

# A simple guide to aligning brand with culture

## Getting started

- 1 This guide is about your organisational brand. Your visual identity (logo, strapline and so on) is only part of the brand. People often focus on this when brand experience is just as important.
- 2 If you are starting from scratch, contact us at Brand Ethos for advice. If you are reviewing your existing brand ask us for our succinct guide, which includes comprehensive guidance and a simple-to-use brand diagnostic, suitable for most organisations.
- 3 If you have not thought about your culture before and would like some help kicking this process off, ask us about Culture Scope (see box below).

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## Why this matters

If you're embarking on a change programme, a rebrand or a service redesign project, this is the moment to be thinking about aligning your brand with the ethos and culture of your organisation, so that people's experiences are consistent.

People talk about brands based on their own experiences, and overheard comments by others. Consistent experiences mean people talk about a brand in the same way—good and bad. Successful organisations align their brand and culture so people can have similar, quality experiences.

Use this guide to understand how organisational brands work and how you can align your brand and culture to ensure your brand is talked about positively.

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## Brands are powerful

Your brand can be described as the sum of all the experiences someone will have of your organisation. What's true in their head is just that: true. To them at least. This applies whoever they are: employee, customer, shareholder, volunteer, donor, journalist, alumnus, whoever.

Brand experiences are determined by the behaviours of an organisation and its employees (and volunteers), but also its partners, suppliers and spokespeople. Those behaviours are the result of an organisation's culture: its ethos.

Brands can influence people's understanding by aligning their culture to change these behaviours to influence people's perception.

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## Culture Scope

Culture Scope is a tool to help organisations identify, measure and develop the sort of organisational culture they need for success. It can be undertaken as a full process, or in part.

- 1 **Aspiration:** The intended culture of the organisation is designed.
  - 2 **Assessment:** A Culture Scope survey is conducted online, giving a complete picture of the factors impacting staff and a clear measurement of how close the organisation is from its desired culture.
  - 3 **Acceleration:** The development of practical solutions to enhance a strong culture and address areas of concern.
- Ask us for more information.

## What brands can do

Brands guide whether customers buy. They help to inform whether shareholders invest. They determine whether employees join, whether they remain and if they'll become your advocates. They build loyalty. Research shows that brand advocates will stand up for a brand even in the face of evidence that its behaviour is below par.

Brands add value to shareholders, act as bellwethers of opinion, and inspire movements. They can help organisations achieve their ambitions on and off the balance sheet, by affording social purpose and being in tune with their audiences.

Brands can also fail, by telling one story, but living another.

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## If people believe they share values with a company, they will stay loyal to the brand

Howard Schultz

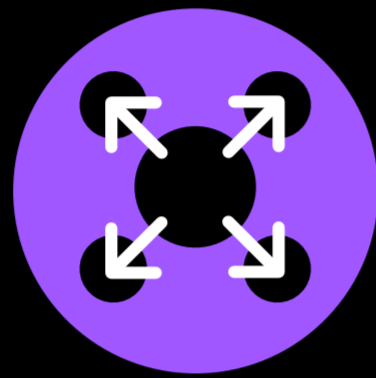
## Don't stop at the logo

Brand development has been given due attention by boards and management teams over the last decade. However, all too often the work stops at the brand identity stage. There may be employee engagement, but usually to research and socialise the new identity and promote organisational values but without giving people permission to 'live them'.

Successful brands penetrate the organisational DNA, and are inextricably tied to the ethos, behaviours and attitudes of the organisation and its entire workforce.

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## Be brand



## To understand brands, understand people

Although organisational leaders understand the importance of embracing 'hearts and minds' this is often not achieved in practice for two reasons.

- 1 It is hard. We tend to overestimate our rational powers of prediction and operation. And yet, research shows that we are predictably irrational. Aligning brand and culture requires work at both the predictable and unpredictable levels of behaviour and operation.
- 2 Change takes time, focus and resilience. Most organisations want 'quick wins' and hope the brand identity is enough to infuse the culture over time. It is not enough.

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## Your culture is your brand

Tony Hsieh

## Capture your big idea

Successful brands stay true to a core purpose and promise, and define:

- the collective ethos of the organisation
- why the organisation does what it does
- how it goes about achieving its 'why' ambitions
- what it does, its offer
- what is different about it
- what it achieves for its customers and for its staff and why they would believe that.

This 'big idea' is the special capability you bring to solve the problems experienced by people you're working for.

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## Ethos, not values

The big idea is a core part of directing the attention and effort of the people who work for your organisation.

Successful brands have people outside the organisation who share ideas with people inside the organisation. They have an affiliation and a strong collective ethos.

