

# The Gettysburg Journal for Public Policy

---

Volume 1

Article 8

---

2023

## Creating a Strong Group Culture

Tianyi He  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gjpp>



Part of the [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

### Recommended Citation

He, Tianyi (2023) "Creating a Strong Group Culture," *The Gettysburg Journal for Public Policy*. Vol. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gjpp/vol1/iss1/8>

This open access book review is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

## Creating a Strong Group Culture

### Abstract

This book review of *The Culture Code* summarizes three significant skills that contribute to creating a highly successful group. These skills include building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing purpose. Audiences are encouraged to appreciate the book for two reasons. First, it conveys that the approaches to strong group culture are multiple. Second, culture is one of the significant factors that policymakers should consider. By reading *The Culture Code*, readers can better understand how culture can help society be more inclusive and dynamic.

### Keywords

Culture; Teamwork

## Creating a Strong Group Culture – Tianyi He, Gettysburg College

Can we make two plus two greater than four? In a competition of building the highest structure by using materials such as spaghetti, a marshmallow, strings, and tapes, a team consisting of kindergarteners provides one of the best answers. Two major groups were got involved in this competition: groups encompassing business school students and groups encompassing kindergarteners. As compared to rational and professional business students, kindergarten kids were less organized. However, the interactions among kindergarteners were more frequent. Children helped each other and attempted to figure out problems together. Building higher structures than that of business school students, the kindergarteners won the game in the end. Under this condition, a four-person team has achieved something beyond merely the sum of four individuals. This effective result is what we called a successful group culture.

Teamwork is never an outdated topic. As social animals, we have been looking for recipes to create successful groups since ancient times. After spending four years interviewing eight highly successful groups such as the San Antonio Spurs, U.S. navy's SEAL Team Six, and Pixar, Daniel Coyle—New York Times bestselling author—uncovers this secret in his latest book *The Culture Code*. As opposed to my predictions, experience and intelligence have never been the key elements to success. Instead, it is all related to a strong culture, something that is socially constructed. Writing in simple and concise language, Coyle made the book easy to read and accessible to almost all of the public. Two themes emerge in the book: multiple approaches and cultural considerations.

*The Culture Code* is divided into three parts to explain three significant skills that help us to create a successful group culture: building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing

purpose. In each part, Coyle states the importance of one of the skills at first and then applies it to the real world. At the end of each section, Coyle further discusses his tips for action.

The first part talks about building safety. As the foundation of creating a group culture, building safety explains the skill from a social psychological perspective. It sends a supportive message to its group members that, “This is a safe place to connect” (Coyle 2018:23). In other words, no matter whether people succeed or not, the groups would always serve as spaces for communication. Due to the sense of belonging, people are more willing to communicate with each other. They share happiness and sadness as they know they are a part of the team. Therefore, group culture is initially shaped when people’s interactions produce chemistry. To further support the concept of building safety, Coyle uses the Spurs as a real-world example. As the coach of the most successful team in the National Basketball Association (NBA), Gregg Popovich knows how to cultivate unselfish behaviors in his players. To build a sense of “us”, the Spurs usually eat dinner together, creating personal connections face to face. The frequent communication between coaches and players, then, forms a concept of “family” where they can share the happiness of success as well as the bitterness of failure. Thus, building safety leads to a strong culture by facilitating interaction and creating a sense of belonging.

After the establishment of safety, it is time for the group to share vulnerability—an opportunity for people to expose their shortcomings. Under this condition, people no longer manage their impressions. Instead, they demonstrate the real selves which contribute to constructing a sense of trust. In the navy SEAL team, soldiers know each other and are not ashamed of exposing their weaknesses. Building on safety, they understand that they can overcome challenges based on the support of group members. That is, they share vulnerability and trust each other. Thus, cooperation among soldiers makes teamwork more efficient, creating

a strong group culture. More specifically, to facilitate cooperation, it is significant for individuals to listen to others, which shows their willingness to help. For groups, looking at a bigger picture or setting a shared goal can improve communication among group members.

As the last skill to involved in creating a strong culture, establishing purpose helps to connect the present and the future. In other words, it explains the purpose of what are doing in the present and how they can build on this to move toward the next goal. To encourage the engagement of group members, the ways in which leaders narrate goals become significant. Through a storying-telling process, the groups look at big pictures and consider potential challenges together. The link between the present and the future facilitates the cohesion of the group. According to Coyle, there are two approaches to establishing purpose: proficiency and creativity. Leading for proficiency, the group focuses more on the task itself. Under this condition, the leader uses a “lighthouse method” of setting clear goals and organizing work. In contrast, the leader using creativity is described as an “engineer of a ship” who provides more autonomy to group members. While holding different concentrations, both approaches—proficiency and creativity—can create strong cultures, helping the group to succeed.

In summation, *The Culture Code* conveys two pieces of significant information for its audience. First, there is no single and perfect model to create a strong group culture. Although the groups following the instructions mentioned above—building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing purpose—are more likely to be successful, they are encouraged to use multiple approaches to master these three skills. In other words, the ways in which we build safety, share vulnerability, and establish purpose are not standardized. Therefore, the culture we construct on the basis of these three elements is also diverse, varying by different contexts. Take the two ways of establishing purpose as an example. As Coyle explains, either creativity or proficiency is an

effective channel for establishing the purpose. Proficiency may be more appropriate for Union Square Café, a top-ranked restaurant that must survive in a competitive New York City restaurant scene, whereas creativity may be more suitable for Pixar, an animation studio which requires more imagination and innovation. In the real world, many successful groups take the third option: combining both creativity and proficiency. Thus, the approaches to establishing successful purposes are multiple, as well as the approaches to mastering the other two skills.

Second, context matters. Looking beneath the surface, we may find that the most basic unit of the culture in the book is the human itself. That is, frequent human interaction is the premise of creating a successful group culture. Similarly, in terms of public policy, the policy is made for the people. During the policymaking process, it is significant to consider the implications within all different contexts, which may vary by local conditions such as population, financial capability, values, etc. Concerning culture diversity, the policies become multiple. In other words, from a sociological perspective, there is no right policy, but rather an appropriate policy.

Writing from a micro level, *The Culture Code* explains three pieces of a recipe—building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing purpose—to creating strong group cultures. It talks about how people can efficiently communicate with each other. In country that is more polarized than ever, it increasingly more difficult to have conversations with those holding different values. Therefore, the book presents itself as heuristic and meaningful by telling stories from micro levels and conveying how cultures can be different even among groups, let alone different societies and nations. Indeed, the world not only consists of “us” but also “others”. Since they both are parts of society, we need to give more tolerance to disagreements that are based on

different contexts. To have better conversations with others, it is the time to form a cohesive and motivated culture. By doing so, social interaction can be more effective and inclusive.