

Daniel Coyle: Culture doesn't take you to some higher plain where problems disappear right, you're still human beings frail, making mistakes. They do take you to a higher plain where you actually see those problems early and you can deal with them. You can face toward them, not ignore them.

(Intro Music)

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate, a podcast about achievement, personal growth and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glazer, and I chat with world class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity, and helping others do the same.

Lenox Powell: This episode was previously recorded and published on the Outperform Podcast

Robert Glazer: Today's quote is from the late business management guru Peter Drucker. That is, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Our guest today, Daniel Coyle, has looked inside some of the world's highest performing groups including the U.S. Navy Seal Team Six, Pixar, and the San Antonio Spurs, and lays out what their success has in common in his newest book, The Culture Code. Daniel is also the New York Times best selling author of The Talent Code, The Little Book of Talent, and The Secret Race, which was co-authored with former professional road bicycle racer Tyler Hamilton. He and Hamilton also won the William H. Sports Book of the Year prize in 2012. When he's not churning out award-winning best-selling books, he's a contributing editor for Outside magazine and works as a special advisor to the Cleveland Indians. So Daniel, welcome. Thanks so much for joining us on Outperform today.

Daniel Coyle: Thanks for having me Bob. It's fun to be here with you.

Robert Glazer: Great. First question is did you always know that you wanted to be a writer?

Daniel Coyle: Whoa! No actually, completely did not know that. Didn't have a clue actually. I was absolutely convinced until I was 20 that I was going to be doctor. My dad was a doctor. I knew a lot of doctors. That was ... My windshield was filled with them, and so that was it. But then had a little moment and realized boy what makes my heart beat fast. It was no scalpels. It was not operating rooms. It was that moment in the week when the new edition of Sports Illustrated arrived in my mailbox, and figuring out how those guys did it, and what that was made of, and that different sort of magic of story telling. That's what really caught hold. But I always kept that kind of doctor's, I guess in some ways, my writing career has been about x-raying things and seeing what's underneath the surface, and seeing what makes things tick. So, it's been kind of this mix of science, and journalism, and story telling.

Robert Glazer: So you could have been a radiologist?

Daniel Coyle: Exactly. That was my dad. My dad and my brother, they were both radiologists, so I was right in line.

Robert Glazer: So it just materialized a little differently for you?

Daniel Coyle: That's right. I have a different machine. It's called the pencil.

Robert Glazer: You worked for Outside for 25 years. How did that job come about?

Daniel Coyle: You know they were, I was living in Chicago and they were the only game in town, the coolest game in town. I grew up in Alaska and always really loved the outdoors. The idea that they were, for some strange reason, in downtown Chicago. When I found that out, it ended up being sort of destiny. At the time I was still, I think I got the internship by promising to help deliver the managing editor's baby. She was pregnant and that's why they had to hire interns. I said well I have this premed background so if things go south I can help you deliver the baby. Maybe that's why I got the job. But after getting in there, it was a good time to be there. There was a lot happening, a lot of great writers, a lot of good writing, a lot of creative thought. There were some editors there that I just learned a ton from, so it was fortunate place to be and I've kept up the relationship.

Robert Glazer: I've been really excited to talk with you about culture today as it's a subject I'm passionate about. Before The Culture Code you wrote The Talent Code. I've been curious to ask you was there something in your research in that book that led you to look at culture as an enabler of performance?

Daniel Coyle: Yeah there was. Every book is like a mystery story. You find the biggest, most obsessive mystery you can dig into. About 10 years ago I started looking at these talent hotbeds, these little places around the planet that produce impossible numbers of talented chess players, and mathematicians, and athletes, and business people, and looking at that when you go to these places. It was a book about learning in the brain, it was a book about how individuals get great. Then though you reach the end of that mystery and there's another one, which is hey there's something really cool happening in these places that I can't quite put my finger on. They have this way of interacting, this vibe. We have these words that we use to talk about special places like oh they have a great vibe, or they just have great chemistry, or they have great culture. All those words are kind of interchangeable. I was seeing that in some of these places.

I remember, actually it was at this tennis club in Russia called Spartak. It's produced way more top 20 players than the entire United States actually. There was a new player who showed up, and she was young. She was very shy, she wasn't sure she wanted to be a part of this. I saw the head coach go over to her and say, it just took five seconds, she goes, "Hey, I'm glad you're here." Then she says, "Hey, do something for me," and she has a tennis ball in her hand, and she

tosses the tennis ball to this new kid and the kid catches it. There was something in that interaction that just absolutely blew me away. This girl went from being a scared outsider at this very impressive place to feeling connected, to feeling like part of a tribe. That tennis ball is what sent me on this journey of looking at great cultures around the planet, and seeing where are they, how are they communicating, how are they creating that connection and making people feel deeply connected, getting that vibe of trust and cooperation, all those things that we can sense.

