



## High-Performance Projects and the “Culture Thing”

*The research is in and what it tells us, repeatedly, is that good project cultures lead to high performance and satisfaction, bad ones to failure and turnover*

*Culture [is] a pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.*

— Edgar H. Schein  
*Organizational Culture and Leadership*

THE OBVIOUS QUESTION, THEN, FOR EVERY PROJECT LEADER is: What can you do to establish a culture of high performance and value?

The starting point is to realize that the project leader has the greatest impact on a project team’s culture. Forget about everything else and every other excuse. Successful project leaders find ways to design cultures of high performance—cultures where quality and innovation exists side by side and where intrinsic motivation and personal satisfaction go hand-in-hand.

Leadership shapes the communication, behavior, rituals, stories, values, and day-to-day performance on a project. It’s the attitude of the leader that engenders the support of the team members. Projects which provide meaningful work, autonomy, and performance feedback stand out as the optimal cultures.

But what can you do to cultivate a high-performance culture? It doesn’t have to be as glib as, “You either got it, kid, or you don’t.”

In support of NASA project teams, the Academy of Program and Project Leadership (APPL) has sponsored research such as the work being done by Dr. Charles Pellerin. Charlie’s observations of projects have generated a simple yet powerful organizing system for project leadership and culture. This system provides

project leaders the competencies to understand, predict, and shape performance culture by focusing on four dimensions: Directing/Organizing, Visioning/Inventing, Valuing/Honoring, and Relating/Including.

You can read more about Charlie Pellerin’s work in our interview with him for ASK Issue 13, available online at <http://appl1.nasa.gov/ask/issues/13/interview/index.html>, or by reading about his work as part of APPL’s Performance Enhancement portfolio, also available online at [www.appl.nasa.gov](http://www.appl.nasa.gov).

APPL’s Performance Enhancement services address issues of project leadership and culture by using Charlie’s 4-Dimensional model. Projects start the process by completing a fifteen-minute, web-based assessment of project leadership and culture. The results are compared across a broader sample and then shared with the project leader.

These assessments are used to formulate next steps, which may include APPL mentoring and coaching services from some of the best project leaders in the world. Some project managers choose to have their teams participate in a three-day workshop designed to help understand and improve project culture. Assessments are repeated after about three months, and results thus far reveal a statistically significant improvement in project culture.

The success of NASA comes down to the successful performance of our programs and projects. The project world is one of complexity, uncertainty, and ever-changing variables. High-performance culture is essential for success—and you, as the project leader, are the greatest influence on your team’s culture. If you want it, APPL has support available for you and your project team. Let me know how I can help.

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