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Michael Bungay Stanier, bestselling author of *The Coaching Habit*

LET'S TALK

ABOUT

CULTURE

CULTURE

The conversations you **NEED**
to create the team you **WANT**

SHANE MICHAEL HATTON

Praise for *Let's Talk Culture*

'Organisational culture's built through words and actions. This book shows you the *conversations* you need to spark the *behaviour* you want to create the *culture* you desire.'

Michael Bungay Stanier, bestselling author of *The Coaching Habit* and *How to Begin*

'In *Let's Talk Culture*, Shane manages to do what many culture experts cannot: simplify the complexity that is culture. Full of stories and insights, Shane unpacks the five conversations about culture that every leader should have with their team. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to create a culture worth belonging to.'

Gabrielle Dolan, International keynote speaker and bestselling author of six books, including *Magnetic Stories* and *Stories for Work*

'Although leaders intuitively know that culture is key to the success of their organisations and the wellbeing of their employees, it is a notoriously slippery construct.

Shane helps leaders gain traction by distilling a broad set of research findings and ideas into compelling frameworks, providing concrete examples of practices others have followed, and offering practical advice for putting the ideas into action.

I would highly recommend this book to any leader embarking on a large-scale program of culture change.'

Sameer B. Srivastava, Associate Professor and Ewald T. Grether Chair in Business Administration and Public Policy at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business, University of California; Co-director Berkeley Culture Initiative

'Shane has done a great job in demystifying and making the case for the role of a people leader in defining, building, changing, and strengthening culture. This book is full of practical questions and actions all leaders should be asking themselves and their teams.'

Steph Clarke, facilitator; host of *Steph's Business Bookshelf* podcast

'It's true that the best storytelling wins, but the leader who knows how to talk about culture helps the entire team win. In this engaging and entertaining book, Shane has crafted the roadmap for exactly how to have those critical conversations that will help you craft the kinds of culture everyone is taking about. I wish I'd had this book when I started my managerial journey 20 years ago. If you're charged with managing others, this book is the companion you've been looking for.'

Mike Ganino, Public speaking and storytelling coach; creator of The Mike Drop Moment

‘Great stuff from Shane, who not only decodes culture, but also provides the data that senior managers require to fund its investment of time and money and the practical insights necessary to do it well, every time.’

Colin D. Ellis, international speaker, culture change facilitator
and author of *Culture Hacks*

‘After over 20 years running my recruitment business, speaking to different organisations daily about the highs and lows of leading people, I can’t express enough the impact culture has on the success of an organisation and the overall job satisfaction of people who work there. What I love about Shane’s book is he really gets to the heart of what drives culture and, through learning from some of the best places to work in Australia, shares with us some of the key actions leaders can take to influence and shape the culture they aspire to. Most of what I have learnt as a leader has been through trial and error and many years of experience; I wish I had read this book earlier in my career.’

Nikki Beaumont, Founder and CEO of Beaumont People

‘As a leader, how do you comprehend something you can see, feel and experience every day, yet struggle to explain to anyone outside of it? You have a conversation. Many conversations. *Let’s Talk Culture* provides the conversations every leader who wants to be intentional about culture must first have with themselves. Shane skilfully weaves hundreds of impressions together and casually yet pragmatically offers the blueprint to growing a culture that lives, is inclusive, and wins.’

James Comer, Head of People and Communities, Australia and New Zealand, Cisco

‘Loved, loved, loved this book. Insightful, instructive, and inspiring, Shane has once again delivered a game-changing book, perfect for anyone, at any level, in any organisation, who wants to play their part in unlocking a culture that enables others to be their brilliant selves.’

Janine Garner, international speaker, three-time bestselling author, CEO of Curious Minds AUS Pty Ltd, and host of the *Unleashing Brilliance* podcast

‘Shane paints a wonderfully vivid narrative of culture as a language we can all learn to speak, even if our dialects are slightly different. As the leader of an integrated health system, this book will aid me in building a more inclusive team to better care for the increasingly diverse communities we serve.’

Tracy Michael, senior healthcare executive

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SHANE MICHAEL HATTON



MAJOR
STREET



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Preface

Brace yourself for a wild ride of emotions.

