Culture Is Leadership's Secret Ingredient

Idea In Short

Leadership does not announce itself through charisma or big speeches. It shows up in the daily discipline of building a culture where people are trusted, heard and held to a standard. Cheryl Bachelder rebuilt Popeyes by treating franchisees as partners rather than subordinates. Ari Weinzweig grew a single sandwich counter into a ten-business community without ever centralizing control. Kristen Hadeed kept college students cleaning houses for years in an industry that loses most of its workforce within months. None of them relied on inspiration alone. Each one built specific, repeatable habits that made culture the operating system of the business, not a poster on the wall. The decision facing any leader today is not whether culture matters. It is whether they are willing to build it on purpose.

Leadership research keeps circling back to the same uncomfortable finding: charisma predicts very little about who actually builds a lasting organization. What predicts it instead is a leader's willingness to treat culture as a discipline, something built deliberately through specific behaviors rather than left to chance or personality. A review of leaders who delivered sustained results across very different industries, fast food franchising, specialty food retail and college-student staffing, turns up the same underlying pattern. Each one made organizational culture the central lever of strategy rather than a side project delegated to a human resources department. That pattern holds lessons for any executive who assumes results come first and culture follows.

The Culture Test That Separates Leaders From Managers

Most executives can recite the importance of culture without ever having built one on purpose. The distinction matters because culture is not a mission statement or an annual survey result, it is the sum of thousands of small decisions about how people are treated, informed and trusted. Leaders who pass this test consistently choose transparency over control and delegation over supervision, even when the short-term cost looks higher. Gallup's research on global engagement found that only 20% of employees worldwide reported feeling engaged in 2025, down from a peak of 23% just three years earlier and calculated the resulting productivity loss at roughly $10 trillion, or 9% of global gross domestic product.1 That gap between average and engaged organizations is not explained by industry, geography or company size, it is explained by leadership choices repeated daily. The three leaders profiled below operated in unglamorous sectors, chicken restaurants, delicatessens and residential cleaning, which makes their results harder to attribute to luck or market timing. What they share is a refusal to treat culture as secondary to strategy and a track record that suggests they were right to resist that temptation.

Three Leaders Who Rebuilt Culture From the Ground Up

Cheryl Bachelder Turned Franchisees Into Partners

Cheryl Bachelder became chief executive officer (CEO) of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen in November 2007, a moment when the company had cycled through four CEOs in seven years and its relationship with restaurant franchisees had deteriorated into open distrust. Rather than issuing new mandates from headquarters, she reframed franchisees as the company's most important customers and built the entire strategy around earning their confidence back.2 She introduced regular franchisee satisfaction surveys, invested in location-selection tools that helped owners choose profitable sites and measured her own performance against restaurant-level profitability rather than headquarters revenue. The results compounded over her decade at the helm: Popeyes stock rose from roughly $15 to $79 a share, top-line restaurant sales climbed 45% and restaurant operating profit more than doubled. Bachelder later distilled the approach in her book Dare to Serve, arguing that leaders exist to serve the people who serve customers, not the other way around. Her advice to leaders navigating skepticism was characteristically direct.

> Don't waste time trying to fit in

That single decision, to treat franchisees as partners rather than subordinates, reshaped a company that had spent years assuming the opposite approach was working.

Ari Weinzweig Scaled Ten Businesses on Shared Values

Ari Weinzweig and Paul Saginaw opened Zingerman's Delicatessen in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in March 1982 with a $20,000 bank loan and a staff of two.3 Four decades later, the Zingerman's Community of Businesses has grown into ten distinct enterprises, a bakehouse, roadhouse, creamery, coffee company, mail order operation, training division, candy manufactory and more, generating close to $70 million in annual revenue with more than 750 employees across the community. Weinzweig chose not to scale through a single growing company under tighter central control, an approach many franchise operators default to. Instead he and his partners spun off new, independently managed businesses, each led by a managing partner and bound together by a shared set of values rather than a shared org chart. He documented the specific behaviors that support or damage this model in his multi-volume Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading, cataloguing an alphabetical range of managerial habits and their effect on team performance. The core argument running through the books is that culture cannot be mandated from a central office, it has to be practiced consistently by every partner running every business.

