



## ***Building Company Culture From the Top Down: Preston D Cameron of Oculus Consulting Group LLC On How the Personal Example of Exceptional Leaders Shapes Companies That Thrive***

An Interview with Authority Magazine  
By Jim Hamel



***Our “can do” culture isn’t satisfied with just “trying” or “planning.” By emphasizing reality and results, we signal to our clients that our team is focused on the execution phase — actually getting the job done until the results can be measured..***

*Company culture is not created by posters on the wall or a set of values on a website. Culture is shaped every day by what leaders do, what they tolerate, and what they reward. Employees watch closely, especially in moments of pressure, and the personal example of leadership often becomes the unwritten rulebook for how people communicate, collaborate, and treat one another. What practical choices help leaders build cultures that people want to be part of, and what mistakes quietly erode trust and morale? In this interview series, we are talking to founders, CEOs, senior executives, HR leaders, and anyone with meaningful experience about “Building Company Culture From the Top Down: How the Personal Example of Exceptional Leaders Shapes Companies That Thrive”.*

*As a part of this series, we had the pleasure of interviewing Preston D Cameron.*

*Preston is a world-recognized international advisor to organizations of all shapes and sizes. He is focused on transforming an organizational vision into a measurable reality. Having circled the globe more than a dozen times working with a variety of organizations, he has been recognized for expertise and thought leadership in a variety of disciplines and he frequently serves as a keynote speaker and presenter for numerous conferences and expositions on these and related topics. He is a member of the Harvard Business Review Advisory Council, an opt-in research community of business professionals and an adjunct faculty member in the Strategic Leadership Program at Northern Arizona University when his schedule allows.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we begin, can you please introduce yourself? Our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your ‘backstory’ and how you got started?**

*Thank you so much for this opportunity. I started my career with a finance degree focused on performing systems analysis and financial planning for the #1 tourist attraction in Hawaii. My career is probably less of a smooth winding road and much more similar to the tilt-a-whirl at your local amusement park! I learned quickly that organizations were anxious to have me assist them with complex transitions and complicating business process renovations as I moved from the Tourism to the Aerospace / Defense then Automotive industries, and then back and forth again. While serving as CFO for an automotive aftermarket manufacturer, I had the opportunity to change industries again and join one of the Big 4 accounting & advisory firms. And then the ultimate change happened, 9–11 and the Enron debacle. Thankfully for me, it provided the impetus to take my knowledge on the road and form my own organization. Today, my organization continues to ride the “tilt-a-whirl” of industries working with state governments, educational institutions, entrepreneurial tech startups, manufacturing and distribution firms, and a host of service organizations. It is safe to say that once I finish one ride, I can’t wait to get my ticket punched and go again.*

*Today, my organization continues to ride the “tilt-a-whirl” of industries working with state governments, educational institutions, entrepreneurial tech startups, manufacturing and distribution firms, and a host of service organizations. It is safe to say that once I finish one ride, I can’t wait to get my ticket punched and go again.*

**None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story?**

*The example of family and friends probably goes without saying much else. But in the world of business, the two individuals who had the most influence on my current career were competing partners at Grant Thornton, when I joined that firm early in my consulting career. While I worked for Linda, she had a great relationship with a Partner (Steve) in another office who needed my skill sets for a project he was leading. I consider both of them tremendous mentors and was fortunate to have both of them as career coaches. Looking back, they were able to share my skills to benefit both of their projects. I even spent 4 months shuttling between their two projects in two different mid-west cities multiple times per week. Looking back, I spent a crazy amount of time jetting from city to city, but the experience and relationships I built with each of them outweighed the personal travel consequences. Today, I still consider them excellent coaches, mentors, and friends.*

**Ok, fantastic. Let’s now shift to the main focus of our interview. When you think about your company’s culture today, what’s one word you’d use to describe it and why? Please explain with stories or examples if you can.**

*Well, for starters, our culture can best be described simply as a culture of “Can Do”! Our motto is a reiteration of this culture statement and is woven into the very language used to describe our services and client philosophy. Rather than just offering traditional consulting advice, our culture is embedded in our tag line “Proven Expertise and Competence In Transforming Organizational Vision Into A Measurable Reality”. This messaging focuses on active transformation and overcoming obstacles and continually reminds us what we are trying to achieve for our clients and how we will measure success. Here are a couple of examples of how we believe we demonstrate this “can do” culture:*

1. **Focus on “Measurable Reality” Over Abstract Ideas:** Our “can do” culture isn’t satisfied with just “trying” or “planning.” By emphasizing reality and results, we signal to our clients that our team is focused on the

execution phase — actually getting the job done until the results can be measured. A great example of this focus is the work we accomplished with one of our clients that resulted in their selection of the CFO magazine “Reach” Award. Our client wasn’t just completing a transformation, but they were also being recognized as accomplishing that transformation in a “best in class” environment.

