

*Cultural Brilliance gives leaders the steps and the mindset for aligning culture with strategy. If you want to bring out the best in your people, or simply become a better leader, this book is your guide.*

–Marlene Chism, Author of *Stop Workplace Drama* and *No Drama Leadership*

# CULTURAL BRILLIANCE

The DNA of  
Organizational Excellence



**CLAUDETTE ROWLEY**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2019

ISBN-13: 978-1-939116-57-4 print edition

ISBN-13: 978-1-943625-76-5 ebook edition

Waterside Press  
2055 Oxford Ave  
Cardiff, CA 92007

[www.waterside.com](http://www.waterside.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

I was born believing in potential. I see potential in people, in organizations, and in society. I was also born with the ability to see reality clearly. This ability has set the foundation for my whole professional life: I can tell you where we are right now (the reality) and I can paint a vision for where we could be (the potential). But bridging this gap between current reality and future potential is my sweet spot. I created *Cultural Brilliance*™ because I believe we can do better as people, as organizations, and as a society to bridge the gap between our current reality and our potential. People who know me well often hear me say, “We know enough to solve virtually all the world’s problems, but we don’t do it. We have the intelligence, knowledge, technology, and capability to create a world that brings out the best in organizations and allows people to live in fairness, greater harmony, and opportunity.” Why would we choose anything else? Yet every day, people and organizations choose a different path.

I believe that humanity is at a crossroads. Every day we hear stories of division, of disconnection from human kindness, and of people treating each other as though they don’t matter. Every day we hear stories of positive action, of strangers reaching out to help each other, and of joy, kindness, and celebration. Every day we hear, read, and create both realities.

What do these dual realities have to do with culture, with business, and with brilliance? You might be thinking, “Isn’t this a business book?” It most certainly is a business book, designed to help you create cultures that will enhance your business performance at every level of your company. Recognizing these dual realities is part of understanding corporate culture. I will deliver on my promise to you, to help you create cultural brilliance in your company, and more, but part of that requires recognizing the larger global context in which your company operates.

I wrote *Cultural Brilliance: The DNA of Organizational Excellence* because I believe the business world is uniquely positioned to help us choose the path of human connection, dignity, and abundance. This path doesn’t sacrifice profitability, revenue generation, or innovation. In fact, I believe that most businesses haven’t reached their full profit potential because they are out of alignment with their people, their culture, and their ability to anticipate and implement change. What we know from quantum physics is that alignment matters. For example, the energy it takes to exploit your workforce to increase profits far outweighs the energy it would take to generate more revenue by respecting the people that work for you. As more businesses choose brilliance, respect, and kindness, the effect will be cumulative, changing the tenor of how we handle business within our world. Your organization’s ability to proactively respond to change is a key factor in your strategy, innovation, and consciousness in the world economy.

Don’t get me wrong; I love business strategy and making money. But business strategy and revenue can be generated from respect, adaptability, and conscious awareness—and learning this can be a key part of increased efficiency and better workplace culture.

For example, when you hold a team member accountable for his or her behavior, that can be an act of kindness. Each business that treats its workforce with respect increases the dignity in the world. When a business finds creative ways to reduce its carbon footprint, we can make the case that it’s an act of brilliance. When a company creates a brilliant culture—an organizational system that proactively responds to change in ways that decrease stress, inspire learning, and promote organizational health—that’s both an

energetic and practical contribution to the rest of the world. Let me guide you through a cultural change system that has the power to revolutionize your business.

For the past twenty years, I have been honored to partner with and advise hundreds of leaders and organizations as an organizational development consultant and executive coach. In that time, I have learned a great deal about business culture. For instance, almost all of the companies I've worked with have struggled because their culture has been out of alignment with their people, strategic objectives, and external environment. For instance, leaders in those companies would come together and discuss ways to improve communication, resolve conflict, and make better decisions. Often working with great commitment, they tried to clarify expectations, improve problem-solving, and become more strategic.