If I could go back and speak to myself as I was setting out to write a book on culture, that's what I would say. Not because I expected that writing this book would be easy. It's more that I underestimated how hard it would be.

I'll explain. There's this popular story about three goldfish that you might be familiar with. It was part of a commencement speech delivered by David Foster Wallace in 2005 at Kenyon College, later published as an essay titled 'This Is Water', and it quickly became one of his most read pieces of work. The story goes:

“There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How's the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?””

Writing a book about culture feels kind of like a goldfish writing a book about water. We spend our lives immersed in it but remain mostly unaware of its presence or impact.

I didn't grow up in a particularly religious family, but my mother is a teacher's aide at an Anglican school, so the limited experience of religion I did have in my younger years typically revolved around that.

I'll never forget the time as a young teen when I swore at church and was met by the full weight of an older lady's eyes on me. She didn't say a word, but she really didn't have to. In her defence she was actually a very kind person, but I knew in that moment I had done something that wasn't part of the culture there.

When I was at university, I picked up a casual job in the warehouse of a surf clothing store. We stood all day around a long workbench scanning items of clothing to be distributed to different stores and throwing them into numbered boxes that correlated with the store numbers. Once each box was full, we would tape it up and ship it to the store and start the process over. Very few people I knew there liked the job, but it wasn't because the work was mundane and repetitive. It was because the warehouse manager had a very strict 'no talking while working' rule. I mean, not a single non-work-related word was to be spoken. It was a policy he seemed to find enjoyment in enforcing. For eight hours a day, we stood around the desk listening to the repetitive beeps of a scanner. (I can still hear them when I go to sleep at night.) It was one of my earliest recollections of hearing someone talk about hating the culture.

I remember starting my career working in local government. My role was to coach local community groups on how to run better public events. I didn't realise how different this world of work would be to anything I had experienced in the past: an oddly specific number of minutes for lunch, forms for absolutely everything and meetings about meetings that seemed to include every person or department you could think of. Nobody really questioned why; it was just the way things were done around there. It's one of the first times I remember having to make a decision about whether that was a culture I wanted to be part of.

When I look back now, I can spot culture everywhere. Like that bit of food in a friend's teeth you should have told them about earlier but

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now you've missed the window and you can't stop looking at it, culture becomes hard to unsee once you're aware of it. But most of the time, culture was all about me. It informed what I could get away with and what I couldn't. It was just a word I used to describe an environment I loved or hated. That's it. I never questioned what it was all about, why it mattered, how it worked or even necessarily the part I played in it. I never had to. Until I stepped into leadership for the first time and my boss told me, 'You're now responsible for the culture here.'

Responsible?! I wasn't even sure I knew what it was.

My best guess is that this has been your experience, too. You've spent most of your career as a goldfish swimming and now, all of a sudden, you're being asked to make sense of the water. You know culture is important but you're still figuring out exactly what it is, how it helps, what it's for and how (or if) you can influence it.

I don't think learning about culture is difficult because there is a lack of information; it's quite the opposite. There has been so much written to try and make sense of it that it can feel a little overwhelming.

Make no mistake, culture is complex, but it doesn't need to be complicated. I wrote this book because it's the book I wish I'd had when my manager told me to take responsibility for the culture.

If you've picked up this book, I can imagine you find yourself in a similar place:

- You want some help to make sense of what culture is all about.
- You want to shape a team that people love to be a part of.
- You want to shape an environment that people love to work in.
- You want a team you love to lead.
- You want a team that feels like it is aligned and moving forward together.
- You want the practical skills to develop a strategy for your culture.
- You want a culture that helps you achieve results.

If this sounds like you, then this book contains the conversations you'll need.

Intent before content

In my previous book, *Lead the Room: Communicate a Message That Counts in Moments That Matter*, I wrote about the importance of intent before content and getting clear on what matters most. So, before we get started, it's important we get clear on who I wrote this book for and why.

My intention for this book is that it will quickly become your 'go-to how-to' for building the team culture you want.

This book won't show you how to build a 'healthy' team culture because 'healthy' is not for me to define for you. I know some organisations that require their staff to be available 24/7 and others that wouldn't dare contact an employee on their day off. If you talk to people from both organisations, they would both describe that as a normal or 'healthy' part of their culture. The team you want and the culture you choose to lead and shape is entirely up to you; this book is here to provide the framework and tools to enable it.