That's not magic. It's sort of seems like magic when you're in a great school, or you're in a great restaurant, or a great family, or a great business, or a great startup. It's like oh they just have it right. Well, it feels like magic, but it's not magic actually. It's this system. It's this process that I got fascinated by figuring out, being a radiologist and saying hey if we could x-ray that, what would that show, what's the pattern that they're following that's clearly lighting up our brains in these extraordinary ways.

Robert Glazer: So when you have a thesis like that for a book, where did you start for The Culture Code?

Daniel Coyle: Yeah, I started with the science. I mean I started digging into all of the research I could around chemistry, cohesion, science. You quickly get into, some of it is kind of incredibly academic and ivory tower, but a lot of it is really fascinating. There's a guy named Richard Hackman out of Harvard who's basically had this, he flew around with different types of teams. He studied orchestras. He studied cockpit crews. You start to dive into that research and you very quickly see these patterns kind of emerge. They have to do with how do people connect. The way that we normally, there's a lot of ... It's funny because there's so many sort of ways that we normally think about culture. We think about leadership, and trust, and integrity, and teamwork, and mission, and values.

You have to sort of purposely strip all of that from your mind and just think of it from this kind of deep evolutionary psychology perspective. Where okay you've got this one group of people and they're all sort of all over the place, what gets them to act like one group. Just strip away all the words like trust and teamwork and everything, and just look at the function, what functions are happening. It becomes really apparent there's just a few. There's really just, one function is how do they connect, like how do they get from this scattering to a single group. Then the next question is how do they share information, how do they cooperate. Now that they're connected, okay they're connected, how do they share information, what triggers that. Then the third thing is like direction, like how do they know where to go, how do they know what's important and what's not important.

Whether you're talking about a flock of birds, a school of fish, Navy Seals, Pixar, they've all got to do those three basic functions. It's like this deep grammar, it's like this deep grammar of cohesion. These signals are being sent and received,

and we are built, evolution has built us to respond to these signals of connection, of cooperation, and of direction.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and so can you walk through the three universal rules that you found across all of the organizations that you looked at?

Daniel Coyle: Yeah. It was, there's sort of three and you can kind of think of them as a grammar. It's like this deep language of signaling. It's about, it's not about what you say, it's about behaviors. It's called, they're signaling behaviors. They're behaviors that send up a strong signal. The first behavior that sends a strong signal is safety, signaling that you are safe, that we are safe here. Sending a simple, quick behavioral signal that shows you see someone, that your futures are connected, and those signals, we typically think of safety as something that kind of descends, certain groups have, certain groups don't. They get delivered in really clear moments. The science is kind of isolated. You can isolate specific moments, specific signals that create that kind of connection that we think of as a family type connection. That's the connection, the signals of safety.

The second rule is sharing vulnerability. How do human beings exchange information, they send signals of openness. They send signals of openness. That signal, and which is a weird one because normally you think of high performing groups you think of people who are confident, you think of people who know the answer, who are experts, and who aren't hesitating and being vulnerable. When you dig into those groups, when you spend time with them, you see that they are constantly creating these signals of mutual vulnerability, admitting weakness, confessing problems, telling the truth about themselves and about the other people. That operates in kind of a loop. So sharing vulnerability. It's not enough for one person to do it. Both people have to sort of share the vulnerability. The whole group has to do it.

Then the third set of signals has to do with direction, what way are we going, what's important. Groups that are successful about that are really, really good at over establishing purpose. It's flooding the windshield with these really clear metaphors, stories, language that drives attention and behavior in a specific direction. Those are the three. You can kind of think of them as really on a functional level. We've got to connect. We're human, we have an algorithm in our brain that responds to signals of safety. We want to share information. If we want to work well together, that's where vulnerability is that trigger. Then we have this way of where are we going together, and that's where purpose is the trigger.

This sort of deep grammar of connection that all these places share and speak, and that culture is something that typically people look on it as a soft skill, that it's something that is a nuance and it's really unique to each group. That's deeply untrue. I mean it's not a soft skill. All of these are about clarity actually. It's about really being really clear. When you're around a good culture, they are really clear with their signaling. It's not individual to each group, it's this sort of much more universal language that has to happen over and over again. It's

these signals. For a good visual, you can kind of picture a flock of birds moving through the sky, navigating the tree scape all together. They're always sending signals of connection. They're always cooperating. They're always sort of know where each other is. They're not hiding from each other. Then they're also moving in the same direction. If you think about that, culture is about being simple and clear.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Patrick Lencioni writes a lot around clarity and how that affects organizational performance, just making sure that everyone understands what the game is being played. We've always had a lot of value about that. You talked about safety, safety and belonging, is that sort of one in the same because I know you talked about belonging?

