The Culture Code
The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups
by Daniel Coyle
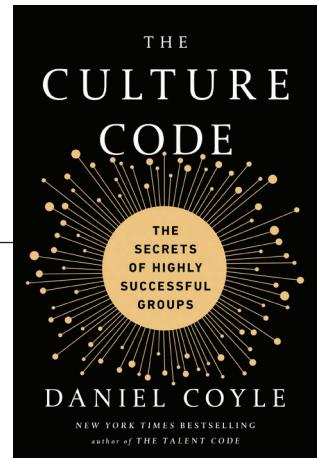
THE MAIN IDEA's PD Ideas and Discussion Questions for *The Culture Code*

ACTION IDEAS

In addition to discussing the book with a leadership team or teachers (see the next section for discussion questions), the book points the way to some very specific action steps you can take. Take a look at the chart below with the compiled action ideas from the book:

THE 3 SKILLS THAT PRODUCE EXTRAORDINARY CULTURES		
SKILL 1 — BUILD SAFETY	**SKILL 2 — SHARE VULNERABILITY**	**SKILL 3 — ESTABLISH PURPOSE**
Tips: What You Can Do	*Tips: What You Can Do*	*Tips: What You Can Do*
1. Overcommunicate Your Listening	1. The Leader Should be Vulnerable First and Most Often	1. Name and Rank Your Priorities
2. Spotlight Your Fallibility Early On	2. Deliver the Negative Stuff in Person	2. Be Ten Times as Clear About Your Priorities as You Think You Should Be
3. Embrace the Messenger	3. Focus on Two Critical Moments When Forming Groups	3. Figure Out Where Your Group Aims for Proficiency and Where it Aims for Creativity
4. Overdo Thank-Yous	4. Listen Like a Trampoline	4. Embrace the Use of Catchphrases
5. Eliminate Bad Apples	5. In Conversation, Resist the Temptation to Reflexively Make Suggestions	5. Measure What Really Matters
6. Create Safe, Collision-Rich Spaces	6. Use Candor-Surfacing Practices like AARs and BrainTrusts	6. Use Artifacts
7. Make Sure Everyone Has a Voice	7. Aim for Candor but Avoid Brutal Honesty	
8. Pick Up Trash	8. Align Language with Action	
9. Capitalize on Threshold Moments	9. Build a Wall Between Performance Review and Professional Development	
10. Embrace Fun	10. Use Flash Mentoring	

As a leadership team, plan to conduct three meetings, each of which will focus one of the 3 skills in the chart above. Go through each of the following steps for each skill. As you do this, have participants fill out the chart below (it's based on the Frayer Model teachers use with their students for building vocabulary).

Step 1: Discuss the tips for the skill you are focusing on. Give leaders time to read the summary of that section, and then have a discussion to flesh out what each tip means.

Step 2: Now that the team has a good understanding of what each tip means, discuss what it does not mean. This step helps build understanding and prevent confusion. (For example, 'Pick up the Trash' does not mean to fire the maintenance crew ☺)

Step 3: Discuss how this tip might look in the field of education since many of Coyle's examples are from other fields.

Suggestion: Look through the tips and identify a few tips your team does well and a few that need improvement. Discuss.

Step 4: Once you have done this for all of the tips, choose 2-3 tips you would like to implement. You may want to start with a few areas you feel need a lot of improvement or you might want to start with areas in which you already have some strengths. Create a plan for who, what, when, where, and how in the last box of the template for each tip.

Tip to Implement:

Step 1: What this TIP means:

Step 2: What this TIP does not mean:

Step 3: Examples of what this TIP would look like in education

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Step 4: Plan for how we would like to implement the tip

Who:

What:

When:

Where:

Discussion Questions for a Leadership Team or Faculty

INTRODUCTION

Ask everyone to think about the uncooked spaghetti experiment with the kindergartners and business school students in the introduction to the book. Have you ever been in a group and found yourself focused more on issues of "status" than on the task at hand? Did you ask yourself questions such as: Who is in charge? Is it okay to criticize someone's ideas? What are the rules here? Share this experience and the impact it had on your participation in the group. Discuss.

SKILL 1: BUILD SAFETY

1. In the first chapter, Coyle argues that psychological safety is a much bigger issue in groups than one might think. Amy Edmondson studies this issue at Harvard and says, "We have a place in our brain that's always worried about what people think of us, especially higher-ups. As far as our brain is concerned, if our social system rejects us, we could die. Given that our sense of danger is so natural and automatic, organizations have to do some pretty special things to overcome that natural trigger." (In the summary and on p.12 of the book.) What is your reaction to this quotation and this idea—is psychological safety as important as they say? Do you think it influences the work of teams at your school?

2. Re-read the note that was sent to some patients who had been admitted to the hospital after a suicide attempt (in the summary and p.24 of the book). What message does this note send? Do you agree that it only takes small signals to impact a person's sense of belonging to a group?