About our research

Experience has taught me that if you want a book to be helpful and memorable, it needs to be simple. But if you're going to tackle a book on a huge and complex topic like *culture*, you want to know that it's thorough. If culture can influence – and some might even say determine – the success of a team, then it's important to clearly understand as much as you can about it.

I wanted to know what people like you think about culture. What it means to you. How you define it. How you view your role in building and shaping it. Where you feel confident and where you feel stuck.

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Sometimes the most obvious solution is the best. So, I took the time to ask.

I'm not an academic and I'm not a researcher, but I am deeply curious and a learner by nature. I love taking big, complex ideas and finding ways to make them accessible to the everyday leader. So, in 2021 I engaged McCrindle Research, an Australian research company with specialist skills in collecting and analysing data and demographics, to bring research to life to help me explore the attitudes and experiences around team culture for people leaders.

We set out with a few key research objectives for people leaders, including to:

- explore their understanding of what culture is
- gain insights into their beliefs about their role in shaping culture
- investigate what builds and what detracts from culture
- understand how equipped they feel to influence culture within their organisation.

This book draws on the findings from our quantitative study of 1002 managers from across Australia, along with a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with managers at some of Australia's best places to work. To help you better understand the sampling of people leaders, we applied the following criteria to participants:

- Age: 18+
- Location: Australia
- Employment status: Full-time
- Company size: 20 or more employees
- Current role: Described as middle manager, team leader or people leader
- Team size: At least two people directly report to them.

This book is for you

Positioned right in the middle of the organisational chart, managing relationships on all sides, you've got leaders looking to you for outcomes, colleagues looking to you for support and a team looking to you for answers. You're in the engine room of the business, managing the day-to-day problems and tensions, dealing with decisions flowing down the line and daily pressure coming up it. It can often feel like your position means you have limited control or authority, but I want to remind you that your influence is significant.

I understand the pressure of moving from being a technical expert at the top of your game to carrying the responsibility of leading people, and maybe even leading leaders. I've been you and I see you. I wrote this book for you.

You'll likely find yourself in one of three places right now:

1. **You're an aspiring people leader.** You're not leading people yet but you're putting in the work. You've got your sights set on leadership, and you want to build the confidence and capability you'll need when you get there. You might not be leading people yet, but leading under a leader makes you no less of a leader. Read this book to help yourself hit the ground running.
2. **You're a new people leader.** You're transitioning from individual to collective, from 'I' to 'we'. You know it's not just about you anymore, and you're ready to build a thriving and cohesive team. You're leading people and you understand the important role that culture plays in creating the team you want, but you just need some help with a strategy and figuring out what to do next. Read this book to help yourself lead more intentionally.
3. **You're a seasoned people leader.** You've been around a while. This isn't your first rodeo when it comes to leading people, but right now you're not leading the team you want. Maybe the

culture you have isn't the culture you created or even the culture you want. Perhaps all the ingredients are there but you know they need to be refined and clarified, or simply harnessed and amplified. Read this book to help yourself accelerate the process.

What do we call you?

The term 'middle manager' has been around for decades as a label. But although it's an accurate description, I can't remember the last time I met somebody who introduced themselves as one. During the interview process, we asked people about their role and the title they most resonated with. Do people prefer to be called 'the middle manager', 'team leader', 'people leader' or just plain 'manager'?

The responses varied across the group. Those who preferred a title with the word 'manager' in it felt that their role encompassed more than just leading people. They felt they were managing processes as well as people and therefore found 'manager' to be more appropriate. Some also felt that 'manager' sounded more senior than 'team leader'. Those who preferred a title with the word 'leader' in it resonated more with the concept of leading their people by setting an example, rather than managing their people, which for some created connotations of 'micromanaging'. Some also felt the word 'manager' was outdated.

One thing was for sure: no one we spoke to resonated with the term 'middle manager', despite feeling like it most accurately described their position in the organisation.

After some long deliberation, we erased 'middle manager' from our vocabulary and landed on the term 'people leader'. Those we interviewed felt this best described the part of their role which is the largely the emphasis of this book – *leading people*. This was also the reasoning by which we excluded managers from the study who were not currently leading people in their role.