Daniel Coyle: Yup. Safety creates belonging.

Robert Glazer: So it precedes belonging. One of the things I think was really interesting in the book that you said that a lot of groups perceive that trust precedes vulnerability, but it's actually vulnerability that creates trust, and that the leader sets the tone for that. Right?

Daniel Coyle: It's so weird. You normally think okay I'm going to trust you before I'm going to be vulnerable. That's how we normally think of it. But as these groups show us, and as the science shows us, we have it exactly backwards. Vulnerability, moments of vulnerability create trust. When I was visiting the leaders of these different groups they were extraordinary about sending signals of openness. When I was at Pixar I was walking around with Ed Catmull, who's the head of Pixar. At one point we're walking through this gorgeous building and I said, "Hey, this is like the coolest building I've ever been in." He turns and looks me dead in the eye and says, "Actually this building was a huge mistake."

Robert Glazer: I remember that.

Daniel Coyle: Really? Huge mistake. Then he sort of started talking about it. He starts listing the ways in which they made a mistake. The hallways are too narrow, and the atrium is in the wrong spot, and the biggest mistake though is that we spent all this money and we didn't realize we were making a mistake. Just incredible openness that is stunning when you're around it, but it sends, and it sends this really powerful signal that hey we tell each other the truth here, and I want you to tell me the truth. That signal of openness is really a strength. In most places people have a, I know Robert Kegan calls it, a secret second job. It's like most places you have a secret second job maintaining your status. That's what you spend a ton of time and energy thinking about, and worrying about, and behaving about. In places where there's safety they have bandwidth to do extra stuff because they're not spending it on this other stuff, this other stuff of saying oh I'm not sure if I trust you, so I'm going to spend all this energy maintaining my status.

Robert Glazer: How much does information play into this? I'm curious, in the businesses maybe that you looked at even outside the book, did the majority lean towards more open book principles and free sharing of information versus kind of closed and secretive?

Daniel Coyle: It depended on the structure of the business. Sometimes there are certain structures in businesses that make sharing difficult, but for the most part they were definitely bias toward that. I mean when we think about vulnerability and trust, we often think of the emotional component. That oh it's this painful emotion. It's true, there is definitely an emotional component to those moments of saying hey I screwed up here, but the deeper reason for it is not emotional. The deeper reason for it is informational. It's so that we can build a shared mental model of what we're doing together. We can't operate if we're hiding stuff from each other. Those groups, that's why they biased a bit toward over sharing in some ways. You often see stand up meetings, quick meetings, interdepartmental, where it's just designed to create awareness of what's going on in the company. Not necessarily to make a decision or anything else like that, but it's more like a dashboard. Okay here's what we're working on, here's what you're working on, and you're working on, just so everybody has got that shared awareness of what's happening and that context that can drive good decisions.

Robert Glazer: One of the examples, moving away from business, that I thought was really interesting in the book, you said when the computers crunched all the data and looked for coaches, equivalent to sort of baseball wins above replacement, when looking for coaches who won more games than they should have based on their talent, that Gregg Popovich came above and beyond everyone else. No Bill Belichick I was sad to see. But can you give us a sense of what, in your time with them, what does he do so well? I sensed a little bit of Brad Stevens in Gregg Popovich, but what do these coaches do incredibly well who seem to just make wins out of whatever talent that they have?

Daniel Coyle: Yeah we often think that there's a dichotomy between I'm either going to be tough, or I'm going to be nice. I have to choose as a leader whether or not I'm going to be a tough style or a nice style. What was stunning about Popovich is he did both. As one of the assistant coaches summed up, he's like Pop does two things: he loves you to death and he tells you the truth. That is so ... I was captured when I spent time there. They lost the game the night before I came. They lost a big game to Oklahoma City. First thing Popovich does walking on the court is he goes right to the guy who missed the big shot last night, and starts talking about the dinner that Pop had arranged for the player and his wife, and the wine that Pop had ordered for the player and his wife. Just they use food as this incredible vehicle of connection over and over again, where they eat together more often than most families.

