

BLACKMILL TOOLBOX

GROWING YOUR TEAM CULTURE

Practical ideas for you to try this week



Helping you scale your tech team without
losing momentum, clarity, or your sanity

Team culture is a collection of values, norms, and beliefs. It is the behaviours that are being rewarded, punished, and ignored. Team culture is the explicit and implicit social behaviours. It is the thousand little decisions that every person in the company makes every day. Where do you have lunch every day? On site, off site, at your desk, alone or with others? Who makes decisions about performance reviews? Do you hang out with your co-workers?

Healthy team culture is difficult and it is getting harder with the new ways of working. It requires active attention to planning and a great deal of work. Your culture is a living thing. It evolves and changes in hard to define ways. Healthy cultures take time to grow. It all starts with acknowledging where you are now and where you want to be. Then the fundamentals include being inclusive, respectful, psychologically safe, ethical, collaborative, and free from abuse.

People talk about hiring for culture fit. But culture fit is static. It is a still photo used to describe a living being. It captures some aspects of your team from a moment in time, but does not portray the whole picture. And it is never up to date. Instead, you should focus on culture growth.

Everyone can contribute to growing the culture. The responsibility of setting the cultural tone is on company leadership. But everyone at every level has the power to improve the workplace for themselves and others. Top leaders find it easier to create change but might lack the context for which change is needed. Individual contributors have more context but might find it harder to make change happen. But at the end of the day, everyone can do something. Advocate for others, ask questions, and role model the behaviour you wish to see. Make everyone feel welcome.

WHAT TOXIC CULTURE COSTS YOU

Working in a toxic atmosphere leads to elevated levels of stress, burnout, and mental health issues. Toxicity imposes costs that flow directly to the organisation's bottom line. It also affects employees' physical well-being.

For example:

- Employee attrition is higher
- Loss of productivity of leaving employees
- Employees leaving leads to loss of employee knowledge
- Poor company reputation makes it harder to attract talent
- To reach peak performance for new employees takes anywhere between six months to two years.
- Increased cost of recruitment and training of new employees
- Outside recruitment might mean offering higher remuneration to the new hires
- Higher absenteeism due to physical illnesses
- Morale of existing staff suffers when other team members leave, leading to bitter, sad, or distracted feelings. The team might become disengaged and less productive.

BENEFITS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY TEAM CULTURE

On the flip side, a healthy culture:

- Reduces emotional pressure. When you feel safe, your motivation is not cancelled out by anxiety.
- Reduces economic pressure by making you feel less afraid of punishment.
- Increases your sense of purpose because the identity of the team is stronger.
- Inspires sharing knowledge and sharing perspectives.
- Drives play, which is our learning instinct, and is tied to curiosity, experimentation, and exploring challenging problems.

PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR YOU TO TRY THIS WEEK

1. DEFINE YOUR ENGINEERING CULTURE

Healthy cultures take time to evolve. It starts with acknowledging where you are now and where you want to be. Start by documenting your current reality. For example, write down how you currently collaborate and what your processes look like. What makes for a good pull request in your team? How, and when, do you deploy? What principles do you follow? Do you have coding standards? This will make the implicit behaviours in your culture explicit.

Healthy team culture is important for growth and weathering tough times.

Are you ready to invest in your team today? Schedule a free consultation with us at <https://meet.blackmill.co/blackmill/30min>

2. ALIGN ON VALUES

Values need to be alive in your culture, not empty words on a web page.

Take the time to establish your engineering team values. Once established, it will guide current and future team members on what is expected of them, help connect the meaning and purpose of work, and guide hiring decisions. You should also use your values in performance reviews and ongoing company communication.

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3. OVER COMMUNICATE IN PUBLIC

Create rituals that encourage communication and sharing. For example code previews, demo days, and a space for sharing kudos and wins. When handling feedback, model curiosity and ask more questions. When it comes to remote work, clear and frequent communication is everything. Being intentional about the ways you communicate and manage the flow of information. Tools can only go so far. In the world of asynchronous communication, more public and written documentation is better.