To clarify, using the title of 'people leader' in this book in no way negates the very important managerial functions of the role, and excluding managers from the study who were not currently leading a team of people in no way makes each of them less of a leader within their organisations.

Using this book

I'm not for a moment suggesting that this will be (or should be) the last book you read on culture, or that applying the concepts in this book will enable you to tick culture off your to-do list. This book is designed to help you with the structure you need to start a meaningful, intentional and ongoing conversation about the culture in your team.

What you'll find in this book is an important and helpful part of the picture of culture, but it would be arrogant for me to suggest that it is the complete picture. Academics, sociologists, anthropologists and business leaders alike have been trying to make sense of this complex thing called 'culture' for decades, and yet each time we peel back a layer we begin to discover more of its richness, complexity and diversity. What this book will do is begin to refine your palate to the conversation around culture. It will give you and your team a common language that dives deeper than simply 'good' or 'bad' in the culture conversation, so you can start creating the team you want. You can think about this book as your left-right combo of process (to help sharpen your thinking) and practical tools (to shape your working). But while I can help you with the framework, the decision to take action rests solely with you.

What we will talk about

This book is built around five conversations that you can have with your team. The first three conversations help you design the

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team culture you want. The final two help shape it. To set up these conversations, we need to have a conversation about culture. To wrap up these conversations, we need to know where to start and what to avoid. I've broken the book up into three parts:

1. **A conversation about culture:** let's talk about what culture is, why it matters and what you can do to get your team ready to talk about it.
2. **Culture conversations:** let's talk about the conversations you'll need to help you and your team design your culture more intentionally.
3. **Keeping the conversation going:** let's talk about what you'll need to bring your culture to life – where to start, what to avoid and how to shape it day to day.

Each chapter contains practical tips for applying your insights and ends with a short summary of the key points. You can use the conversations from this book to facilitate your next team day or space out the conversations over a period of time. You don't have to do it all right now: you just need to start where you are, with what you have.

When you're ready, let's talk about culture.

PART ONE

A CONVERSATION ABOUT CULTURE

Culture is your team's unseen competitive advantage. It sets winning teams apart. And yet, according to Google Trends, the top three most common searches associated with the topic of 'organisational culture' since 2004 have been:

- 'What is organisational culture'
- 'What is culture'
- 'Organisational culture definition.'

Despite all the information we have access to – and there is a lot – we're obviously all still a little confused about culture. So, before you can have conversations with your team about the culture you want, we need to talk about what culture is and what it's for. We need to make sense of why culture is so important and understand why it can feel a little confusing or even overwhelming. And then, as when building anything significant, we need to start by laying the foundations.

Chapter 1

We're all a little different

Celebrate your uniqueness

'There are two types of people. The first are people who think there are two types of people. The second are those who've accepted that everyone is tragically, and gloriously, different.'

– Karl Kristian Flores, *The Goodbye Song*

Key finding: Half of people leaders see inclusion and belonging as key ingredients of a healthy culture.

'You've got a look in your eye like you're about to do something crazy.'

I can remember this moment vividly. I was seated across the table from my first mentor, Lincoln, just inside the entrance of a small Italian restaurant. It wasn't the calming ambience or authentic pasta menu that left a strong impression on me (it had neither). Truth be told, we were only there because it was one of the few places that would stay open outside of the peak lunch rush in the small town I grew up in.

What made this moment so memorable was what I said out loud for the first time: 'I'm going to ask Cassandra to marry me.'

That might not sound like a profound decision to you, but it's not a decision a lot of 19-year-olds make. If you find yourself thinking 'You were just a kid', then that's a perfectly appropriate response. Don't get me wrong, Cassandra and I are both extremely grateful for the opportunity we have had to grow up together and experience so much life in common, but to this day we're still unsure why nobody tried to stop us.

Fast-forward six months, throw in a birthday, a wedding and a mortgage, and there we were – standing in the lounge room of our first home, living together for the first time away from our childhood homes, deciding what to eat for our first meal. As we began making our brand-new house a home, the realisation finally started to sink in: we were two very different and very complex human beings who now needed to live, work and function together in very close proximity with some semblance of harmony. All. The. Time.