Then instead of watching game film, they go in to watch game film and up pops a CNN documentary about the Civil Rights Act, and Pop starts asking them what would you have done. This incredible curiosity about them, and about them as a whole person, as a person who enjoys dinner with their wife, and a person who

thinks about civil rights. It was stunning. He was much more than a coach. He loved them to death and he told them the truth. Those things went together. We're wrong about nice and tough. We shouldn't divide them. Actually, if you are really, really loving and really, really, really high standards, those things can match up. Not to say it's without challenges. Not to say that any of these places have it completely figured out. Basketball fans out there know that San Antonio has had their difficulties this year, and some of it has been around cultural questions, players who have kind of checked out, one player in particular. But the thing that struck me about great cultures is that they're not immune to problems. In fact, they're probably more in tune with their own problems than anybody else is.

Culture doesn't take you to some higher plain where problems disappear. You're still human beings, frail, making mistakes. They do take you to a higher plain where you actually see those problems early and you can deal with them. You can face toward them, not ignore them. Rather than being governed by the tensions, you can govern the tensions a little bit. I had sort of gone in it with the thought that oh no when you get to Pixar and Navy Seal Team Six all the tensions disappear and everybody's walking on clouds. It's like no, not at all in fact. They have harder conversations, more candor, and more conflict is actually a sign of a culture that might be more in touch with what's really going on, a stronger culture where it's safe to disagree.

Robert Glazer:

You know there's some themes that I've seen in different leadership writings across the year where when and how ... So the loving and tough, is there some time themes you saw? When are they tough and when are they supportive? When do you pat them on the back, and when are you doing you're yelling? Is there anything consistent that you've seen in terms of how that's delivered?

Daniel Coyle:

Yeah. The pat on the back is sort of like first. It's always first. You always see the whole person first. When it comes to those moments of intense truth telling, I think they're delivered with a lot of intent. It's delivered in a context of lots of signals of connection, lots of signals of support, and kind of high octane very clear signals. Those signals of toughness are always delivered in kind of a social context. Like hey we have high standards here. I'm not picking you out. In fact, there was this Stanford study that I wrote about in the book a little bit, and they determined that the most effective feedback, they called it magical feedback, was really simple. It was where they explained the reasons giving the feedback. The feedback is something like hey I'm giving you this feedback because we have high standards here and I believe you can reach those standards. It's like always these messages of warm candor, where they're saying hey I've got a tough truth, and the reason I'm giving you this is because we're all connected and we're all trying to get to some tough place together. It's hard to solve, we're solving tough problems. Nothing here is easy. There is that sense of always that dual message. I call it a dual message of connection and candor.

Actually there was a waitress on her first day at this great restaurant, Union Square Café, it's like the Pixar restaurant, very good restaurant, very high quality

staff. The manager came over, and the woman had been training like six months for this moment, and the manger came over right before she was about to go out and said, "Hey, if you don't ask me for help 10 times today, it's going to be tough." Which was kind of a hell of a message right, but really it was truth. Really ask for, you're going to mess up 10 times today for sure, that's just what's going to happen, but look for me. That dual message is what's powerful where it's not just ... He could have said you're going to get head handed to you today. That would have been true, but it wouldn't have been connective. This message of truth plus connection seems to be the one, the sweet spot to land in.

Robert Glazer: I also read, there was a book years ago by one of my college professors called The Leadership Moment. He talked about how a lot of the feedback, Joe Torre got all over his players when they were up 10-1, to do something right, and to not run to the base late, and to make the little play, but whenever anyone made a mistake that was not when he got on them. Similarly they saw that most of the people actually die on the way down from Everest when everyone is kind of lackadaisical and letting go, and not when they're in the heightened sense and need the encouragement on the way up. There's probably some DNA of that in here in terms of how and when you deliver the right messages. But I wrote down that line after your book, the "we have high standards here and I know you can meet them," because I think that's incredibly powerful and is very similar to what we're going for from a DNA. I was thinking that's sort of a great new hire talking point.

Daniel Coyle: Yeah. Right, right, to set that bar and make it really clear. Just because you're trying to be excellent doesn't mean you can't connect. That old choice you face all the time when you're managing a group of people, you kind of have that choice between progress, being tough, making the progress and being productive, and stopping and pressing pause, and going back and connecting with your people. It seems to me that the good cultures always, whenever they're faced with that dilemma, will bias toward people rather than bias toward progress. If there's a tension, if there's a big project to happen, if there's all this progress that has to happen, they're constantly attending to the team dynamics along with trying to make progress. To me that's another sort of deep pattern that emerges. That there's never a point where they say screw it, we've got to make this deadline, do whatever you can. They always are saying hey what do we need to do to support our people, how's the team doing. They're always checking in to see if they're in a good spot and how they can help.

Robert Glazer: Great. Thanks Daniel. We're going to take a quick break for a message from our sponsor, and we'll be right back.