Imposing 'values' on people won't magically mean people live them. They have their own personal values and beliefs, which will determine how they play out their behaviours, in part influenced by the behaviours of others. The collective values and beliefs of an organisation constitute its ethos and these determine behaviours and experiences of your brand.

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## Think like your customer

Or 'end user', or employee. Segment your audiences and find what connects them.

At its simplest, use pen portraits, or if you have sufficient data, prepare personae.

Test your big idea by running through the various customer or employee journeys that people will take with you. What are they looking for? What are we asking them to do? How do we best engage them? What should we avoid doing?

Does your 'big idea' match up?

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## Be repetitive



## Align with expectations

With the big idea tested, translate into clear expectations of behaviour both within your organisation and outside. In fact, all of your interactions.

Overleaf you will find the Brand Ethos template to record your ethos, behaviours and attitudes.

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## Keep it simple

In order to coordinate the activities of many people with myriad preferences in an organisation, the message needs to be clear and simple.

Chunk it up. People find it easier to remember no more than seven things. They remember just three the best. Keep it simple. Your three ideas need to appeal to both people's heads and their hearts.

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## Thinking fast, thinking slow

We don't always think things through. We have fast and slow thinking systems.

We process information deliberately with our logical mind (Slow, System 2), but less consciously at an emotional level (Fast, System 1). System 1 helps us to create shortcuts and function in the world, but is also largely the cause of our cognitive bias. We need to work with both systems.

We process information rapidly through all of our senses, creating shortcuts, heuristics and associations.

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## Show and tell

Don't just rely on what can be conveyed verbally.

Use design and imagery creatively in your organisation. Use cues to reinforce the brand—organisational symbols, physical environment, product or service design, policies and practice, visibility and behaviours of leaders, interactions with society beyond customers and suppliers—but keep it true.

Convey your big idea in everything the organisation does, recognising that people not only see things rationally, but emotionally, too.

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## Repeat repeat repeat

Developing organisational culture around clear brand messages and behaviours is not a one-off activity.

### Repetition is essential

The ambition should be about creating habits for the longer term. It is not enough to produce brand or value statements, however, if they are statements that live on walls and not in the day-to-day activities of the company.

Get the message out consistently, regularly and repeatedly. Use all your organisation's communication streams to embed the big idea and expectations of what kind of behaviours allow the ethos to be lived and connected with.

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## Lead by example

We tend not to listen to what people say, but rather notice what they do (particularly if there is a difference between the two).

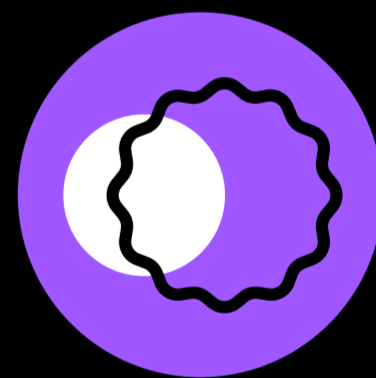
Leaders have a powerful impact on organisational culture. Cliché though it may be, but leaders need to walk the talk, as well as offering compelling reasons for why they do, how they do and what they do.

Nothing is more disruptive to brand and cultural alignment than directors not agreeing with one another, or behaving differently.

For more information about this see Plum's passionate leadership points overleaf.

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## Be exemplar



## Join the dots

Aligning culture with brand requires all your organisational processes to cohere and fit. Pay attention to how the organisation is structured.

Do you have too many or too few layers? Is it easy for people to do the right thing? Do you recruit and develop people around a core set of brand messages and behaviours? Does your performance management reflect what you expect of people?

Simplify core processes and make them reinforce one another, create the environment for your people to be your brand.

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## Live the brand

By now you are certain the big idea and core messages are right. You have segmented your customers and markets and understand their needs, motivations and opportunities. Your organisational processes support the big idea.

It is time to deepen the relationship and move into 'brand assimilation'.

This is about structuring your development interventions, over time, to support employees to understand the connection between their individual behaviour and organisational success.

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## Be passionate



## Create habit

Living the brand means creating deep habit in customers (to buy or recommend) and in staff (to reinforce and promote). Creating long-term habit requires three things:

- **Ethos:** your people understand and share the big idea
- **Behaviour:** your people have the right skills and capabilities
- **Attitude:** you help your people adopt the mindsets to be effortless brand ambassadors.

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## Protect habit

Successful organisations pay attention to the big three habit accelerators.

- Embed the 'big idea' in all organisational literature and processes. Keep it compelling and simple.
- Check regularly in meetings, appraisals, reviews.
- Support aligned brand behaviours through your ethos development programmes.