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4. CREATE DELIBERATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTEDNESS IN HYBRID ENVIRONMENT

You can work in the office and feel disconnected or work remotely and feel connected. It really depends on the culture. Remote work gives us flexibility but it may contribute to feeling disconnected. Create opportunities for shared experiences in physical or virtual spaces to build relationships. So that team members learn to care about each other beyond work requirements.

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5. NURTURE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety is a shared belief held by team members that they can speak up or admit mistakes — without fear of negative consequences. At the heart of it, it is all about trust. To build trust in your team, be the first to show vulnerability, and admit your own mistakes. Role-model the behaviour you want to see from others. Accept information sharing positively. Practice blameless post-mortems.

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6. BUILD RAPPORT

Loneliness is a big threat to remote work. 20% of remote employees say they struggle with feelings of isolation. Show genuine interest and care for your team members. Don't only talk shop. Instead, ask your team about their life outside of work. Show the team that you are thinking of them and care about their well-being. In a remote work environment, focus on outcomes rather than hours worked.

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7. ENCOURAGE ONE-ONES

Team members who have regular check-ins with their managers are more likely to engage. Ensure you make time for everyone on your team at a regular cadence. Practice active listening. Do not skip or reschedule one-on-ones too often. Create a shared agenda for the meeting in a place where they can contribute to it. Do not waste one-on-one time on status updates. Action to do items from a one-on-one immediately..

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8. MITIGATE BLAME BIAS

With blame bias, we look for reasons to explain outcomes that don't fit our intuition. And we usually tend to blame others rather than consider our contribution to the problem. To combat blame bias:

1. Assume positive intent
2. Come up with 5 possible scenarios to explain the behaviour
3. Ask why?
4. Together identify the root cause of the problem and develop a plan to remedy it

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9. HANDLE BURNOUT

Instead of worrying about productivity in an unsupervised setting, consider that the opposite might be true. In remote work environments, some people struggle to separate work from home life. Often people work too much, which leads to employee burnout and isolation. Look out for signs of team members feeling overwhelmed. Be proactive by asking questions. Learn the indicators of burnout such as inability to concentrate, recurring illness, lack of patience and irritability, and lack of motivation. Lead with compassion and make sure your colleagues feel appreciated. Create rules around work hours and restructure work to reduce stress.

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10. CONSIDER CULTURAL RELATIVITY

One dimension of culture differences around the world is the level of context. In a low-context culture, everything needs to be spelled out, reiterated, or must be very clear. In a high-context culture, people read between the lines and have a high level of shared context. To mitigate cultural differences between team members, define a team-working agreement. At the start of a project, talk about your roles and responsibilities. Define deadlines, work hours, and how you want to work together. Set expectations together and everybody will understand when those expectations are being met. The explicit agreement allows you to have a more productive conversation when necessary.

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11. MEASURE, INVEST, AND ITERATE ON WHAT'S NOT WORKING

Our first tip talks about defining where you are and where you want to be. Assess your current culture for dysfunctions like the absence of trust, artificial harmony, conflict avoidance, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, or inattention to results. Then iterate on improving the norms. Frame changes as "experiments". Look for change, then rinse and repeat.

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ABOUT BLACKMILL

At Blackmill, we believe in people and the universal desire to continuously improve. We believe in creating better ways of working together. That is why Blackmill exists.

We work with startups, scale-ups, and established tech companies to improve existing processes by engaging with all stakeholders and provide guidance for better results. We support team growth, expansion, and building healthy cultures to increase employee engagement and performance.

We are engineering practitioners with decades of leadership experience who understand the challenges that technology companies and their leaders face. We know what is required to succeed in a fast-paced industry that requires constant iteration and collaboration.

Blackmill is your thought partner in nurturing a healthy culture that is adaptive, resilient, and ready for growth. We will lead change and level up your engineering practices to support a high performing team. We give you practical tools you can start using tomorrow.



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