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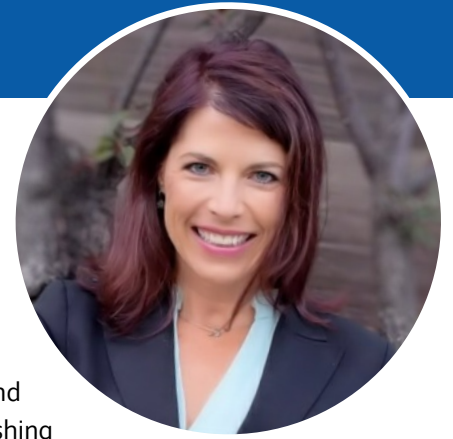
# *Organizational Gravity and Its Underpinnings in Leadership and Culture*

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### Who Am I and Why Can You Trust Me?

I am Sara LaForest, an entrepreneur, consultant, coach, instructor, and author with comprehensive experience in the private, nonprofit, education, and government sectors.

I am on a mission to empower entrepreneurs, executives and leaders to grow their businesses and help them create flourishing workplace environments. If you share this mission, these articles will introduce my approach. I believe you will find them helpful and pragmatic.

For more than a decade, I have grown, managed, and nurtured my own companies specializing in leadership consulting, organizational development, and executive and performance coaching. My focus is on the critical—yet often overlooked—interdependencies of strategy, branding, culture, and talent necessary to foster and propel growth. My high-touch, personalized approach helps leaders improve company performance and team functioning at all levels, while facilitating a positive and productive workplace culture.

How am I different? What new perspective do I bring? My strength is combining company growth with an emphasis on the personal growth and well-being of the people with whom I work and serve. My deep-rooted commitment to human advancement is my advantage.

This article, along with many other national and international published works, was co-written with my retired partner, Tony Kubica. Our book, *Organizational Gravity: A Guide to Strategically Growing Your Company's Brand, Culture, and Talent*, is available on [Amazon](#).

To learn more about my services, publications, and speaking engagements, please visit [LaForestConsulting.com](#). You can contact me directly at [Sara@LaForestConsulting.com](mailto:Sara@LaForestConsulting.com) or via [LinkedIn](#).

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Organizational gravity draws both talent (employees) and customers to your business. We know that *bodies attract with a force proportional to their mass*. Likewise in business, companies attract talent and customers with a force proportional to their organizational mass, consisting of a strong brand and culture, talented employees and a growth strategy.

Leadership has the responsibility to build and capitalize on the interrelationships of strategy, brand, culture, and talent to build a gravitational organization. And leadership is about:

- You—your confidence, your skill, your presentation when showing up; and self-awareness is key to your effectiveness
- Vision—your ability to anticipate market need and spot opportunities and threats to create and course correct the vision/strategic direction of the company
- Alignment—your ability to find common ground and generate collective ambition
- Core values—having and living high standards and guiding principles
- Motivation and empowerment – your ability to inspire and empower those around you
- Challenge—your own and others thinking and the status quo
- Awareness through inquiry—of what is *really* happening in the organization and active attention to positively influencing it;
- Action—the ability to make timely decisions and doing something about it.

Talented executives with a talented team of employees are a disruptive force in the marketplace. Executives bring the strategic vision and the employees create both pragmatic and innovative ways to execute the strategy.

Consider the factors that relate to leadership and issues that are important for leaders in building and leading a “gravitational organization”.

As the executive, you are responsible for eight critical elements:

1. ensuring your executive team provides a clear and concise strategic vision and commonly understood purpose for the company with accompanying core values – attitudes, behaviors and beliefs- that drive collective efforts;
2. actively attending to alignment between members of the executive team in developing the strategy and in leading it;
3. ensuring performance accountability in each executive member (and his/her ability to build and work with a strong team if he/she has employees/departments);
4. ensuring that interpretation (communication) of the strategy and key priorities cascade from the executives through the middle managers to the staff;
5. providing strategy implementation guidance and support that ensures the authority and autonomy of your employees to carry out their work
6. ensuring the executive team puts customer-centric growth and retention strategies in place using employee and customer feedback and ideas;

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7. ensuring a brand strategy and respective brand messaging/tactics that encapsulates your market and your distinct value (competitive advantage)
8. ensuring there is a succession plan in place for all critical positions/levels of your business. This is an interrelated element for business growth and talent management and development of your next generation of leaders.

No business is perfect. Growth is complicated and stressful. But providing strategic leadership and direction by setting and messaging a clear strategy and priorities; understanding, making, and keeping promises to your customers and your employees; and empowering your employees to consistently contribute their best, is what will grow and distinguish your business.