Equip your people with the skills and capabilities that reinforce and represent the brand, rather than things that are in fashion or that you can do.

Your people are your brand ambassadors, so develop them consistently in what matters. Reinforce the brand attitudes through performance review, day-to-day conversations, noticing people who are getting it right.

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## Commit for the long term

All of the above requires time and focus. Merging what is in people's heads (brand), with how people do things (culture) can take anything from one to five years, depending upon the organisation's size and complexity.

Leaders need to stay focused on the alignment project for the long term, even if its full manifestation will not be achieved within their tenure. Leaders have a responsibility to protect brand and culture alignment and resist the organisation chopping and changing. This only makes the messages and the behaviours misaligned. The only reason for change should be overwhelming factors, such as market volatility or shift, merger etc. Focused discipline pays dividends in the longer term.

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## Culture eats strategy for breakfast

Peter Drucker

## Credit where it's due

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Helpful instructions overleaf

Further relevant information overleaf

## Cultural change consultants

Plum Consulting Services Ltd is a cultural change consultancy, working productively with the predictably irrational elements of change



www.plum-consulting.co.uk

## Clear thinking for spirited organisations

Brand Ethos is a brand strategy consultancy for organisations looking to make positive change in the world

dba Association Member



www.brandethos.co.uk

# Passionate leadership

## A model from Plum

1

**Be who you are**  
Being passionate is about being authentic, not necessarily having charisma or gravitas. Too much emphasis is placed on heroic or charismatic models of leadership. You are what you are. You can add skills and attitudes, but you can't have a personality replacement. There is no formula for leading. Relentlessly use your strengths, talents and values.

2

**Use your head and your heart**  
Given that we think not only with our heads, it is important that leaders use their EQ as well as their IQ. Too often the emphasis on leaders is to shape the path, present the way, delineate the strategy. More often than not, the role is to create the impetus to follow and that is as much about passion as it is reason.

3

**Build enthusiasm build hope**  
State is contagious. Leaders need to pay attention to creating states that are positive and supportive for their people to do the right thing – eg be enthusiastic, be positive. Leaders therefore need to be prepared to work with the deeply personal, using discovery and imagination to shape environments that match our human needs.

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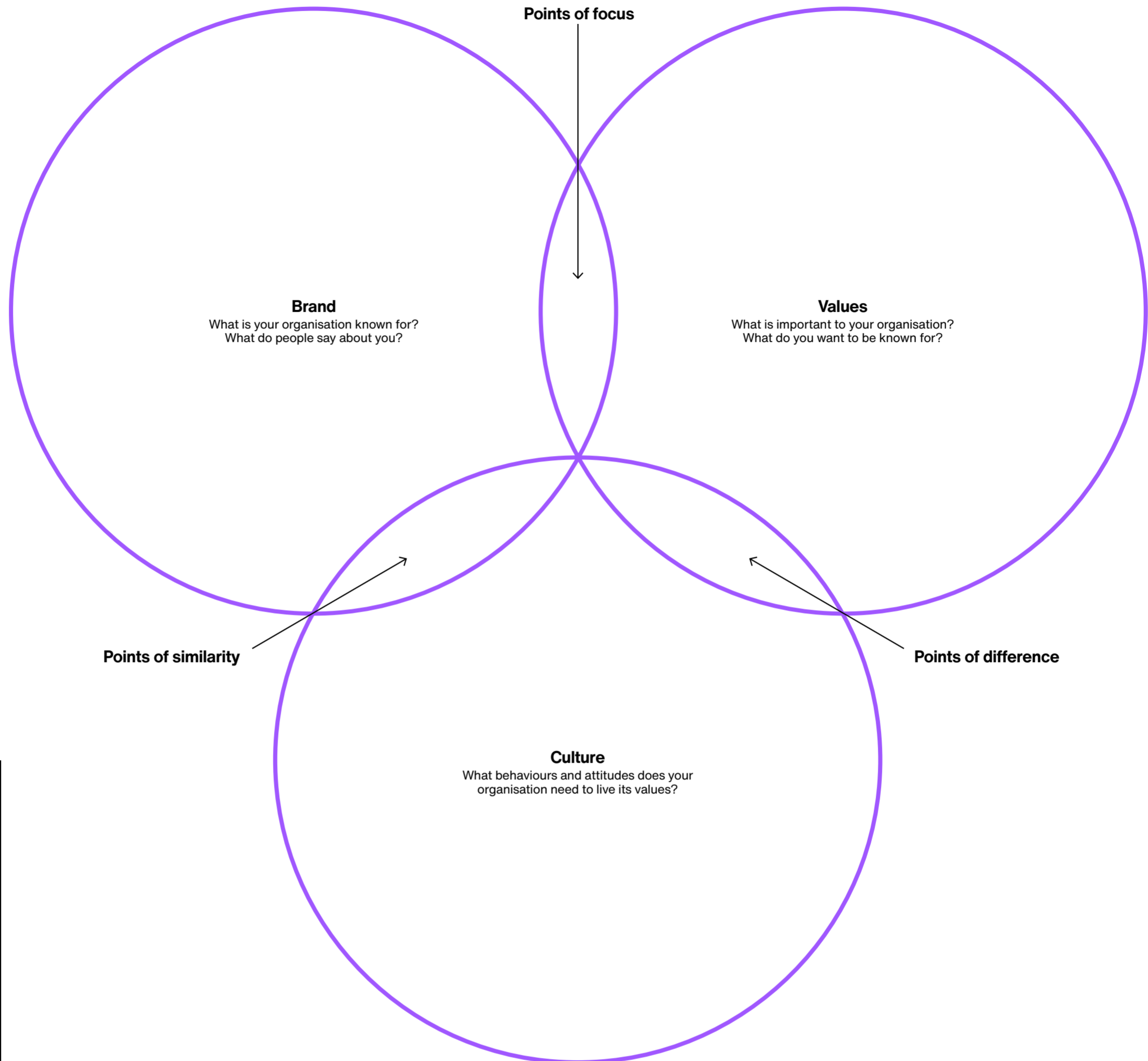
**Don't expect to get it right all the time**  
With passion, comes energy and drive. This is a pattern that can be hugely helpful to the organisation. However, there are natural ebbs and flows. Too often we talk about learning from the mistakes or the downturns, but we practice totally ignoring them. Leaders need to show that they don't always hit their mark and demonstrate the positive benefits of reflection.