We're all a little *different*. We all have those *things* – those things we do *differently* to everybody else. Those things that make perfect sense to us but make no sense at all when it comes time to share them with others. They could be nicknames, beliefs, phrases or ways of doing something. I invited people to share some of theirs with me in preparation for this book:

- Sarah told me how her mind was blown when she learned we say 'Bless you' after a sneeze and not 'Blashu'.
- Rose refers to paying by EFTPOS as 'booping' the card, and her children now believe that in order to pay, you must 'boop it'.
- Ed learned that adding the words 'so it is' at the end of a sentence might be normal in Northern Ireland – for example, 'It's a really nice day, so it is' – but that it didn't translate when he moved to Australia.

- The “slow poach” or “slow coach” conversation can really stir up some heated debate in Jesse and Chanelle’s marriage. I didn’t dare throw ‘slowpoke’ into the mix.
- Letitia’s family uses the question ‘How long shall we beep it for?’ to refer to the microwave, and she wasn’t made aware that this was unusual until getting married.
- Kat’s family celebrates each Christmas present exchange with ‘warm-up gifts’ before exchanging the ‘main’ presents, so expect a very average first present if you attend Christmas at her house.

The list goes on. People told me about vacuum cleaners named Johnny, dog biscuits called ‘hominigritz’ and pet chickens called ‘lah-lahs’, all of which made perfect sense to them – and yet it was impossible to understand the origins of these terms.

My favourite story was from a participant who will remain nameless, who confidently asked if anybody in the group was ever given the ‘scratchy towel’ as a comforter when sick. (Her parents had a dedicated towel for when she was sick in case she threw up on it. Of course, they would ensure that towel was the oldest and most disposable towel in the cupboard, aka the ‘scratchy’ towel.) It was sad to see her happy childhood memory pulled out from underneath her.

The moment my wife walked in on me laying bath towels down at the doorways to our new home was when we discovered my ‘different’. Let me explain.

I blame my stepfather’s ‘different’ for influencing mine. He had an ability to maximise the life of absolutely everything we owned. This applied to everything from appliances to books, right down to the carpet in our house. In his defence, our home was immaculate and we rarely had to replace or fix anything. As a teenager, all of my friends would throw parties when their parents left them at home alone for the weekend; I was more excited about being able to eat in the lounge room on the carpet (with a blanket down, of course).

Bundaberg is a small town located in regional Queensland, Australia, known around the world for its rum, ginger beer and sugar. Growing up, we were told it was located on the same latitude as Hawaii, giving it the seventh-best climate in the world. (The more accurate description of 'hot and humid' is much less appealing for most tourism campaigns.) After a long day in the heat and humidity, you can imagine the condition in which my brother and I would arrive home when we were teenagers. While many households have a 'no shoes in the house' policy, ours went a little further: when we arrived home, we went straight to the outdoor tap, where a little bar of soap sat, to wash our feet and *prepare* to enter the house. There was no way we were going to be allowed to bring all that sweat and oil from our feet into the house across the pristine carpet. Naturally, once you'd entered the house, you'd need a towel to dry your feet before coming inside. My whole life, the towel at the door made perfect sense.

So, there I was, a newly married man setting up our freshly built home, when I see my wife just walk inside *without* washing her feet, like it was nothing, without a single hesitation, like some kind of animal. Then there was my wife, staring through the lounge-room window at me, in the backyard, with a bar of soap in one hand and the hose in the other like some kind of psychopath.

Don't be too quick to judge the differences. You have them, I have them, we all have them – we just think they're *normal*. We usually don't know they're unique, unusual or flat-out weird until we find someone else that does it *differently* to us. And where else can you see this play out better than at work?

'Different' shows up at work

I'm never surprised when I talk to people leaders and hear that there is conflict at work. I'm more concerned when they claim there isn't.

That more than likely points to a lack of diversity or a suppression of conflict. We spend more than a third of our lives at work, so it's bound to be one of the first places we start to notice that the way 'I' do things and the way 'you' do things can be extremely dissimilar. The workplace is a collision of differences.

Similarities might make us comfortable. But our differences make us better.