#### **Culture – Glue for Your Business**

Culture is often misunderstood or overlooked in growing businesses. It is viewed as the “soft stuff” (the pampering of people), while owners and leaders prefer to focus on accomplishing *real work*—the hard matters of business and measures such as revenue, gross profit, and market share. Yet, culture is a critical driver for organizational effectiveness.

If you, as a business owner and leader, are not actively attending to the culture within your company, you’re likely to experience:

- Difficulty recruiting good talent
- Poor retention/high turnover
- Disengaged and under-performing staff
- Silo behavior between individuals and departments (meaning territoriality vs. cooperation in the organization)
- Customer complaints and worse, customer loss

A strong culture serves as the glue that holds an organization together—it creates the “stickiness factor” for employees and customers. How so? The ROI of a strong culture includes:

- Improved retention and reduced turnover
- Interest by more qualified candidates (we call this “talent gravity”)
- Less time complete work (cooperation vs. silos)
- Customer satisfaction, leading to loyalty and referrals

A strong culture will help you attract and keep top talent, ensure delivery on your brand promise, and keep customers coming back and referring new business to your company. But it’s important to realize, that to instill and reinforce a robust culture, requires *active attention* by the owner and leadership team. And, it is a key leadership function that can’t be delegated.

Do you, as an owner or leader understand what culture is? Recognize how culture impacts your organization and its employees? Know how to assess your culture? Utilize an approach and techniques that help build and reinforce a strong, performance-based culture in your business?

*Now, there’s an important underpinning we want to emphasize respective to culture – and that’s the interdependent relationship of your brand and your culture. Brand serves the promise of what you*

*do; culture enables you to deliver on that promise.*

If you don't have a handle on your culture, you should hold off on a marketing and sales campaign... Otherwise, you will be promising something you cannot deliver, at least not for very long.

### **What Is Culture?**

*At its core, Culture is the "way work is done around here."* It reflects shared values, beliefs, and attitudes, as demonstrated in the day-to-day behavior of your employees. It can be:

- Seen in how people work together.
- Heard in what company employees say
- Represented by how you build your teams, infrastructure, and processes to deliver on your promise.
- Exemplified by how you lead, manage, develop, and implement strategy

*At the end of the day, the quality and strength of your culture will help you outrun your competition.*

It's important to know that culture develops whether you nurture it or not. It evolves out of the nature of your group dynamics—standards, relationships, and norms (day to say behavior). And, your culture will either help attract and retain customers and top talent, or it won't.

Culture is grounded in the understanding and common practices around the mission, vision, and values of the company. It drives how decisions are made and how responsibility is assumed. It also determines your behavior in front of customers and within your group. It is reflected in the standards and consistency with which you deliver your product or service. So, culture will either foster or hinder your goals and outcomes.

So what can you do about your culture? Here are 8 steps you can take to help you build a strong, performance-based culture.

1. Ensure you have established a meaningful and relevant vision, mission, and value set for the organization to build shared attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that drive performance and outcomes.
  - 1.1 Integrate corporate values in and across the organization, ensuring values are included in hiring for cultural fit, onboarding for swift integration, performance appraisal processes, day-to-day operating policy and procedures, incentives and rewards, and promotion and succession candidate readiness.
2. Ensure active (ongoing) communication of the above messages and how the business is doing in demonstrating the values, achieving the goals and the priorities to align collective efforts across the organization in both written and verbal form. Remember that more informal and frequent communication trumps formal, monologues in information sharing.
3. Assess your culture to understand whether it is supporting or impeding growth. Practice active inquiry: (annually or amid big change initiatives)

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- 3.1 Ask and listen to your customers. Conduct a customer satisfaction survey as an external measure of feedback about their satisfaction.
- 3.2 Conduct an employee opinion (or perception or satisfaction) survey to determine the current pulse of the organization and its employees experience and perceptions to get a snapshot of the current state of its culture.
4. Identify what you need your culture to be to deliver your brand promise.
5. Based on the findings from the survey, and what the gaps are in the needed culture, identify key actions that will help you bridge the gap between where you are now and where you need to be to ensure consistency in delivery on your brand promise.
6. Communicate this to the organization and its members. Follow-up and transparency are critical to help employees feel you care and are acting on their feedback. Poor communication and poor follow-up will result in skepticism and potentially disengagement.
7. Demonstrate commitment by action in addressing findings from the survey. Don't try to boil the ocean. Choose 3-5 most critical items to take action on. This should consider both "low hanging fruit" (easy to implement) and more complex items to move you forward.
8. Use developmental tools to strengthen key components that contribute to culture, such as, supervisory training (to improve the quality of supervisory relationship building and effectiveness) emerging leader development, and new manager integration support.