BRIDGEPOINT COACHING & STRATEGY GROUP

Conditions Set Culture

Why Leaders Who Protect the Conditions Get the Culture They Want, and Leaders Who Chase Culture Do Not

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Executive Summary

Every executive I coach wants a better culture. Most of them are trying to build it from the wrong end.

They write values and hold the offsite. When the culture does not show up, they run the program again with a new consultant and a new word.

Culture is what people do when nobody is checking. You cannot install it or ship it from one company to another. It grows in the conditions: what the leaders of a place tolerate, value, and protect, every time protecting it costs them something.

Beliefs shape conditions. Conditions produce culture. Culture delivers outcomes. Beliefs are private. Culture and outcomes arrive later. Of the four links, only one is in a leader's hands, and it is not the culture.

> **"Conditions are the only link a leader can change this week."**
>
> DEAN MILES

I have advised senior leaders since 2007, in oil and gas, heavy industry, banking, healthcare, technology, professional sport, and family-owned businesses. Their organizations represent more than $300 billion in combined revenue and assets under management. The pattern holds in every one, and in the companies everyone studies. None of the famous ones protects "innovation." They protect a team size, a markup, a Thursday meeting: something you could watch break by Friday.

Why Culture Programs Fail

I have sat in many rooms where a leadership team unveiled its culture. Integrity, ownership, candor, one team. Everyone nodded. Six months later the culture was what it had been, and the team was quietly embarrassed by the posters.

The values were not wrong. Values describe an output: what you hope people will do. They never touch what people live through on a Tuesday afternoon when the number is short and the boss is in a mood. People read something else:

- **Not the safety policy.** What happened to the last person who stopped the job.
- **Not the value that says candor.** What happened to the last person who disagreed with the CEO in the meeting.
- **Not the slide about ownership.** Whether the last person who made a call without asking got thanked or got corrected.

Those are conditions. Somebody set every one of them, usually without meaning to, and the culture grew in them the way grass grows in whatever soil it is given. You can put up a sign that says "lawn." The grass does not read.

Leaders aim at what they can see and leave alone what they can move. Because culture lags, they are always a season late.

> ## Cultures do not transfer. Conditions do.

Watch an acquisition. The buyer announces that its admired culture will be "infused." In my experience, it rarely is. The acquired company receives new conditions: who gets promoted, what gets funded, what happens when you miss. If those match the buyer's, the culture eventually follows. If not, the old culture carries on under a new logo. Even in the lab, when Weber and Camerer merged small experimental "firms," performance fell and each side tended to blame the other side's people (Weber & Camerer, 2003). A new CEO works the same way. She brings conditions, not a culture, and the organization reads them within weeks.

So the question I put to a leadership team is not "what culture do you want?" It is "what do you protect?" The first produces adjectives. The second produces a list you can act on.

The Chain

The idea that culture drives results is not mine. What I add is naming what sits upstream of culture, and which link a leader can actually reach (Figure 1).

Beliefs are what the leaders of a place privately hold to be true. "People are basically trying to get away with something." "A missed number is a career event." Few leaders have ever been asked to say theirs out loud.

Conditions are what those beliefs produce in an organization: what is tolerated, valued, and protected when protecting it costs something. You can watch one break, and you can change one this week.

Culture grows in the conditions. It cannot be installed. **Outcomes** follow: safety, earnings, turnover, retention. Last to move, first thing the board asks about.