2. **A “Bias Toward Action” in Difficult Environments:** Our “can do” culture embraces work environments where organizations often encounter leadership and cultures that are “opposing” a project. It is not infrequent to have our clients tell us that when we begin a project with them, they are skeptical of their own organization’s culture and ability to complete the transformation they are envisioning. We cherish words like “defeat” and “oppose” by our clients as it frames the work we are doing as problem-solvers who don’t back down when things get difficult. It portrays to our clients a culture that views obstacles as things to be overcome, not as excuses for failure.
3. **Pursuing “Exponential” Rather than Marginal Improvement:** One of the reasons our clients select us is because they are seeking to challenge the status quo of “small” gains. Our “can do” attitude is often characterized by bold thinking. Aiming for 1,000% improvement as an example shows an ambitious mindset that refuses to be limited by “standard” expectations. We experienced this when we sat with a Governor of a prominent State and discussed his vision for dramatic reductions in program costs coupled with significant improvements in services. The dichotomy of cost reduction and service improvement in a fixed budget regulatory environment like state government required we demonstrate “can do” across the entire state’s operations. Incremental improvements were simply inadequate. What he saw, and what we were tasked with, was ambitious exponential improvements and the opportunity to convert his organization to a new way of thinking and execution.

**Many companies define values, but fewer truly live them. How do you personally hold yourself accountable to your organization’s values in day-to-day decisions, especially when it would be easier not to? Can you share an example?**

*I strongly believe that experiencing positive emotions at work broadens the individual thought-action repertoires that build enduring personal resources, and that encourage taking risks and demonstrating a culture of “Can Do”. We see examples of these challenges in nearly every organization that we have worked with. If our client’s team struggles to find something positive to be proud of, has difficulty verbalizing what they and the organization stand for, what is required to exceed their current duties, or even hesitates to tell people where they work, then it is obvious that something is prohibiting a culture change.*

*We were assisting an educational institution with a culture assessment. The IT department seemed to be the envy of the campus with every wall in their office area painted to resemble a beach somewhere in the world. The results from our proprietary survey found that 16 of the 18 employees in the department were generally dissatisfied with their department and the institution. “Oh, the environment is fun, and we get to wear shorts and sandals a lot”, they said, but the consensus was they felt underappreciated, lacked motivation, and were generally discouraged with their performance. Repeatedly these employees told us that this constraint was a common cause and major roadblock to feeling their work was worthwhile. “They hired me for my cybersecurity skills, and the work environment is cool, but I don’t get energy and pleasure from my job”, said one of the IT managers.*

*Allowing resources to re-energize and refocus is critical to our ability to share our “Can Do” culture with our clients. We have turned down a few projects because the client organization was not willing to allow us to focus on our project teams as part of the overall transformation project.*

**Looking back, was there a specific moment, decision, or behavior that became a turning point for your company’s culture? Please share the story.**

*We were working on a high-stake, high-profile project with global ramifications for our client as part of a previous consulting firm. While at a client’s facility in Europe, my daughter had an auto accident in the United States on a Thursday evening. Friday morning the project team handed me a ticket home to check on her. I had been scheduled to be onsite for 4 weeks, but the consensus from the team was “family first” and the project came second. It’s safe to say*

that relationships with those teammates transcended the quick trip home. We still stay in touch and share concerns for each other's families. The team was demonstrating our "Can Do" culture in a couple of ways. First, they were confident that I could be gone to deal with that important situation without jeopardizing the project. They were saying "we can do this; your situation is more important". Second, they knew that if they found themselves in the same situation, our culture and my personal leadership would mandate that we treat them the exact same way. "Can Do" at our firm is one way we demonstrate that everyone is valued and treated equally! As I and my partners embarked on our own, this "Can Do" approach to dealing with each other was a fundamental guiding principle we mandated for each other.

**Can you share a time when your company's culture was tested, such as during a crisis, conflict, or major change, and how your leadership approach affected the outcome?**

No one likes to admit failure, especially in the world of consulting and advisement services. Organizations can be quick to blame each other and threaten legal action as a way to pressure entities to perform. We were working with a client that had experienced significant turnover and was attempting to address the challenge through a series of leadership changes. The executive that brought us to the project was concerned that the organization's history of litigation would negatively impact the ability for employees to be honest in diagnosing the culture and changes that would be needed. We agreed to begin the project with appropriate milestones to assess not only our success, but the accuracy and honesty of the client's resources in the engagement. During one of our milestone checks, several of our teammates expressed unyielding concern that we would not be successful. During our assessment, we concluded that the organization was simply not prepared for the change they were asking and that we would not get the honest feedback essential for our culture assessment needs. It was a difficult decision for our team, but looking back, one that was essential for our progression. We had to revisit and strengthen our tools, processes, and approach to ensure we were effectively demonstrating our own "Can Do".