3. Look back at the WIPRO call center experiment (in the summary and pp.36-39 in the book). What was it about Group two's training that had such an impact on job retention? Think about the training and onboarding you provide for new hires at your school. Is there any way you can take a lesson from this experiment and apply it to your own process?

4. Gregg Popovich, coach of the San Antonio Spurs, spent four days getting to know a prospective player before inviting him to join the team (in the summary and p.52 of the book). While a school leader doesn't have the time to do this for prospective teachers, what else might we do before hiring teachers and other staff to achieve some of what Popovich did?

5. Coyle writes that it's a misconception that highly successful cultures are happy and lighthearted. Instead, he writes, they are "energized and engaged." Discuss the difference between the two.

6. In studying feedback to middle schoolers (in the summary and pp.55-56 in the book), researchers found that one type of feedback was particularly effective—"magical feedback"— feedback that sends the following message: *I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.* Why do you think the researchers called this "magical" feedback? What are some phrases we can use to help our feedback to teachers become more "magical"?

7. Tony Hsieh, founder of Zappos, believes he can foster personal emotional connections by creating a physical locale in which 1000 "collisionable hours" will occur each year. "Collisions" are serendipitous personal encounters, or the lifeblood of an organization that drives creativity, community, and cohesion (in the summary and pp.63-67 in the book). What do you think about this concept of "collisions"? Is it something you can promote in your school? If so, how can you increase our "collisions"?

8. What do you think of Hsieh's view of leadership (from the summary and pp.66-67 in the book): "This place is like a greenhouse. In some greenhouses, the leader plays the role of the plant that every other plant aspires to. But that's not me. I'm not the plant that everyone aspires to be. My job is to architect the greenhouse." How similar or different is this to how you see your role as leader?

SKILL 2: SHARE VULNERABILITY

1. At the BrainTrust meetings at Pixar, directors and producers provide painfully candid feedback about each film as it is being created. While these meetings are painful, the president says "The BrainTrust is the most important thing we do by far." (In the summary and p.99 in the book.) Why do you think the president says this?

2. At the Gramercy Tavern, the manager says the following to a waiter who had trained for 6 months and is heading out to greet customers for the first time: "The one thing we know about today is that it's not going to go perfectly. I mean it could, but odds are really, really, really high that it won't." (In the summary and on p.100 in the book.) What is the manager accomplishing with these words? Do we do anything equivalent for teachers heading out to teach their first classes ever? Should we?

3. The manager above added the following: "So here's how we'll know if you had a good day. If you ask for help ten times, then we'll know it was good. If you try to do it all alone..." his voice trailed off suggesting that it will be a catastrophe. Is there any way we can do something similar in the education world?

4. Discuss the following quotation: "People tend to think of vulnerability in a touchy-feely way, but that's not what's happening. It's about sending a really clear signal that you have weaknesses, that you could use help. And if that behavior becomes a model for others, then you can set the insecurities aside and get to work, start to trust each other and help each other. If you never have that vulnerable moment, on the other hand, then people will try to cover up their weaknesses, and every little microtask becomes a place where insecurities manifest themselves." (In the summary and on p.104 in the book.)

5. Take a look at the 5 steps in the vulnerability loop. Does this seem to be a touchy-feely process, or do you imagine this can have a significant impact on a group? Why?

6. In education, we often begin the year with trust-building activities (for students or staff). Coyle argues (in the summary and p. 107 in the book) that the vulnerability loop changes the way we might have traditionally thought about building trust in a group. Most groups think they need to build trust and then people will be willing to participate in risky or challenging tasks. However, science suggests the opposite: vulnerability comes before trust and in fact, helps to build it. Does this idea influence your thoughts about whether we should continue to start the year with trust-building activities? Discuss:

7. Coyle describes why Navy SEAL, Dave Cooper, is outstanding at building teams. (In the summary and on pp.135-45 in the book) Can you think of anyone in your professional or personal circles who's great at doing this? What is it about what Dave Cooper, or someone from your own experience, does that is so effective in building teams?

8. Take a look at the quotation below, from Dave Cooper. Discuss the questions he poses as well as: Why it is so important not to just follow what superiors say? Why do we need to create "leaders among leaders"? Why is it unreliable to have one person tell others what to do as a way to make decisions if that person is a skilled leader? Now answer the embedded questions below:

"That night put me on a different path. From that moment on, I realized that I needed to figure out ways to help the group function more effectively. The problem here is that, as humans, we have an authority bias that's incredibly strong and unconscious—if a superior tells you to do something, by God we tend to follow it, even when it's wrong. Having one person tell other people what to do is not a reliable way to make good decisions. So how do you create conditions where that doesn't happen, where you develop a hive mind? How do you develop ways to challenge each other, ask the right questions, and never defer to authority? We're trying to create leaders among leaders. And you can't just tell people to do that. You have to create the conditions where they start to do it." (From the summary and pp.138-9 in the book.)