It's OK to have your differences. In fact, we need them and are better for them. We're not trying to create some beige, homogeneous blob in an organisation where we all think, walk, talk and act the same. We can leverage our differences to help us bring fresh perspectives and approaches to the way we work. We can contribute our uniqueness in order to spark new creative ideas and groundbreaking innovation.

In a 2009 study, fraternity and sorority students were placed in small groups to solve a murder mystery case and then asked to provide a joint answer. Five minutes in, they were joined by an additional member – either a person from their own house or an 'outsider'. Afterwards, they were asked to rate the conversation and process. When an outsider was added, students rated the conversation as less comfortable and less effective – and yet, their chance of arriving at the correct solution doubled (from 29 per cent to 60 per cent). While the work might have felt harder, the outcomes were actually better.

We might find it easier to be around people who are like us, but we get better when we surround ourselves with those who are anything but.

Frans Johansson is the author of the bestselling book *The Medici Effect*, which explores the vital role diversity plays in creativity. In the book, he explains that our most breakthrough creativity occurs at the intersection of different fields, ideas, people and cultures. In an interview on my podcast *Phone Calls With Clever People*, Frans shared a powerful example of how this diversity drives innovation.

In the mid-1990s in London, England, Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) was experiencing an increase in complications between the operating room and the intensive care unit, which they attributed to the high risk involved in the handover procedure. When the hospital sought to improve its systems, you might naturally assume that they would identify other hospitals within the medical field to learn more about best practice and procedures. However, instead they chose to engage the Formula 1 pit crew at Ferrari.

A team of doctors visited and observed the pit crew handoff in Italy, taking particular note of their process mapping and description and delegation of tasks. In Formula 1 racing, the pit crew are able to complete the complex task of a tyre change and refuel in around seven seconds. The doctors at GOSH found this similar to the team effort of surgeons, anaesthetists and ICU staff who needed to transfer a patient, their equipment and information from the operating room to the ICU ward.

Following the trip to Italy, the team took time to videotape their handover procedures and sent the tapes to be reviewed by the team at Ferrari. This analysis of the procedure resulted in a new handover protocol with new and improved processes and more streamlined teamwork, which reduced complications at the hospital. For the hospital staff, a unique perspective transformed their patient care and increased safety. What value could a diverse perspective bring to your team?

Differences are advantages – a conversation with Corrie

I first met Corrie when we were speaking together at a retail conference in Melbourne back in 2019. We were seated at a table together, and from the moment I spotted her walking over, I knew there

was something different about her. It wasn't her bright red lipstick, leopard-skin clothing or full-sleeve tattoos that made her stand out in a crowd in business attire: there was something unique about the way she carried herself and the confidence she had to show up and be true to who she was.

Corrie is the CEO of Thendro, the parent company of the retail store Off Ya Tree, which is well known across Australia. Founded in the 1970s by Jim Kouts as a small stall at the Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne, Thendro has grown to have more than 20 retail stores Australia-wide and is a wholesaler to businesses all over the country, with a revenue of over \$30 million a year. Thendro has become one of the leading businesses in the areas of smoking paraphernalia and alternative fashion, and now operates the world's largest body piercing brand. The business prides itself on doing things in an unconventional way, thinking differently and being different. While the alternative products they provide serve a very specific market, it is what Corrie has done to shape the culture of the business that first caught my attention.

Corrie is the very definition of 'started from the bottom, now we're here'. Corrie began working at Thendro on the retail floor back in the late 1990s and rose through the ranks to lead the business as CEO. She shared with me what it was that attracted her to the business in the early days:

'I just loved alternative culture, tattooing, piercing, that kind of thing. It, to be fair, probably disgusted my parents somewhat. No one wanted to hire me: I had pink hair 20 years ago and I had a few tattoos. I was totally capable as a human being, but I wanted the right to look how I wanted to look. And so, it shut a lot of doors. It's nowhere near that anymore. I mean, you can go to a coffee shop and people have nose rings. And I remember,

when I used to work in hospitality, you weren't allowed a nose ring. It was just all these rules and regulations.'