Adam Grant: Hi, I'm Adam Grant. As a Wharton psychologist I've spent most of my career studying two big questions: how do we unlock original thinking and build cultures of productive generosity. With those questions in mind, I recently co-founded a pretty extraordinary community dedicated to discovering ground breaking ideas while trying to make the world a better place. It's called The Next Big Idea Club. Together my friends Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Cain, Dan Pink, and

I search far and wide for the eight most original, most essential non-fiction books of the year, and we send them straight to you. We also interview the authors, and we send you the key insights across video, audio and text formats. Remember, this is a book club, so when you join the exclusive online forum you get the chance to discuss every season's selections not just with other members, but also with me, Malcolm, Susan, and Dan.

Robert Glazer: Get insider insights from Dan Pink, Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Keen, and Adam Grant, and sign up for The Next Big Idea Club today at www.nextbigideaclub.com/10off, and get 10% off your subscription.

All right, welcome back everyone. Daniel, before the break you mentioned a few times working with Navy Seal Team Six. The environment they work in is far from safe, so I'd love to hear some of the insights that you learned about how they create safety and a strong culture in the types of environments that they operate in.

Daniel Coyle: Yeah. No it's incredible to see the way they solve problems and the way, how unmilitary it is. I guess when I went in I thought oh there's going to be very confident commanders who really know all the answers. With Seal Tim Six I found kind of the opposite. I went to the Navy Seals and I started asking around, like who's the best Team Six leader you know, and I kept hearing the same name over and over again. People said you've got to talk to Dave Cooper, Dave Cooper, Dave Cooper. Dave Cooper, who had recently retired so he could talk, was the guy who trained Seal Team Six. He was not the best shot, he was not the best swimmer, he was not the best in shape, he was not the best at close quarters combat, but he was the best at creating this incredible cohesion.

His story was fascinating in and of itself. He had some run ins with authority figures in the military and had realized the supreme importance of leaders who admit weakness. In fact, he said the most important four words a leader can say is I screwed that up. With his teams, there's this authoritarian default that we all go to when the person in charge walks in the room, he would go so far out of his way, in fact he would forbid the people to call him commander. He would constantly sort of end or leave his speech with, I might be wrong here, anybody have any ideas. He would constantly look for reasons for himself to sort of disappear to see how the team would function on its own. Always tending to the team dynamic and sending a persistent signal that they owned it, that they owned the best ideas, that they owned the worst ideas.

They had this wonderful cultural calisthenic on the Seals team that really brought this home. For me, it's like the one thing that any group out there could do. It's so easy to do, and it's so powerful, and it's called an AAR, an after action review. In the Seals that manifests itself by whenever they finish a training mission, whenever they finish any kind of a mission, the first thing they do, before they sleep, before they have a meal, is they circle up and they talk about how it went. Where did we fall apart, where was it good, where was it bad, what are we going to do differently next time.

They're really actually hard meetings to have because you just finished this thing and the last thing you want to do is go back and watch the tape together and admit fault and confront the weaknesses. You want to gloss over it. You all came back, you survived, whatever it was, but to actually go back and face that, own that, and to try a build a shared mental model of what really happened is incredibly powerful, but most groups don't do it. Whenever we finish a project with a group, whether it's any kind of project, there's a tendency to high five and walk away, just tell everybody good job, good job. But to actually sit down and to go over in detail what went well, what didn't go well, and what you can do differently next time.

It's funny actually because as part of these conversations there was an opportunity recently for some Seals to come observe heart surgeons at the Cleveland Clinic. There was a bunch of Seals that came in. The heart surgeons did this intricate aneurism fix with 11 people, 11 nurses and doctors working on this one patient. The Seals watched, and then the doctors finished, and then the doctors went over to the Seals and said, "Hey," these are some of the best surgeons in the world, they said "Hey what did you think? What did you notice of the way our team worked together?" The Seals just did a face palm. I mean they just put their heads in their hands and they said, "We can't believe that you guys would do this incredibly intricate operation with 11 people doing all different things and you'd finish and you'd just walk away, and you wouldn't stop, press pause, and do an AAR, do an after action review, and just talk about what went well and what didn't go well. How are you going to learn together if you don't do that?"

To their credit, the surgeons really got it, and now they do them. It's such a simple thing, but it's such a powerful tool. To me, that constant sort of, to think of in terms of cultural calisthenics, we understand in our bodies that if we are going to be healthy and strong we need to have moments where we feel pain. If you go to the gym and you don't hurt, or if you run and you're not hurting at all, you're not getting better. Actually, that's how it is with these AARs and these other moments, these calisthenic moments that are kind of painful, like they kind of suck, but they bring this huge amount of gain because the next time that group encounters something they're building a shared mental model of what works and what doesn't work, and not having misunderstanding fester. It's clarity to go back to the first word we started with. It's really about creating clarity.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Everyone knows what the game is. Two thoughts on what you said there. One is we actually have a policy of doing debriefs as a company when a whole bunch of certain situation happen. People have to write them up and share them with the company. They've been a huge sense of learning. We said look it's fine to make a mistake, but let your mistake be the guide for someone else.