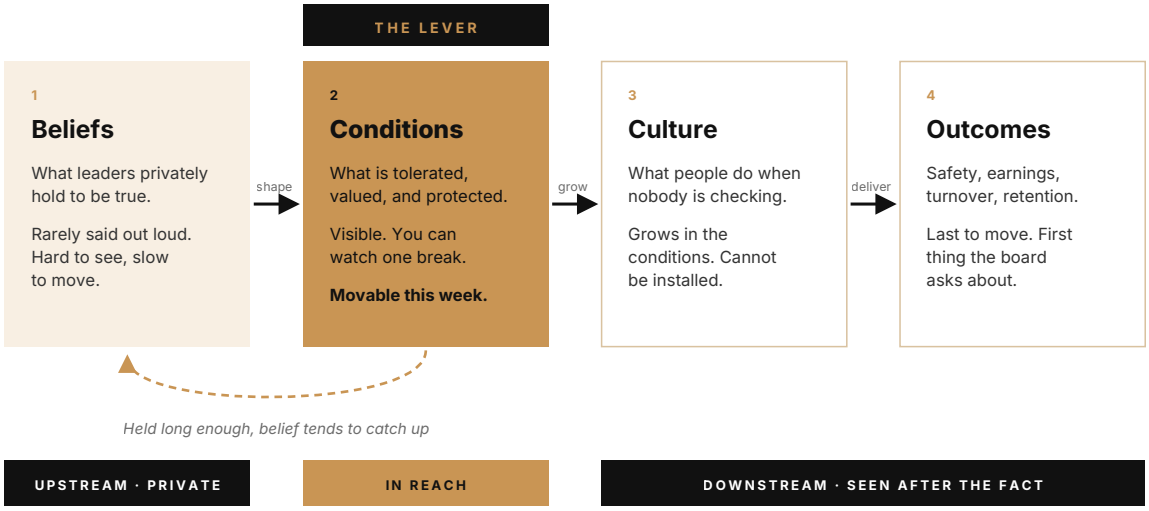


Figure 1. The Chain. Beliefs shape conditions, conditions grow culture, and culture delivers outcomes. Conditions are the one link a leader can see, move, and watch break. The dashed line is the slow return path: a condition held long enough tends to reshape the belief behind it.

Edgar Schein listed the mechanisms through which leaders actually embed culture: what they pay attention to, measure, and control; how they react to critical incidents; how they allocate resources, rewards, and status; and whom they recruit, promote, and remove (Schein, 2010). Every item on that list is a condition. None is a poster.

One chain, the way a crew would tell it

LINK	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Belief	"A stop-work call is a cost to the crew."
Condition	Raising a hazard delays the job, and the crew absorbs the delay. Nobody praises the call out loud.
Culture	Near-misses stay in the truck. "We will do it right on the next one."
Outcome	The recordable nobody saw coming, after a reporting number that looked fine the week before.

The safety policy says the opposite. The crew reads what happened to the last person who called a stop-work.

Why not work on beliefs instead? Beliefs are hard to see and slow to move, and belief tends to follow behavior more often than it leads. People who act against a belief feel pressure to bring the belief into line (Festinger, 1957), and we often learn what we believe by watching what we do (Bem,

1972). Schein describes culture forming the same way, from a way of working that keeps succeeding (Schein, 2010). Leaders who protect a condition for a year usually come to believe in it. Change the condition. The belief tends to follow.

What Known Companies Protect

If conditions set culture, famous cultures should have famous conditions. They do; we look past them because they are less inspiring than the cultures they produced. From my longer reference list, here are twelve, checked against public sources. Read them for the shape, not the names.

COMPANY	WHAT THEY PROTECT
Amazon	Two-pizza teams with single-threaded ownership. Six-page memos read in silence before discussion. Disagree and commit (Amazon, n.d.; Bezos, 2018; Slater, n.d.).
Toyota	Any worker can stop the line, and by many accounts the team leader starts with thank you. Go and see. One A3 sheet per problem (Liker, 2004; Willis, 2015).
SpaceX	Every requirement carries a person's name, not a department's. Delete the part or process before optimizing it (Isaacson, 2023).
Apple	A Directly Responsible Individual on every action item. Below the CEO, no conventional general managers with their own P&L (Lashinsky, 2012; Podolny & Hansen, 2020).
Pixar	The Braintrust: candid notes from peers with no authority to force a change. Dailies: unfinished work shown every day (Catmull & Wallace, 2014).
Netflix	Context, not control. Vacation policy: "Take vacation." The keeper test. The 2009 deck: "adequate performance gets a generous severance package" (Hastings, 2009; Netflix, n.d.).
Berkshire Hathaway	Operating CEOs run their businesses; in 2015, 24 people worked with Buffett at headquarters. Weak businesses rarely sold if managers are sound (Berkshire Hathaway, n.d.; Buffett, 2016).
Ford under Mulally	Business Plan Review every Thursday, attendance required. Color-coded charts. The first executive to show red was applauded (Edersheim, 2016; Hoffman, 2012).
Southwest, founding era	One aircraft type. Ten-minute turns in 1972, flying a four-plane schedule with three planes. Employees first, customers second, shareholders third (Lucier, 2004; Southwest Airlines, n.d.).
Costco	Markups long reported as capped at 14 percent on brands, 15 percent on its own label. Fewer than 4,000 items per warehouse (Costco Wholesale, 2025; Greenhouse, 2005).
Nucor	Weekly crew production bonuses. A no-layoff practice; hours and bonuses fall instead. "Share the pain": officers' pay falls furthest (Govindarajan, 2000; Nucor, 2020).
Ritz-Carlton	Any employee can spend up to $2,000 on a guest, per incident, without approval. A daily lineup, every shift, about fifteen minutes (Reiss, 2009).