Many of the people who work at Thendro have endured a life of being ostracised by the external world, which is one of the complications of being someone who is into an alternative culture – whether it is being judged by family members or more mainstream people, or experiencing the looks you get while simply walking to work from the train station. Corrie and the team have worked hard to create an environment that welcomes and celebrates each person's differences:

'Our mantra is "helping anybody". Not everybody: anybody. And the emphasis is on the "any", because you can be anybody you want to be. If you say everybody, for me, that's meaning everyone's the same. So, we're very strong in that wording, but it's helping anybody to be who they truly are. And that's at a staffing level and a customer level. We want them to feel safe, secure and happy to be their real selves.

'So, we always welcome with open arms people that aren't welcomed by others. And so, I think you get a loyalty. There's a natural loyalty that [says], "Holy shit. You've seen me as a human being and you're okay with that? And you are still wanting to employ me and help build my career and my future?" And we're always about that, whether you're with us for a long time, or whether it's us giving you tools to further your career elsewhere: that's really important to us either way.

'We are getting the wrong-side-of-the-track people. And I don't necessarily mean just by the way people look: it's like their outlook on life, or that they want to just work three days a week and they don't necessarily have a career and that's comfortable, because to them, their hobbies are way more important. We're open to that and we're open to the flexibility of that.'

Corrie regularly points back to the organisation's mission with the hashtag #ThinkDifferentBeDifferent and told me that they are on a mission to be 'the best at being different'. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while many retail businesses were struggling, Corrie and the team at Thendro were able to maintain the strength of the business and not go backwards in most part due to their commitment to being different:

'Go back two years ago, the banks would say "You've got too many hands in too many pies, and who are you? You do body modification, you do smoking subculture stuff, you do alternative fashion?" and the banks couldn't get their head around it. They're like, "A shoe shop sells shoes, so they're an expert in shoes. You've got 16 different departments. How can you be an expert in all 16 of those departments?" Now, they're like, "Oh, the diverse companies are the ones that have survived the pandemic, and the ones that just sell shoes are the ones that have suffered".

'We do get told a lot what we should be doing, and we don't really listen, and I think it's been really positive. By us being unconventional and viewing the world differently, it's allowed us to pivot whenever we've needed to pivot, because different markets for us have always been down or up, [for example] you've had a slump in body piercing, and then your smoking goes up, and then your fashion goes through the roof. Because we have all the different departments, they all complement each other. And so, we have constant growth, which is really positive.'

Thendro is a business that doesn't just talk about acceptance, belonging and thinking differently. These principles are at the essence of their

culture. They are lived out by their people from the bottom to the top of the organisation and set them apart as a workplace like no other:

‘We just don’t care how they present themselves, as long as they’re doing what’s required, but they’re supporting everyone else in the team and the team is supportive of them.’

Thendro is proof that you don’t need uniformity for alignment. They have built their organisation on the premise that difference is their advantage. We’re not seeking to eradicate differences at work – we need them. But we also need them to work at work.

Different has to work at work

There’s a question I love to ask the teams I work with to highlight just one aspect of this. Take a moment to consider how you would answer:

If you were delegated a big and complex project to work on, what would be the first thing you’d do to get started?

Would you think people’s approach would mostly be the same? Here’s just a small collection of answers I’ve been given over the years:

- ‘The first thing I would do is ask a whole lot of questions to the person that delegated this to me so I can better understand the assignment.’
- ‘I would want to know why this project is important to take on right now.’
- ‘I’d be curious about how this connects to the overall strategic plan.’
- ‘Get away from people. I need some space to think about it more strategically and get a plan in place. Only once I’m clear can I get other people involved.’

We're all a little different

- 'I'd immediately gather a team of people to talk through the project and work out who would be best suited to help with different parts.'
- 'I think I would break it down into a series of smaller projects and then delegate appropriately.'

Did your answer show up in the list? Or would you do it differently? If I were to ask you which approach was *right*, which would you say? Generally speaking, they all are. We might be assigned the same task but all approach it differently. You could create an almost endless list of work-related functions this applies to.

Most of our career is spent thinking, working and operating at an individual level. When we join an organisation, we consider our place through the lens of 'me'. How will 'I' do things here? How do I fit in this team? How do the consequences of my behaviour impact me? How does my performance in this team influence my opportunities for promotion or limit my opportunities for advancement?

While differences are advantages, what happens when the way you or I do things gets in the way of our collective progress?

