



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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## Creating a Positive Corporate Culture: An Interview with S. Chris Edmonds

By Brian Pauley

Our world is filled with projects, meetings, spreadsheets and the next big deadline. Leaders have the additional responsibility of leading teams to accomplish everything. With our minds and workdays filled with so much, it is tempting for leaders to overlook a critical responsibility: creating an inspiring, results-achieving work environment. To accomplish this, leaders must pay close attention to culture.

To help us improve here, I'm pleased to interview corporate culture expert, S. Chris Edmonds. Edmonds is the author of the book *#Corporate Culture tweet*. He's the co-author of *Leading at a Higher Level* (revised and expanded edition), *#Positivity at Work tweet* and *#Successful Corporate Learning tweet*. He writes a weekly blog, *Cool Culture*, that you can find on the Web at [www.DrivingResultsThroughCulture.com](http://www.DrivingResultsThroughCulture.com). Chris has been a significant influence on my leadership development, and I'm excited to share his knowledge with the actuarial community.

**BRIAN PAULEY: CHRIS, YOU CLEARLY HAVE A PASSION FOR HELPING PEOPLE IMPROVE THEIR CORPORATE CULTURE. WHERE DID THIS COME FROM?**

**Chris Edmonds:** I learned about the power of values from a best boss back in my nonprofit management days ('80s and early '90s). He aligned our work team to clear values and performance expectations while at the same time held us accountable to them. It was a terrific experience and one that I've been coaching teams and organizations to duplicate in the years since.

**BP: What cultural issues do you commonly find with your clients?**

**CE:** Most clients come to me with engagement issues. They don't define those as "culture" issues. Most senior leaders don't understand the impact that culture has on performance and engagement, so they don't think they have a culture "opportunity."

**BP: Share with us the best culture you have seen. What made it great?**

**CE:** I've seen a number of high-performance, values-aligned cultures, from industries as widely varying as manufacturing, pharma sales and insurance. When I'm able to educate senior leaders about their responsibility to proactively manage



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**S. Chris Edmonds, MHROD,** is a speaker, author and senior consultant with the Ken Blanchard Companies. He is Blanchard's culture expert and has helped numerous clients create a high-performing, values-aligned culture using Blanchard's proven process. He can be reached at [chris@chris-edmonds.com](mailto:chris@chris-edmonds.com). Follow him on Twitter using [@scedmonds](https://twitter.com/scedmonds).

their desired workplace culture, remarkable things happen. A recent example is a division of Wal-Mart, with 300 stores and 85,000 associates. During the recession, Wal-Mart did great globally. This Midwestern division credits our culture change process with helping them boost associate opinion survey scores, customer experience scores and profits, nearly doubling those of any other U.S. division during that time frame.

**BP: What about the worst? What made it challenging?**

**CE:** I've seen too many lousy cultures. The worst case scenarios occur when there are inconsistent performance expectations, inconsistent accountability for performance, no values expectations, and little accountability for values demonstration. It's a free-for-all, everyone for himself or herself. The "I win, you lose" culture creates a cutthroat environment.

**BP: If you had only an hour to drive a team toward a better culture, what would you tackle first?**

**CE:** An hour introduces the concepts—awareness is all that'll happen in 60 minutes. If I can inspire further conversations by educating about best practices of a high-performance, values-aligned work environment, then that's a win.

**BP: You frequently mention these high-performance, values-aligned teams. Explain them to our readers. What makes them particularly effective?**

**CE:** The combination of high performance and values alignment enables teams to demonstrate great productivity along with authentic consideration and cooperation. Teams with "one heart, one mind, one voice" are able to align thinking, efforts and accomplishment to declared opportunities and strategies. In such teams, everyone is looking to do their jobs, help each other, and look for ways

to wow internal and external customers. That's an unusual mix!

**BP: In your writings, you've stated that leaders should spend at least 50 percent of their time on culture-aligned activities. Since most leaders spend a majority of their time on results-aligned activities, I'm sure this is a tough pill to swallow. How do you convince leaders to alter their time allocation so dramatically?**

**CE:** Leaders are doing the best they can. All they know is how to manage production and results, so that's where they put in their time. When their organization's culture focuses so heavily (usually exclusively) on production, that's not a surprise. What I need to accomplish is a shift in leaders' hearts, heads and then hands. When they understand their primary responsibility is to create a safe, inspiring work culture, and they proactively do that (with hours a day invested in connections, communication and praising), productivity grows by leaps and bounds.

**BP: Fire drills seem to be pervasive in company cultures. How can employees reduce firefighting when it is such a strong part of the culture?**

**CE:** Panic isn't pretty in a workplace. Reactionary leadership exhausts leaders and followers. When everything is a dramatic emergency, people grow numb. Team leaders can insulate their staff from a firefighting culture by making things safe, sane and inspiring in their work team, where they can.

**BP: I'm sure a number of readers would love to improve their organization's culture, but would push back that management wouldn't support these efforts. What do you say to those readers?**

**CE:** If you're a leader, create a "pocket of excellence" in your team. As noted already, insulate



your team from the frantic pace and exhausting behaviors embedded in the broader organization's culture. Making your team culture safe and inspiring brings many benefits. If you're a team member, it's not your job to "fix" the team's or organization's culture. Be clear on your personal purpose and your personal values. Stay sane by acting on your purpose and values every day. If your job causes values misalignment, proactively look for another role so you won't have to face that.

**BP:** One of my favorite books is *The Advantage* by Pat Lencioni. He makes the case that being healthy is a competitive advantage that allows a company to tap into its collective smarts. Most companies miss this, thinking their woes are due to the competition beating them out in smart areas such as technology, strategy and finance. How do you think culture fits into the grand scheme of organizational health?

**CE:** I went to grad school with Pat at the University of San Francisco in the mid-'90s—he's a brilliant thinker. I totally support the idea of organizational health as a competitive advantage—we've seen it

time and time again (e.g., Jim Collins and Jerry Porras' *Built to Last*). When an organization's culture treats its members as trusted, respected and valued players, those players apply discretionary energy to opportunity. That energy translates into wowed customers and increased profit. See Tony Simons' *Integrity Dividend*.

Where a culture treats employees as cogs in a wheel without a brain cell, people won't contribute their ideas. Collective smarts is hard to find in those organizations.

**BP:** The Society of Actuaries represents a profession based on specialized technical training. What advice do you want to give to leaders who desire to improve their corporate culture, but work in an environment where subject matter expertise is very highly valued?

**CE:** The folks pressing buttons on those keyboards? Entering data and analyzing results? Human. With hearts, minds, hopes and dreams. Leaders—in any profession—who are able to inspire people's hearts,

**Making your team culture safe and inspiring brings many benefits.**

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heads AND hands create a force of will and good that's pretty awesome to experience.

**BP: What personal development activities can technically focused leaders pursue to make the transition to being stewards of corporate culture?**

**CE:** I don't believe that personal development activities, alone, change behavior—much less create a proactive culture manager. Information is widely available—but knowledge about effective cultures does not equal skills. Find a coach who can get you on the right path and keep you there.

**BP: You have a strong social media presence. How has social media affected your work as a culture consultant?**

**CE:** I really didn't "get" Twitter back in 2009 when I joined. It took a couple of social media

mentors to coach me to understand the power of Twitter communities to drive knowledge, sharing and connection. I've learned—and continue to learn—how to put best practices for #CoolCulture, #ValuesMatter, #PositivityAtWork, and #Leadership into succinct, actionable quotes of 140 characters or less. I see social media as a means of getting what I know out there. My brand is focused on proactive culture management, and social media helps my messaging stay "front of mind." ●