None of them protects "innovation" or "integrity." Those are the cultures. They protect a team size, a markup, a name on a requirement, a two-thousand-dollar limit. Each has the marks of a real condition: you can see it break, and holding it costs something. Costco could raise the markup tomorrow. Nucor could lay people off. For decades, neither did.

> **A CAUTION**
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> Several of these have eroded. Southwest's average turn is now near fifty minutes, still the fastest among large U.S. carriers, and it ended open seating in January 2026 (Southwest Airlines, 2024, 2026). Netflix has rewritten its memo more than once since 2009. A condition is protected every time it costs you, or it becomes a story about the old days.

What a Culture Carrier Actually Does

Every organization has a few people it calls culture carriers. I used to see them as people who embody the values. Then I watched what they do: they protect conditions, again and again, at some cost to themselves.

> **"A culture carrier is what a conditions protector looks like from downstream."**
>
> DEAN MILES

- The plant manager called a safety culture carrier thanks the operator who stopped the job, in front of the crew, even when the stop cost the shift an hour for nothing.
- The executive known for candor says "I disagree, here is why" in the meeting, then describes the final call to her team exactly as the CEO does.

When you hire or promote, look for a record of protecting something specific when it cost them. As the leader, you do not have to be inspiring. You have to be consistent about a short list of conditions, especially when consistency is expensive. People will call it culture. To you it will feel like an ordinary Tuesday.

The Conditions Audit

The first exercise with a leadership team is one question, answered out loud, together:

What must be true in this room for us to make the hard calls that do not have a clean right answer?

Four rules. Nobody nods; everybody speaks. If one person cannot sign up, it is not a condition yet. Each person writes the list in their own handwriting. And no more than six. Twelve is a wish list.

Five questions a condition must pass

1. **Can I see it break?** Something you could watch fail in the next 90 days. "We trust each other" fails. "Disagreement happens in this room, not after it" passes.

2. **Is it ours to protect?** "The center listens to the field" fails. "'Corporate wants it' is never the reason" passes.
3. **Does it cost us something?** If nobody would vote against it, it is a virtue. "We're honest" fails. "The number we give this room is the number we believe" passes.
4. **Does it come before the result?** Set on Monday, not read off the March scorecard. "We make good decisions" fails. "A hazard raised costs the crew nothing" passes.
5. **Does it pick a side under pressure?** "We balance short and long term" fails. "Bad news reaches the room the same week I hear it" passes.

Five look-alikes every team offers first

WHAT IT IS	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	WHY IT FAILS
A belief in disguise	"We trust each other." "We assume good intent."	True in the heart. Invisible in the room.
A virtue	"We're honest with each other." "We hold each other accountable."	Nobody can vote against it, so nobody can protect it.
An outcome	"We make good decisions." "Safety is our first value."	It is what conditions produce, not what leaders set.
A wish about others	"Corporate gives us the autonomy we need."	It belongs to someone who is not in this room.
A compromise	"We balance short term and long term."	A tension being dodged instead of managed. My paper *Problems to Solve, Tensions to Manage* covers those.

The tell: no name, no timeframe, no way to catch it breaking. Do not reject these. Interrogate them. One vague line often becomes three real conditions.

Under each condition, write the belief it needs to survive a bad month. "Disagreement happens in this room, not after it" survives only if each person believes "my peers can hear a hard no from me and still trust me tomorrow." What leaves the room is one page: six conditions at most, each with its belief and a name beside it. If it does not fit on the page, it does not exist.

In Practice: Two Composite Cases

Each case below is a composite that blends several engagements, with details changed, so no company or person in it is real. What happened in the room is true to my experience.

Case A: A senior executive inside a founder-shaped company

A senior executive at a large, long-established company was proud of its strong culture, and stuck in it. Every proposal entered months of consensus that ended in agreement that was not really agreement. He recognized Jerry Harvey's Abilene Paradox: a group agreeing its way into a decision few members wanted (Harvey, 1974). His instinct was to fight the culture.

We ran the chain backward instead. The consensus culture had grown in its conditions: long tenure, promotion from within, an inherited caution, and a real cost to anyone who pushed a decision through early. It was slow exactly as its founders intended.

So he stopped asking how to change the culture, which was not his to change, and asked which conditions on his own team were his to set. In Edmondson's study of 51 teams inside one company, psychological safety was shared within teams and differed between them (Edmondson, 1999). He set two. A proposal gets a decision date the day it is raised. Disagreement in the meeting earns a thank-you, not a longer process. Then he built a long-term proposal in the founders' own language, asked a small group whether it deserved review, and let the silence sit. A senior colleague offered to help. He had stopped fighting the culture and started working the chain.