Here's the thing, though: Although productivity and performance may have increased, the company usually still felt frustrated and stuck in a loop of mediocrity with an occasional spike of excellence. That's because at their root, they were trying to resolve cultural issues but didn't know it.

To use a metaphor, it's like putting a Band-Aid on a heavily bleeding wound—it's simply not going to staunch the flow. When culture constrains the organization's ability to move forward productively, the company is simply going to stall or get stuck, or, if it does move forward, it does so under great stress.

For years I have seen companies work around their cultural issues rather than confront them, avoid telling the truth about behavior, and over time, allow their culture to devolve, rather than evolve, into something nobody wanted. Often this occurs unintentionally, the result of corporate leadership not understanding how culture shapes the organization and how, simultaneously, the organization molds the culture.

Why would an organization create a culture it doesn't really want or create a culture that's pretty good but could be so much better? This is one of the key questions to understanding corporate culture, one of several we need to ask in evaluating the culture at our own companies.

I wrote this book to both help you explore these questions and give you practical applications, but more important, I wrote it because I believe that your company's culture can be brilliant.

While that brilliance will help you make more money and fulfill your organization's mission, it will also help you contribute to the world in vital ways. What follows are the three reasons *Cultural Brilliance*<sup>™</sup> came to fruition; the first two address missing pieces in the collective narrative on culture and the last reason addresses the need for all of us to rise up and use our business power for the greater good.

1. Organizational culture thrives in truth.
2. You are always part of a company culture and your culture is constantly evolving, even at this moment. Culture is not something you can set aside; rather it is always present and needs to be respected accordingly.
3. You have an opportunity—and a responsibility—and I can help you rise to the occasion.

## Organizational culture thrives in truth

As an organizational development consultant, I've witnessed amazing transformations when cultures begin to recognize and tell the truth about themselves. I've seen leaders in a family business who were barely speaking begin to communicate again, allowing them to implement positive, strategic changes that helped their culture evolve. I've witnessed educators begin addressing the power imbalance in their school once they discovered that their culture held an unconscious belief that conflict was wrong (which in turn created tremendous, unresolved conflict). As a culture consultant for an energy company, I've coached a leader who designed an organizational structure that allowed the brilliance, talent, and invention of several previously siloed departments to coalesce.

And unfortunately, I've also seen organizations shy away from telling the truth about their culture and stay stuck in mediocrity. This refusal to recognize and see the truth in turn continues to support tremendous inefficiency, which can cause talented people to leave at regular intervals.

## You are always in a culture and your culture is evolving at this moment

You are always in a culture. Culture in your company isn't an "extra" you can sideline or otherwise avoid addressing until you have time. It isn't a chair you stick in the corner and ignore. Instead it's like standing in the middle of a swimming pool. Every minute of each day the culture in your organization is evolving and you are immersed in it.

When a company hires a new CEO, the cultural foundation shifts. When an organization decides to reorganize, the culture allows or constrains the success of the reorganization. When an engineering department of a software company decides to create a new product, the culture will influence the product development. If the product is a huge success, the culture will evolve and change accordingly.

Why is culture always evolving? Organizational culture operates as a system, and like most systems, it is in a continual state of evolution as new people, ideas, and decisions enter the system, and as people, processes, and old ideas exit the system.

Although I'll delve into this idea more fully in Chapter 2, here's a peek into what often happens in businesses: As they attempt to improve their culture, they reduce it to its more superficial elements or take a one-size-fits-all approach. In other words, businesses take action without understanding how making a change in one part of the culture will affect the rest of the system and may dilute the potential in other aspects of their culture.

For example, a leader may recognize that his teams are not getting along well after a reorganization and the resulting tension is slowing down productivity (a common problem). Instead of identifying the "glitches" in the organizational system, however, the leader organizes a series of social events that gloss over the relationship tensions. In fact, people may become more frustrated and say, "Ever since our company reorganized, people aren't getting along and everything takes twice as long to accomplish. Our CEO's response: Bring in lunch and dinner for us and organize a company outing. He's not even listening to us!"