As leaders, we have a responsibility to the collective. This means considering how 'we' now do things as a team. How do 'we' communicate as a team? How do 'we' engage as a team? How do 'we' confront behaviours or manage conflict as a team? What and how do 'we' celebrate here?

This is a sobering new reality. It's no longer just about you. You are responsible for leading your team in a way that helps remove the ambiguity and finds a way for you to move forward together. You play a crucial role in helping people feel included and creating a shared sense of belonging.

Communication is the problem, communication is the solution

My journey can best be described as a long collision of marketing, leadership and psychology. I have always found myself in positions and organisations that straddle the intersection between business and people. This has taken me from my own consulting business to education, government, events and the not-for-profit sector. Wherever I go, the problems to manage always have one thing in common: communication.

If we can learn to have more effective conversations, we can almost always resolve our biggest issues. If we avoid them or leave communication open to interpretation or ambiguity, then they almost always escalate unnecessarily.

It's communication that has saved my marriage times over and communication that can transform a team. When I walked inside, having dried my feet on the fresh towel at the door, my wife lovingly looked at me and said, 'We need to talk'. As two very different people who had always approached life in a very *individual* way, we needed to have a conversation about how we would now live and function *together*.

An intentional culture is what is needed to make differences work at work.

I want to suggest to you that culture is the key to moving from individual to collective. It's how we align people so we can move forward together, and it's how we make our differences work at work. In Corrie's words, 'Yeah. Culture's it, mate'. And what you need to create the culture you want is more effective team conversations.

But first, let's talk about why culture is so important.

Action steps

Remember this

- We all do things that are a little different.
- Differences show up at work.
- Differences are advantages.
- Intentional culture is the key to making differences work at work. It's how we move from individual to collective.

Try this

Have a conversation with your team about the things that make them unique. Take time to explore the different perspectives. Here are some questions you could ask:

- What is something you do differently to anybody else?
- What is something that seems normal to you that other people might find unusual?
- What makes no sense to you when you see someone else doing it?
- What is something you're passionate about that is completely unrelated to your job?

Find ways to regularly appreciate and celebrate the unique perspectives of your team.

Work towards this

- Everyone in your team is aware of their uniqueness.
- Each team member recognises and appreciates the strength of diversity.



About the author

Shane is a Queenslander by birth, Melbournian by choice, curious by nature and creative at heart. He has spent the last decade developing remarkable leaders, teams and cultures.

He is an expert in leader communication, blending his experience in business and psychology to help leaders communicate, connect and collaborate more effectively in order to bring out the best in those they lead. Shane is passionate about helping leaders have the conversations they need to create the teams they want.

As a speaker, coach and trainer, Shane has partnered with some of Australia's most well known and loved businesses across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

His coaching helps individuals and teams better understand what makes them exceptional and how they can leverage that to achieve individual and collective outcomes.

Shane is a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach and author of *Lead the Room: Communicate a Message That Counts in Moments That Matter*.



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*'Shane manages to do what many culture experts cannot:
simplify the complexity that is culture.'*

**Gabrielle Dolan, bestselling author of *Magnetic Stories*
and *Stories for Work***

THE HOW-TO GUIDE FOR PEOPLE LEADERS WHO WANT TO SHAPE A WORLD-CLASS TEAM CULTURE BY DESIGN

Successful leaders and organisations know that culture is the unseen advantage of world-class teams. But can it be influenced? What role do managers play in building and shaping it?

The research suggests it can be influenced and that the people leader plays a crucial role – and it all starts with effective communication.

Based on extensive research from Australia's leading workplaces, *Let's Talk Culture* reveals the five practical conversations people leaders need to have to design a world-class team culture within their organisation.

An easy-to-understand guide for future culture champions, this book will give you the tools to build a team that attracts and retains your top talent, confidently address cultural inconsistencies in the workplace and meaningfully reward the behaviours that strengthen your team culture.

SHANE MICHAEL HATTON is an expert in leader communication, blending his experience in business and psychology to help leaders communicate, connect and collaborate more effectively in order to bring out the best in those they lead. As a speaker, coach and trainer, Shane has partnered with well known and loved businesses across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. He is a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach and the author of *Lead the Room: Communicate a message that counts in moments that matter*.