Case B: A startup cohort with no culture yet

A cohort of first-time founders, each a year or two into a company too small to have a culture, mostly thought culture came later. Seth Godin's definition helped: culture is "people like us do things like this" (Godin, 2018). The founders were the only "people like us" in the building. Whatever they tolerated in month six would be the culture in year three.

So we talked about what each would protect once it got expensive. "Candor" had to be described breaking: a co-founder disagreement moved to the parking lot, a bad number reaching investors two weeks late. Each left with one condition on an index card, in their own hand, and a sentence a peer could say if it slipped.

Protecting the Conditions Under Pressure

Conditions are cheap on a good day. In a bad month they tend to go in order. First, the one that slows the meeting: welcome disagreement becomes "let's take this offline." Next, the one that costs money: the maintenance window, the hiring bar, the crew bonus. Then the one protecting the people at the far end of the chain.

None of this takes a decision. Nobody votes to stop thanking the person who stopped the job. It happens less, then once, and the crew has learned something. Three practices help.

Watch for the break, not the feeling

For each condition, agree on a sign of slippage you could tally at month end: proposals that left without a decision date, days between a bad number being known and reported. Put a name next to each. Unwatched, a sign is decoration.

Give each other the sentence

Agree on the exact words a peer may say when a condition slips, and the response the room owes. "We are doing the parking-lot thing again" is a sentence. "Hold each other accountable" is not. A dashboard shows a slip. A sentence makes it safe to name it to someone's face.

Hold your own conditions in public

Your conditions get watched hardest. Say disagreement is welcome, then cut the meeting short when someone disagrees, and the condition is gone. The reverse is true too. Thank someone for a hard no in front of their peers, in a bad month, and the condition becomes real. People will call it culture. You will know what it actually was.

How Coaching Helps: Discovery, Design, Development

From inside, conditions are nearly invisible. A leader who has spent fifteen years somewhere struggles to see what the place tolerates, because tolerating it is what fifteen years taught them.

- **Discovery: find the conditions already in place.** I talk in confidence with the leader and six to ten people around them, and ask what happened to the last person who stopped the job, disagreed, missed a number, or decided without asking. Those stories are the conditions, and most leaders are surprised by at least one.
- **Design: name what you will protect.** The one page: up to six conditions, each with its belief, an owner, a sign of slippage, and the sentence a peer may use.
- **Development: protect them when it costs something.** We rehearse the expensive moments, debrief the ones that went badly, and recheck with the same stakeholders at the midpoint and close. If the stories from downstream have not changed, neither has the condition.

Reflection Questions

Answer alone, then compare with your team. The places you disagree are where to start.

1. What happened to the last person on my team who disagreed with me in a meeting?
2. What happened to the last person who brought me a bad number early?
3. What happened to the last person who made a call without asking?
4. If a new hire watched my team for a week, what would they say we actually protect?

5. What do I protect that costs me something? If nothing comes to mind, I am protecting virtues.
6. Which of my conditions would go first in a bad month, and has it already started?
7. What exact sentence is a peer permitted to say to me when they see me slip?
8. Who are the culture carriers in my organization, and what condition is each one protecting?
9. Which belief do I hold privately that my team can read in the conditions I set?
10. What do I want people to do when nobody is checking, and what must be true on Monday for that?

If the first three were hard to answer from memory, start there. Those stories are your conditions.

About Dean Miles and Bridgepoint

Dean Miles is the Founder and President of Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group, the executive coaching, training, and leadership development firm he started in 2007 in Celebration, Florida. He began coaching and facilitating at a global pharmaceutical company in 1996 and has advised senior leaders since 2007. His executive coaching practice started in 2008, on drilling rigs for a global drilling contractor, where the gap between safety policy and crew habit first showed him that conditions come first. He has logged more than 13,000 hours of one-on-one executive coaching with 245 leaders.

He is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach (CPCC) through the Co-Active Training Institute (2009) and a certified Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder Centered Coach. He holds an M.A. in Executive Leadership from Liberty University, completed with high distinction, and is a PhD candidate in Organization and Management in Liberty's School of Business. Selected to Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches in 2021 from more than 18,000 applicants, he is ranked by Thinkers360 as #1 in the world in Business Continuity and a Top 10 Thought Leader in Coaching. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Coaching, a McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School affiliate, from 2016 to 2024, and is featured in the Wall Street Journal bestseller *Becoming Coachable*.

Let's Talk

If you have run the culture program and the culture has not moved, let's talk about what you protect. The first call stays private and commits you to nothing. Bring one condition you suspect is slipping. We will run it through the five questions, and you can decide from there.

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