**Here is the main question of our interview. Based on your experience and success, what are the "Five Things Leaders Can Do To Build and Shape Company Culture From The Top Down?" Please share a story or an example for each.**

Based upon our experience, narrowing a list of tasks or actions could seem daunting. However, looking back over our 25 years of client projects, there are some themes and consistencies that emerge.

### **1. Watch Out for The Credibility Gap: The Foundation of Trust**

It may be an overused phrase, but walking the walk is a legitimate key component of shaping culture from the top down. Our experience has demonstrated that if the leader's walk doesn't match their talk, the organization pays a "Credibility Tax". One of the best examples of this "tax" is what we refer to as the "Unwritten Rulebook". Employees follow behaviors, not handbooks. Every project team or department knows that rewarding a "toxic high performer" rewrites your company rules instantly. It sends the message that no matter what we say, what we do (or don't do) communicates volumes about our "real" culture.

We were conducting a transformation project for a prominent web-based human resources organization that professed a culture of employee self-worth and treating each other with respect. During one of our initial meetings, a client's team member began to belittle a co-worker regarding their suggestions for an approach to communicating with the organization about this project. The suggestions were valid, but the commentary and rebuttal were inappropriate. Thankfully, the language of the participants did not escalate beyond the verbal confrontation. Later I had the chance to meet with a project sponsor and discuss the behaviors exhibited in the meeting. Initially, the sponsor tried to play down the discussion as "just the behaviors between two employees that don't get along". I had to explain to the sponsor that the "Credibility Tax" the organization was paying was substantial. We discussed the concept of The Say/Do Ratio, that acceptance of their organization culture can be measured by the distance between what a teammate says in a public and what they do in when a challenge arises. In this case, failure to address the belittling behaviors was sending a message to the rest of the organization that employee self-worth and treating each other with respect was a nice culture value, but not something that the organization practiced which was taxing productive performance as a result.

## **2. Recognize Culture as Infrastructure: Demonstrate Result-Based Leadership**

*Too many of our clients see culture as a soft, “feel good” philosophy within their organizations and not part of the core processes that deliver true value to themselves or their customers. Organizations that can treat culture as a delivery system, understand how to execute that delivery system to produce a “measurable reality” of positivity and enhanced performance.*

*Staying with the example of our prominent web-based human resources client, the organization was operating with 20–30 key projects in various stages of completion at any given point in time. Various teams frequently competed for high-profile technical resources often creating a critical point of conflict between the teams and these key resources. We worked closely with these teams to implement two components of making culture a true part of their infrastructure. First, we focused on Rewarding the “How”. We identified how their performance reviews should be a 50/50 focus of performance evaluation: half on “what” was achieved (KPIs) by the employees and the project teams, and half on “how” it was achieved — measuring cultural alignment of these teams with the organization’s infrastructure. The result was a dramatic change in how teams sourced and rewarded resources, allowing resources to shop their skills to match their personal availability and interests. Project durations were expedited and project completion for their clients improved dramatically — a demonstrable measurable reality for our client.*

## **3. The Personal Example: The CEO as the “Thermostat”**

*There are thousands of books that focus on the leader’s role of establishing an effective organizational culture. While some of the books are entertaining, many explore situations that most executives may never encounter. Understanding how organizational leaders set the temperature of an organization’s culture and excellence or inertia, is often hidden in these publications.*

*We were working with an educational institution in updating their culture and establishing relevant performance metrics when we encountered two of the key attributes of the CEO as the Thermostat. The College President professed the need to meet with individual academic and operating departments as part of his own attempt at “assessing the temperature” of the organization. During campus wide forums and college presentations, he professed a set of values and tried to establish a culture of openness. The reality was he didn’t understand “The Echo Effect”. Every whisper and side-bar conversation he had with employees in these departments was the equivalent of a shout to the front lines. His casual comments were inadvertently becoming “official policy”, several in direct conflict with the vision and open communication culture he was professing was so important. Employees were quick to realize that these individual one-off conversations were a more accurate representation of what he was trying to achieve, and not at all in line with his published vision and values.*

## **4. The Inertia Killer: Removing Organizational Friction**

*We believe that one of the greatest barriers to transforming a culture vision into a “Measurable Reality” is the friction caused by outdated organizational inertia. To dismantle the cultural habits that stall progress, leaders must first challenge the “That’s How We’ve Always Done It” mentality, replacing legacy behaviors with process reengineering that serves current performance imperatives. This transformation is fueled by what we refer to as Decision-Making Velocity; when a leader models decisiveness, they eliminate the “areas of inertia” that slow the entire organization. For example, by conducting a “Meeting Culture” audit, we have successfully assisted leaders in using their own time management as a template for efficiency, ensuring that collaboration is purposeful rather than performative. Executives must lead the charge in Breaking Silos from the Top, modeling cross-functional synergy before expecting it from their teams. Finally, leaders must demonstrate how to handle failure as a data point for growth, ensuring that the organization remains agile and bold rather than paralyzed by the fear of a mistake.*