Let me show how to make changes in your business culture that pave the way for growth and evolution.

## You have an opportunity—and a responsibility—and I can help you rise to the occasion

I believe each business around the world can and should be doing more to recognize and act on three realities:

1. A business exists to do more than make money. Even if the primary function is to make a profit, the business impacts its workforce, the community in which it resides, and the larger society through its branding, products, and services.
2. A business influences the fabric of our larger culture, of our societal interactions, and the health of our planet. Take the iPhone, for example. Although only one product, it has changed the way we look at technology, communicate, and view the role of smartphones in our lives. Need I say more? Companies have an enormous impact on us in both positive and negative ways. Businesses like Apple have reshaped our communication, connection, what we value, and how we spend our time.
3. A business' workforce are social beings with a need to connect, to be treated with dignity and respect, and to develop their talents, skills, and competencies. I dislike the term "human capital." We are not human capital; we are human beings. Human capital allows employers to distance themselves from how they treat their workforce and turns them into "head counts" and "FTEs." Everyone who works for a business is a person.

### How to use this book

*Cultural Brilliance* is a road map, a field guide, and a cultural treatise all-in-one. When addressing culture, organizations often focus on what is wrong, broken, or defective instead of what calls forth excellence in people. The Cultural Brilliance System™ reveals the hidden parts of the cultural "iceberg" through authentic involvement at all organizational levels, solutions that are co-designed by the workforce and leadership, and integration that moves beyond dialogue into iterative, systemic implementation. As you read this book, it will become clear that your company's facility with change and the ability to tap into your culture's potential are both competitive advantages.

This book is a journey and I'm your guide.

In Part One, we'll define and explore brilliant cultures. What are they? How do they develop? How do you maintain cultural brilliance? We'll learn the roles of authenticity, adaptogen design, and aware integration. I'll talk about how cultures lose their luster over time and common behavior dynamics and decisions that indicate that your culture isn't shining as much as it could be. Then together we will unravel how culture really is the DNA of your excellence. Finally, I'll share the keys to the cultural kingdom by teaching you how your culture operates as a system. Once you understand the systems approach, it is much easier to develop a brilliant culture.

You'll also meet the U.S.-based two companies who will accompany us through an application of the Cultural Brilliance System: Islington-Barrett, a utility company, and SN Controls, a manufacturing company, both based on the East Coast of the United States. Islington-Barrett, a seasoned company, supported individual growth and focused on creating a positive environment for the people that work there. As you'll read, the compliance department's culture had gotten stuck in a set of mindsets and behaviors that prevented key changes. SN Controls, on the other hand, had less experience discussing or addressing its



culture. While this company was also considered an overall positive place to work, stress levels had increased sharply over the previous year. As the company intentionally grew, its systems and processes weren't able to adapt to the increased volume. As you'll read, we worked on finding the root cause of these issues and how their cultural systems were driving the stress and inefficiencies. Both the names of Islington-Barrett and SN Controls have been changed to protect their privacy. However, the insights, work products, and outcomes you'll read about are real and accurately reflect what these companies learned and how they evolved.

In Part Two, I'll guide you phase by phase through the Cultural Brilliance System. We'll explore each of the three phases in detail: Authenticity, Adaptogen Design, and Aware Integration. You'll leave each chapter with a thorough understanding of the phase, why it's important, and practical strategies, tools, and tips to implement in your organization. Additionally, we'll spend time on the brief, yet important transitions between each phase that are essential to your success: Contextual Emergence, Design Integrity, and Social Capital.

In Part Three, I'll describe the essential roles leaders play to develop and evolve brilliant cultures. Specifically, we'll delve into what makes leaders culturally brilliant and how leaders can see their culture more clearly, and how anyone can become a culture whisperer. I'll leave you with a checklist to help you stay on track, avoid common pitfalls, and harness the positive emotional energy in your culture.