Daniel Coyle: Right.

Robert Glazer: The other was, and it was a story I hadn't heard before. You talked about in the book how the Osama Bin Laden and the Seal Team Six, that they were really worried about this new helicopter. This is the one that went down and had the problems. So they trained and practiced a thousand different times, and debriefed and went through it. That sounded like without that that mission might have had a very different outcome. I mean I heard about the helicopter tangentially, but you really went into what happened behind the scenes there.

Daniel Coyle: I love that story so much. I mean for me, we all know the story of the raid, but the real story of the raid is how they trained. Dave Cooper didn't trust the helicopters. He knew they were new. He knew they hadn't been tested in combat. So when it came time to train, and they trained over and over again in North Carolina and Afghanistan in mock ups of the full compound, he repeatedly trained for downed helicopter scenarios, and after each one they did an AAR. They were building this incredible group mind, this model, which looks like magic when it plays out, but it's not magic. They built it over and over again with quality reps and quality AARs. On the night, the helicopter goes down, and boom they have no problem. They solve it all in 39 minutes as if it never happened. It was because they had made themselves vulnerable, and that's why they were strong.

Robert Glazer: This is a thing that I think business leaders really need to key themselves into. When you hear these examples from different industries where the training time to I'll say on stage time is 10 or 100 to 1, and it's just why they're ready. We had the Southwest plane a few weeks ago, I just wrote about it last week, and it was a pilot who practices landing on one engine for 20 years without ever needing that skill, and probably most pilots don't ever need it. Then the moment that she needs it, she has it. I just think in business we don't even practice on a one to one ratio the things that we're going to do before we do them.

Daniel Coyle: That's right. That's right. I mean the value of a quality rep is unbelievable. To have a culture that supports not only the rep, but the learning that goes alongside it is incredibly powerful.

Robert Glazer: One of the things that we're all fighting with in culture is the Silicon Valley brand of culture, which makes people think that a great culture is ping pong tables, and free food, and massage, and a lot of superficial benefits. Particularly after listening to everything you said here, how do we change the vernacular around that? How do we get that to be relabeled in terms of what culture is and what culture isn't?

Daniel Coyle: Yeah, I think you can divide all these kinds of activities into two layers. On the top there's shallow engagement, shallow fun. That's your ping pong table. That's your beers after work. That's these kind of light, genuinely delightful methods of interaction and modes of interaction. It's great. It's a blast to play ping pong at work. That's incredibly fun. It has meaning, but there is another layer beneath it that people do not employ nearly enough, and there's some fascinating

research by a guy named Eli Morgan on this. You can call it deep fun, deep engagement. That is when people are involved in the planning for activities, and involved in the experience of living in the organization. Where instead of sort of just playing ping pong, you're saying hey we're going to have a hackathon and we're going to rebuild our HR function. Or we're going to give this group a budget and they're going to redesign half of our office space. Where they get involved in the planning and execution of the daily life in that organization.

Because it changes the identity of the people there. They're no longer just sort of a customer at Six Flags enjoying the perks. They're actually involved in the building of the perks and the building of the rest of the experience there. That's the pattern that I saw in smarter cultures is that willingness among leadership to be vulnerable and to really share some of those leadership functions with everybody. The place that conversation starts can often be the conversation about culture. To sort of create conversations about who are we, where are we going, what do you think. Culture emerges from those conversations. It's not something that gets dictated from the top down. We constantly seeking a deeper level of engagement and deeper conversations about who we are and where we're going, and who can help us get there is a path to our deep engagement, so fewer bean bags, more great conversations.

Robert Glazer: It is implicit in all these great cultures that anyone is allowed to call out something that is inconsistent with the stated culture?

Daniel Coyle: Yes, it is. It really is. It's hard to do. It's incredibly hard to do. It is implicit, incredibly hard to do. Not just things that are inconsistent, but just call out anything anywhere. You actually give people a platform, and most of them have got weekly meetings where people are encouraged to speak up. It's incredibly powerful when people do to call out things and question things, and try to, and make suggestions. [inaudible 00:33:00] got another sort of calisthenic function in terms of creating voice, of saying it could be incredibly powerful to have somebody speak up. Smart cultures sort of go out of their way to create those moments and embrace those moments.