5

**Keep the focus**  
With passion comes focus and often at an effortless level. Given that nothing comes in one uninterrupted slice (particularly over the course of an organisation's life), then sustaining individual and by default organisational focus on some core issues is critical to success. No one ever achieved a major breakthrough by being 'mildly interested'.

## Your aligned brand and culture model

Use the model on the right to take a quick overview about how aligned your brand and culture is at the moment. Set out the main elements of your current brand. How do external stakeholders see and describe you? Next set out the values of the organisation. What do you stand for? How do you want to be seen and described? Then set out the culture that you need to achieve your values. What attitudes and behaviours do you need? Keep this to the most important points. This will help you identify the points of similarity and difference in the current situation. It will then help you identify where you need to focus for the future.



**A brand is a living entity – and it is enriched or undermined cumulatively over time, the product of a thousand small gestures**

Michael Eisner

## Your three little ideas brand model

Brands are the sum of experiences people have of them. This is how people talk about them and how they are 'overheard'. In other words, they describe your personality. Behaviours 'express' a brand's personality and are underpinned by the ethos of an organisation, which are the values and beliefs that define a community. Successful brands nurture an ethos to attract people that think the same, rationally and emotionally.

Use this chart to define the three ideas that sum up your organisational ethos. You may have more, but it's easier for people to remember three. Keep it simple. Each idea should be short: two or three words. They should capture ideas people understand intuitively. A short descriptor underneath will help explain them further. They can be aspirational, but above all they have to be true. Avoid two temptations. First, ideas that are basic and should be part of any organisation, such as being professional, respectful and honest. And secondly, avoid ideas that suggest you might be covering up something that has been a poor behaviour in the organisation previously. Then test it and refine.

### Core belief How we think

**Idea 1**  
This is what we believe.  
We're looking to connect with people who think similarly

**Idea 2**  
This is what we believe.  
We're looking to connect with people who think similarly

**Idea 3**  
This is what we believe.  
We're looking to connect with people who think similarly

**This is your ethos**  
A blend of values and beliefs that determine how we go about business

### Core behaviour How we are

**Idea 1**  
How we behave is determined by what we believe.  
How do we live out our ethos?

**Idea 2**  
How we behave is determined by what we believe.  
How do we live out our ethos?

**Idea 3**  
How we behave is determined by what we believe.  
How do we live out our ethos?

**These are your principles**  
Guides that help people appreciate what is expected of us

### Core attitude What others say

**Idea 1**  
We rely on others to tell strangers why, how and what we do.  
What we would like people to be saying about us

**Idea 2**  
We rely on others to tell strangers why, how and what we do.  
What we would like people to be saying about us

**Idea 3**  
We rely on others to tell strangers why, how and what we do.  
What we would like people to be saying about us

**This is your personality**  
How we hope to be overheard