*Returning to our example of the client educational institution in updating their culture and establishing relevant performance metrics, we observed firsthand how organizational friction was an inertia killer. The institution had a long prominent history of being a traditionally modeled education delivery system. Following the 6+ years of work we had spent assisting them with a culture change project, their decision inertia nearly brought the institution to its knees. Three years after we finished our work with them, the COVID pandemic arrived. Post-COVID, they quickly realized that their student populations were demanding more innovative learning environments and models. The*

institution's leadership struggled to identify and dismantle the cultural habits of decision-making that stalled progress and innovation. Forward thinking faculty and program leaders wanted to use a satellite campus for a lab to demonstrate a culture of innovative learning. Unfortunately for the institution, decision makers were firm in their historical decision-making processes and effectively killed these innovative efforts. The measurable reality was a decline of 50% in their student population and a mass exodus of key forward-thinking faculty, setting the institution back 20 years in its growth efforts, effectively killing the culture change that the leaders had envisioned and the work they had tasked us to assist with.

## **5. Cultural Sustainability: Building the Legacy**

To ensure that a culture of delivery outlasts any single executive, succession must be treated as a “Cultural Act”, where the next generation of leaders is vetted specifically against established “Leadership Credibility” standards to prevent the return of historical organizational inertia. This means a culture continuity is reinforced through the “Narrative of Success”, utilizing intentional storytelling to institutionalize the organization's way of delivering results and transforming abstract values into shared history. To bridge the gap between vision and daily operations, there must be a rigorous “Alignment of Incentives”, ensuring that recognition and promotions are mathematically tied to cultural health rather than just productive output. By embedding “Rituals of Excellence” — the cultural ceremonies that dictate how the firm meets, celebrates, and solves problems — leaders create a framework of excellence that remains stable during transitions. Finally, leaders must model “Continuous Transformation”, demonstrating a learner's mindset that proves the culture is not simply a static monument, but a dynamic asset that evolves alongside the market to ensure the organization remains in existence and thrives.

One of the best examples of building the culture legacy is our work with our prominent web-based human resources client mentioned previously. The organization held a once-a-year celebration bringing resources from across the country together along with their top clients to recognize project teams and top performers in an event that would rival any major Hollywood production. The organization banked on that celebration propelling the entity's enthusiasm and performance for the upcoming year. Our assessments indicated that employees preferred celebrating intermediate successes and recognition of smaller wins was more motivating to the project teams. Working with the leadership, we were able to embed several new rituals of excellence focused on more frequent celebrations at the project and team level which have endured for the past 8 years. The measurable reality is a consistent 10% revenue and profit growth rate despite the economic challenges of the COVID era.

### **What advice would you give to leaders who want to build thriving cultures but aren't sure where to start?**

In our experience, the foundation of a successful transformation is not just a change in mindset, but a willingness to analyze how the organization currently functions and identify the “embedded knowledge experts” already existent within the team. For those leaders unsure of where to begin, our advice is to focus on creating a deeper interconnectedness among employees and leveraging the wealth of information already available within your organization. By treating culture as an architecture that must be carefully analyzed and adjusted, leaders can move beyond fractional improvements and instead achieve the exponential growth necessary to foster a truly resilient and thriving environment.

### **How do you make sure your values and expectations are actually reflected by managers and team leaders throughout the organization? Please share examples if you can.**

We encourage our clients to follow our example and go beyond simply stating values; they must architect a project and management culture where every individual understands the critical success factors and their specific role in achieving them. By utilizing performance measurement and diagnostic services, we can identify the relationship between our human knowledge experts and our business strategy, ensuring that principles and expectations are translated into key performance indicator targets. This approach helps us create a self-aligned organization that constantly monitors our environment and our performance, allowing our leaders to provide the coaching and training necessary to make high-standard performance a repeatable reality across all levels of our organization and our projects.

**You are a person of great influence. If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)**

*The “Go For It” Movement. Excellence is a much better teacher than mediocrity and it is only achieved when groups, teams, and leaders are willing to lean to the sunlight, to seek the heliotropic power of taking risks and recognizing small wins. Failure is an excellent teacher and should be rewarded not punished. The perfect answer doesn’t exist, so try what you can and go with what you know.*

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**This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for the time you spent with this!**



WRITTEN BY  
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## Authority Magazine

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