Robert Glazer: If you have a leader and they have a new team, or a newish team, what did you discover in your research that they can do to try to build trust and cohesiveness quickly?

Daniel Coyle: I think the first day, I mean we're wired to respond to that first, really forget first day, how about first hour. I think sort of scripting that first hour so that you are clearly opening up to them and allowing them to open up to you a little bit. I saw it done pretty well at Pixar where basically first day everybody, if you're a barista, if you're a coder, if you're a director, you go get in the auditorium, sit in the fifth row because that's where directors sit apparently, and then the president of Pixar comes up and says, "Hey whatever you did before, you're a movie maker now. We need you to help make our films better." That's it. This expression of openness and need. Then of course they go to a meeting, a daily meeting, where they show a clip of the previous day's footage and anybody in

the company can speak up and make improvements to it. They call it [plussing 00:34:11].

That sort of pattern of everybody together, solving hard problems together in kind of a flat way ends up repeating itself over and over and over again. It's not enough to send that signal once. That signal has to be embedded in all of the interactions. It's impossible to script it for kind of a universal way, but I would say there are a few basic ingredients there. One is that deep connection of personal safety with the leadership. So you really get to know them and they really get to know you, and you're sending a clear signal of connection and safety. The other one is about meaning. What is this group about, what stories, experiences, capture what this group is about. I know there's a basketball team, the Oklahoma City Thunder. On the first day the general manager takes the players to the bombing memorial from the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing where all these 200 people died. They walk around the memorial together to give the players a better sense of this community and what they've been through.

Stuff like that I think gives, is an incredible opportunity that doesn't have anything to do with work. It has more to do with life, and the communities of people in which you work. It can be incredibly powerful. That sort of connection, safety, openness, vulnerability, and then a shot, a real clear hit of larger meaning, what's this all about. That would make for a pretty good first hour.

Robert Glazer: When we have a lot of people start, and I do this sort of cultural onboarding, I ask them sort how it compares to past experiences. We had someone last week talk about how the core values were all over the walls, all over everything, and then no one ever spoke about them or talked about them in the two years at the company, or explained the tangibility. I'm curious if you could answer this question, but do you think, what is more dangerous, a consistently poor culture, or a culture that says one thing and does another? Like says we love feedback, and then makes it really clear that they don't want feedback.

Daniel Coyle: Oh my God. I would say B is worse. I would say B is a lot worse because it opens up the door to any kind of hypocrisy, to any kind of bad behavior. Cluelessness is better than hypocrisy I would say as a general rule. But you're right, those are all over the place.

Robert Glazer: So being consistently poor.

Daniel Coyle: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: I was not a big fan of core values five six years ago. I didn't believe in it because what I knew of it was the pictures hanging on the wall. Then I just found some companies that had really operationalized it, and realized that was a different thing. But I would say it's 80% to 90% of companies feel so great when they get their little picture done and hang it on the wall, and it's literally never discussed again.

Daniel Coyle: That's right. That's right. It's about the behavior, it's not about these words. The words are useful. They could be a North Star at times, but man oh man the ... It's interesting because if you distilled all the value statements of so many companies, they're all kind of the same. They're mostly, nobody's going to be no we're not about high quality, or we're not about good relationships, or we're not about creativity. They're all kind of about those same things over and over again, so it's not so much that word, or that mission statement, but I think there's so many opportunities with the story telling, and the behaviors, and the habits that you do that's so much powerful than a word on the wall.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. I think one of the most amazing things you had in the book, it actually gave me a little bit of chill, was when Johnson & Johnson had the Tylenol and the Cyanide scandal. The press release explaining the recall started with quoting their 100 year old credo literally word for word.

Daniel Coyle: Yeah. That's right. Incredible. I mean they had built such a clear North Star that when this crisis happened, and any culture can function when there's no crisis, but when there's a crisis what does the group do. They had done such a marvelous job of creating this real clear North Star that everyone could behave with this extraordinary cohesion because they knew where north was. The north was the health of their user. So when this crisis happens they don't have to hesitate. They don't have to talk. They don't have to think. They simply have to behave in a way that's consistent. But what we typically underrate is ... Because having that conversation in the four years prior is really a difficult crusade to go on for this leader who did it, this guy James Burke. That role of somebody in your company who is constantly creating the culture conversation to me seems to be one of the more undervalued roles and impacts that somebody could make. That is going to be the person that everybody has in their head. That's going to be the value that everybody turns to when there's a crisis. Having that conversation before and continually is incredibly useful.

Robert Glazer: So here's the million dollar question then. Why if Peter Drucker talked about this, people have read about Southwest, Herb Kelleher, your book, why if everyone knows that the science says the culture is the differentiator, why do so few companies act upon that?

