building a disciplemaking culture.

### 1. Observe/model

Picture yourself in a culture different from your own. One of the first things you might notice is that people not only eat different food but they eat differently. To become part of this culture, you have to first observe how people eat and receive some instruction on the eating choices and habits. Cultures are passed-on and developed as people observe others in the culture. The same is true in building a disciplemaking culture

Disciplemaking cultures start when people observe and experience disciplemaking through the model of others. Modeling always precedes planning. The original twelve disciples grasped the importance and the practice of disciplemaking because they had both observed and experienced how Jesus disciplined them.

Modeling is critical because it provides clarity about the goals and vision of a culture. Author and culture builder J. Stewart Black writes that “unless the target (goal of culture building) is relatively clear to those who are expected to pursue it, it is analogous to shooting in the dark.” Modeling moves ideas and beliefs into tangible and visible lifestyles.

The principle of modeling pulsates through the Bible. Jesus modeled a life doing the Father’s will (John 4:34). The Apostle Paul encouraged people to “imitate” his life (Philippians 3:7). We do not build cultures by announcement but by modeling the values and behaviors we want people to practice. People must first observe if they are to embrace a culture.

Modeling is ultimately about influence and not imposition, and it starts with leaders of the culture. “Nothing undermines the communication of a vision more than behavior on the part of [leaders] that seems inconsistent with the vision,” writes John Kotter. Culture building leaders must consistently clarify, model, and remind people of the vision of a disciplemaking culture.

### 2. Instruction/training.

Observation and modeling is not enough, instruction and training must happen. To learn to eat in another culture, we may need remedial instruction and practical training in the use of eating utensils or the understanding of table etiquette. Training gives people the capacity or capability to do something. In our case, we need to train people to make disciples. This means imparting heart, vision, and know-how in disciplemaking. “No one expects to be instantly great at something they have not done before . . . Most of us do not like to be bad at something, especially if we are already good at something else,” writes Black. Building a disciplemaking culture requires new thinking and new ways of doing things. If people are not prepared through instruction and training to do what they may have not done before, they will quickly default to doing what they are used to.

<sup>1</sup> The following four principles were adapted from the book *Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook*.

### 3. Practice

As people have observed, experienced, and received instruction in discipling, they are now prepared to disciple others. They imitate through practice what they have observed and been trained in. Consider the eating analogy. You observed the table etiquette, someone explained and demonstrated the culture's eating practices, and now it's time for you to eat! You now practice what you observed and been instructed in. So it is with discipling, observation and training have happened and now you can come alongside another to disciple him or her.

### 4. Reinforcement

Reinforcement is the celebration and affirmation of "doing it right." Think about eating in the new culture. The friends who oriented you to new eating habits applaud you when you begin to eat like others in the new culture. Authors Chip and Dan Heath calls this looking for and affirming the "bright spots." The bright spots are those successful efforts worth emulating.

We must look for and celebrate the "wins" or bright spots of discipling. We highlight, affirm, and applaud when people take the initiative to practice life-to-life discipling. In particular, we publicly showcase the "early adopters," the people who quickly demonstrate the internal values and lifestyles of our discipling culture. Reinforcement communicates what is valued in a culture. Simple affirmation spurs us to keep repeating our new values and behaviors.

**How do you know when a discipling culture has been established? Two simple qualities should exist.**

#### 1. Internalization

Internalization is the personal "ownership" of a value or behavior. It means that we do not need external prodding or rewards to continue to live a certain way. The behavior has passed from a program to an internalized value, something we now own for ourselves. We could also call this internalized value a "conviction." A culture of discipling has been internalized when people are so convinced of discipling that they make it a regular priority. What are some markers of internalization?

- Ownership - People are making disciples without the prodding of a program or a campaign. They "own" the Great Commission.
- Organic - Discipling is happening outside the church, people are discipling others in their neighborhoods, workplaces, etc.
- Multiplication - Generations of disciples are appearing. The people that the original disciplers discipled are now discipling others who are discipling others.

#### 2. Spontaneous Demonstration

Making disciples is now a lifestyle. The habits and practices to disciple others is now a part of a person's life. There's an unconscious approach to discipling because it is built into one's life and values.

<sup>2</sup> These two outcomes were adapted from *Culture Matters*.

## Sustaining a disciplemaking culture.

Disciplemaking cultures must be sustained over time by weaving certain qualities into the organization and fabric of a church or ministry. They need to be made “concrete,” tangible practices and strategies are easily identified and built into the organization of a church or ministry.

Five concrete qualities must be present in the daily system and organization of a church or ministry for disciplemaking to be sustained.

### 1. Purposeful leaders

It is essential that church leaders embrace, model, and teach a vision, mission, and values for disciplemaking. The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote: *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me* (Colossians 1:28-29 ESV). Disciplemaking cultures are marked by purposeful leaders.