Kristen Hadeed Kept Employees Cleaning Toilets for Years

Kristen Hadeed founded Student Maid in 2009 as a 19-year-old University of Florida student who needed to pay for a pair of jeans and built it into a cleaning company that exclusively hires college students.4 The residential cleaning industry is notorious for churn and Hadeed's own company reported an average employee tenure of about two and a half years, far longer than the industry norm for entry-level cleaning roles. She achieved that by training employees in relationship management and conflict resolution alongside cleaning technique, treating 19-year-olds as adults capable of handling real feedback rather than as disposable seasonal labor. Student Maid requires a minimum grade point average for hiring, runs quarterly leadership-development days that pause normal operations and has employees who report their own grades improving after joining the company. Hadeed has been blunt about what her generation of workers actually needs from employers.

> Employers have to find a way to show them how their work matters, every single day

The company's willingness to invest in unglamorous jobs with genuine development produced loyalty that the broader cleaning industry has struggled for years to replicate.

What Culture-Building Leaders Actually Do

Across all three cases, a consistent set of behaviors separates leaders who build durable cultures from those who simply manage operations. These leaders inspire their teams toward specific, impactful actions rather than issuing vague directives about effort. They give people real authority alongside clear direction, understanding that empowerment without clarity produces confusion rather than ownership. They demonstrate integrity and honesty even when the truth is inconvenient, because employees calibrate trust based on how leaders behave under pressure. They reinforce the organization's core values repeatedly through decisions, not just through statements at all-hands meetings. They stay dependable and composed when results are uneven, because a team takes its emotional cues from whoever is leading it. McKinsey's research on organizational performance found that companies with strong, well-defined cultures deliver total shareholder returns roughly three times higher than companies without one, with leadership role-modeling identified as the primary mechanism for embedding those behaviors.5 None of these behaviors requires charisma or a particular personality type, which is precisely why they can be learned and repeated by leaders who do not consider themselves naturally inspiring.

The Habits That Quietly Destroy Culture

The behaviors that damage culture are just as identifiable as the ones that build it and they tend to originate from good intentions gone wrong. Distrust is the most corrosive of these habits, because a leader who does not trust their team defaults to micromanaging and micromanagers rarely have the bandwidth to build the relationships culture depends on. The Society for Human Resources Management has calculated that replacing an employee typically costs between 50% and 200% of that person's annual salary, a cost that climbs sharply when the departing employee held institutional knowledge or client relationships that a single replacement cannot absorb.6 Withholding information produces a similar effect at a smaller scale, since unclear instructions leave employees guessing about priorities and unable to contribute meaningfully to decisions. Leaders who project visible uncertainty about the organization's direction transmit that uncertainty directly to their teams, because confidence and doubt both travel downward through an organization faster than any memo. Treating every employee identically, regardless of what motivates them individually, ignores the reality that some people respond to autonomy while others need structured feedback to perform well. Talking about values without demonstrating them through actual decisions is perhaps the easiest trap to fall into, because it costs nothing to say the words and everything to live them consistently.

Turning Culture Into a Deliberate Practice

The financial and retention outcomes documented across these three companies did not result from unusually charismatic founders, they resulted from specific, repeatable choices applied consistently over years. Bachelder measured her own success by franchisee satisfaction rather than headquarters convenience. Weinzweig distributed authority across independently managed businesses rather than consolidating control as the company grew. Hadeed invested training budget in life skills that had nothing to do with cleaning technique, betting that capable, respected employees would stay longer than poorly trained, disposable ones. Each choice ran counter to the default instinct many leaders have under pressure, which is to tighten control, withhold information and demand loyalty without first extending trust. The evidence from all three organizations suggests the opposite instinct produces better results, provided leaders are willing to sustain it long enough for the culture to compound. That timeline is measured in years, not quarters, which is exactly why so few leaders commit to it in the first place.

- 1State of the global workplace 2026
- 2The CEO of Popeyes on treating franchisees as the most important customers
- 3Zingerman's
- 4Why these student workers are lining up to clean dirty toilets
- 5Establish a performance culture as your secret sauce
- 6The myth of replaceability: preparing for the loss of key employees

Summary

The leaders profiled here did not inherit strong cultures, they built them through specific, repeatable choices. Bachelder rebuilt trust with franchisees and tripled Popeyes stock price over a decade. Weinzweig turned a two-person deli into a ten-business community without sacrificing its founding values. Hadeed proved that young workers stay loyal when treated as capable adults rather than disposable labor. The pattern across all three is deliberate action, not personality. Leaders who inspire action, delegate real authority, communicate with clarity and reinforce values through behavior rather than slogans build organizations that outperform and outlast their founders. The habits that erode culture, distrust, silence,

uniform treatment of people, are just as identifiable and just as avoidable. Culture is not a byproduct of good leadership. It is the mechanism through which leadership actually works.