Daniel Coyle: Because our brains are designed to screw us up in this department. We're status oriented creatures, and we're constantly worried about our safety. That's how evolution was built. Evolution wasn't built with corporations and teams. It was built on much more tenuous ground. So we have all these alarm systems in our head, and all these that are designed to help us actually. When you get a signal that you're not safe, it's millions of year of evolution say hey you're not safe, maybe you should make a run for it. That worked until the last few hundred years. and so now we've got these stone age brains inside sleek modern corporations and they're getting signals. You have to, that's why everything in the end ends up being about these very fundamental tribal moments where people can say hey you're safe, hey we admit weakness here, and that it's something that is incredibly difficult to scale in the end. It's really about being a

room with someone that you connect with and that you like solving hard problems with.

These problems are not going to go away. As we were talking about a little bit before, having a great culture does not mean problems go away. Having a strong culture means that you can control them a little bit more, you can anticipate them, you can deal with them when they occur, but it is ... If you're looking for a reason why this is still and will continue to be persistently challenging terrain, it's just because of the disconnect between our stone age brain and our modern workspace.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, one that's not likely to be reconciled any time soon.

Daniel Coyle: I don't think so.

Robert Glazer: Based on evolution. So looking back in all of your roles, whether it's working on a team, editor, role as a consultant, I'm curious now if there's a time when you can clearly identify when you failed to follow one of these culture building principles?

Daniel Coyle: Oh my God like my whole life. I think that's one of the reasons that it was so clear to me I desperately needed it at so many junctions in my life. One that pops right to mind is when I was in school I had to be the editor of this project. It was a big magazine project that took months. You had a whole staff and everybody making a magazine. I was kind of in charge of it, and I was awful. I couldn't figure out why it wasn't working. I was kind of focused on my own expertise. At the time the model of leadership I had in my head was like captain of the ship, like I steer the boat and I tell everybody where to go. That did not work well because I never created any kind of a safe connection where people understood what we were doing together, or I never sent a signal of hey I don't have all the answers here please help me. I was all about being smart, and that ended up just making the project incredibly painful and difficult, and we got a less far less than optimal result.

I find myself thinking about that a lot over the years. God, if I had only had a better model in my head we might not have made such a horrible [crosstalk 00:42:05].

Robert Glazer: And had this book.

Daniel Coyle: Yeah, if someone had written this book. Exactly.

Robert Glazer: Reminds me of that scene in the movie What About Bob when the therapist is looking around for a book and he has 200 of his own book on the shelf saying what's that book. I think I know a good book that could help you.

Daniel Coyle: That's it.

Robert Glazer: Any clues for our listeners on your next book?

Daniel Coyle: I don't know. I'm still kind of playing around with a few different ideas. I don't have anything too particular at this moment, but it's fun. What's fun is the conversations like this one that writing a book can lead you into. I know that I'm admiring what I'm hearing about what you're doing, and it's just cool to be a part of a community like this that can knock around ideas and see what comes of it.

Robert Glazer: Yeah you know one of the things, not to point you in any direction, but I've had this discussion with a lot of authors where I think a lot of the examples used in some of the business books tend to be larger organizations. It's interesting because I'm seeing a lot of the small and medium size organizations have founders that are willing to jump in and make changes, and have far fewer resources. I think it would be interesting in some way to look at what's going on in sort of the SMB landscape in terms of the types of things that are out there, and how people are able to do things with far fewer resources than some of the larger organizations.

Daniel Coyle: That's interesting. Right. There's something quite tribal about that scale that's really powerful. Ultimately, somebody told me once, culture is the 15 feet around you. That is kind of the most high density area signaling that we're built to do, and use, and take advantage of, and employ. That is kind of dispiriting on one hand, but it's also kind of empowering too. If we can control this 15 feet and make everyone really connected, cohesive, and open, you can be quite a lever to make things happen even inside a larger organization.

Robert Glazer: I agree. Well Daniel, where can people find more about you and your work?

Daniel Coyle: Yeah, I have a website called danielcoyle.com. That's not a bad place to go. There's an email on there. If you just hit it, it comes to my email. If anybody wants to chat, please feel more than free.

Robert Glazer: All right Dan, thanks so much for joining us on Outperform today, creating a high performance culture and all that involves is something we put a lot of stock in at Acceleration Partners. I really appreciate you coming on to talk about your best-selling book and the research behind it. It's really been an honor having you on with us today.

Daniel Coyle: Hey it's been a blast. Thank you so much for having me.

Robert Glazer: All right, for our listeners we'll include notes from this episode, links to everything that we talked about in here, and to Daniel's books in our show notes. Until next time, keep outperforming.