*Every cultural good, whether a new world, recipe, song or gadget, begins with a small group of people – and not just a relatively small group but an absolutely small group. No matter how many it goes on to affect, culture always starts small.*

Andy Crouch

### 2. Picture of a disciple

When Jesus commands us to “make disciples,” it is implied that we know what a disciple looks like. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus gives markers of his true followers: they’re to love one another (John 13:34-35), deny themselves (Luke 9:23), and bear fruit (John 15:16). A New Testament picture of a disciple become the “bulls-eye” of a church’s mission. Having a clear picture of discipleship shapes the planning, strategy, and priorities of a church from the youth to the seniors. Disciplemaking cultures happen when a clear picture of a New Testament disciple is present.

### 3. Pathway for disciplemaking

The New Testament paints a picture of spiritual growth as a movement from childhood to maturity (Ephesians 4:13-16). A simple, practical, and biblical pathway moves a young or new believer to maturity and mission for Christ. This pathway has an established process to help pass-on what a disciple needs to know, be, and do.

### 4. Practitioners

Without practitioners, or disciplemakers, a culture remains a theory on paper. Practitioners have the heart, vision, and know-how to come alongside people in life-to-life ways to help them follow Christ. Disciplemaking cultures are marked by an ever-increasing number of disciplemakers.

### 5. Progress markers

When Jesus speaks to the seven churches in chapter one of Revelation, he first affirms before challenging. Assessing our progress means identifying the “wins,” the successes that the Holy Spirit generates as the culture grows. These progress markers are taught and celebrated as the church moves forward in its disciplemaking ministry. Disciplemaking cultures have established progress markers.

## In conclusion

Why culture building? Pastor Tom honestly assessed his disciplemaking efforts and came to this conclusion: "If I only model and teach disciplemaking, it may not last beyond my leadership tenure. If I build a culture of disciplemaking, it will outlast me!" Pastors and ministry leaders must be committed to building, nourishing, and sustaining life-to-life disciplemaking cultures. What we teach, model, and talk about sets the culture for our congregations and ministries. Effective leaders do not take culture for granted; they intentionally shape and build them.

However, there is a word of caution about culture building. Building a disciplemaking culture runs counter to our cultural values. It takes time. Author Bill Hull asserts that moving a church to a disciplemaking church takes three to five years. Building a culture means starting small, going slow, and building deep. This means following Jesus' pattern of starting small by investing in a few, we go slow rather than rush a program, and we build deep through intentional disciplemaking relationships. Like the mustard seed in Jesus' parable (Matthew 13:31-32), we allow the planting of the small seed of disciplemaking to slowly germinate until it overflows into a harvest. We long for what God did in the Book of Acts to happen in our churches and ministries: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly, and a great many . . . became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Want to know more about how The Navigators Church Ministries can help your church or ministry build a disciplemaking culture? You can contact us at [Navigatorchurchministries.org](http://Navigatorchurchministries.org) or (719) 594-2446. Ask for the free booklet: *Crockpot Disciplmaking: How I left my instant pot behind.*"

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## Appendix 1: Discussion Questions

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1. Consider your church or ministry culture. What can you observe about the four culture characteristics (language, values, history, practices) in this culture?
2. What prevents us from providing active leadership in building and nourishing a disciplemaking culture?
3. If we view disciplemaking as a culture-building process, what would change in our typical approach to programming, teaching, etc.?
4. Why is modeling so important for culture building?
5. What can happen if we fail to adequately train people in disciplemaking?
6. What skills or competencies are needed to build a disciplemaking culture?
7. How would you describe whether “internalization” has taken place?
8. What are some “wins” to celebrate in disciplemaking?
9. What is one action step we could take to begin to build and sustain a disciplemaking culture?

## Appendix 2: Assessing Progress in Building a Disciplemaking Culture

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### Language

Cultures share a common language.

- What words do we want to use and repeat regarding discipling?
- Do we have a language that describes a disciple?
- What words speak to the stages of spiritual growth that people pass through?

### Values

Values describe what is most important to a culture.

- How do we celebrate the ministry of discipling?
- What resources have we allocated in our budget and calendar for discipling?
- What “wins” do we talk about at leadership meetings regarding discipling?

### Shared practices

We have agreed upon approaches, skills, and activities for discipling.

- Do we have an agreed upon pathway of discipleship?
- Do we have a core set of skills and practices that people use in discipling others?
- What are we doing to train people in this core set of skills?

### Story

Story speaks to our common vision or hope for the future.

- How is the story of discipling presented in our church?
- What is our vision for discipling?
- How often do we communicate this vision?
- Do people embrace a goal to be disciples and make disciples?

## Appendix 3: References

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