9. Look at Cooper's small gestures—eliminating titles, changing orders into requests for feedback, having enlisted men and not leaders run review sessions, etc. What do you think of these gestures? Are they enough?

10. Cooper argues that "I screwed that up" might be the four most important words any leader can utter. Do you agree?

11. Like the AAR (After-Action Review, p.140) meeting Cooper designed, do you have any review-style meetings to discuss student learning, curriculum, assessments, or anything else? What's the goal of the meeting you have and how does it compare to the goal of the AAR—to build a shared understanding and help so people see the big picture and not just their own part?

12. Roshi Givechi is assigned as a "roving catalyst" because she's so good at helping teams function (in the summary and pp.149-54). What does she do so well? How is she both "soft and hard"?

13. Roshi designed some very simple questions teams could ask themselves. Coyle notes that these questions are not about the work of the company. What, exactly, is the effect of these questions? Would questions like this work with leadership or teacher teams in your school? Why or why not? Below are the three questions:

- The one thing that excites me about this particular opportunity is _____ .

- I confess, the one thing I'm not so excited about with this particular opportunity is_____ .

- On this project, I'd really like to get better at _____ .

SKILL 3: PURPOSE

1. Discuss the following questions that Coyle poses (in reference to Johnson & Johnson's Credo) from p.177 in the book, How can a handful of simple, forthright sentences make such a difference in a group's behavior?

2. Look at the mottoes of a few successful cultures below—what do you think works about these mottoes?

Pixar—Technology inspires art, and art inspires technology
The SEALs—Shoot, move, and communicate
KIPP—Word hard, be nice

3. Take a look at the Rosenthal study (in the summary and pp.183-5 in the book). Do you really think it's possible to change teachers' warmth, input, response-opportunity, and feedback to students by providing teachers with a different narrative about their students? Why or why not? Do you have any ideas about how to change the stories we tell about our students?

4. Coyle writes (in the summary and on pp.193 of the book), "One of the best measures of any group's culture is its learning velocity—how quickly it improves its performance of a new skill." Do you agree or disagree? Can you think of a recent example when teachers or leaders had to learn a new skill? What does this say about the group?

5. According to Amy Edmondson's study (in the summary and pp.193-6 in the book), the following five factors were what made the surgical teams successful. Discuss what these mean and if you think there's any way these translate into the field of education:

   a. Framing: Successful teams saw the technique as one that would benefit patients and the hospital. Unsuccessful teams saw it as an addition to existing practices.
   b. Roles: Members of successful teams were explicitly told why their skills were important to the team's success.
   c. Rehearsal: Successful teams prepared in detail by explaining and practicing the new protocols and the necessary communication.
   d. Explicit encouragement to speak up: Successful teams were told to speak up if they detected a problem and were coached to do so.
   e. Active reflection: Between surgeries successful teams reflected on performance. One team leader wore a camera to facilitate this process.

6. Edmondson's study shows the importance of continually reminding people of the importance of their work, rather than stating it in one grand speech. Rather than planning one speech at the beginning of the school year, how might you regularly send the message to teachers, other leaders, and students that their work is important?

7. In the summary and on p.204 of the book, Meyer states that "The number-one job is to take care of each other." Would you say we have the same priority in the field of education? Does this mean the priority is for staff to take care of each other or the students?

8. The following are examples of catchphrases Meyer created to capture the behavior he wants to see at his restaurants. First, think about the behavior you'd like to see as teachers interact with each other, the students, leaders and families. Next, see if you can come up with a few catchphrases that would describe that behavior in a few simple words.

Read the guest	Making the charitable assumption
One size fits one	Collecting the dots and connecting the dots
Finding the yes	Are you an agent or a gatekeeper
Skunking	To get a hug you have to give a hug

9. Discuss this quotation from a cofounder of Pixar, "Give a good idea to a mediocre team, and they'll find a way to screw it up. Give a mediocre idea to a good team, and they'll find a way to make it better." (In the summary and on p.220 of the book.) What does this quotation suggest? What are the implications of this quotation for schools?

About the Author

Daniel Coyle is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Talent Code*, *The Little Book of Talent*, *The Secret Race* (co-authored with Tyler Hamilton), *Hardball: A Season in Projects*, and other books. Winner (with *Hamilton*) of the 2012 William Hill Sports Book of the Year Prize, he is a contributing editor for *Outside* Magazine, and works as a special advisor to the Cleveland Indians. Coyle lives in Cleveland, Ohio during the school year and in Homer, Alaska, during the summer with his wife Jen, and their four children.

About the Guide Writer

Jenn David-Lang runs THE MAIN IDEA (www.TheMainIdea.org)—a subscription service that provides monthly summaries of the best current education and leadership books for school leaders. Jenn founded THE MAIN IDEA in 2007 because she witnessed too many school leaders who were so busy with the day-to-day responsibilities of running their schools, that they had no time for their own professional development.

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