



Culture in Action

The public has been fascinated with the U.S Navy's secret SEAL strike teams ever since one of them, SEAL Team Six Red Squadron, tracked down Osama bin Laden in 2012. The public's eye typically focuses on the modern weaponry, awesome firepower, and sheer bravado of the SEAL operators. At least three books and a hit movie, *Zero Dark Thirty*, each with its own interpretation of that operation, came out in 2013. But beneath the surface of Red Squadron's successful foray is another story, about the culture of Team Six, which has not been fully told.

The books written by SEALs underscore the important contributions of the team's tightly knit culture. The members of Team Six "are bound together not only by sworn oaths, but also by the obligations of their brotherhood" (Pfarer, 2011, p. 28). As one team member described it, "My relationship with Team Six has been more important than my marriage" (Wadsin and Templin, p. 254). Published sources sometimes mention pranks, humor, ritual, and specialized language, but they don't describe in depth the cultural components that create these emotional and spiritual bonds.

This is fairly typical. Descriptions, prescriptions, and theories about improving teamwork often miss the deeper secrets and mysteries of how groups and teams reach the elusive state of grace and peak performance. Former Visa CEO Dee Hock captured the heart of the issue: "In the field of group endeavor, you will see incredible events in which the group performs far beyond the sum of

its individual talents. It happens in the symphony, in the ballet, in the theater, in sports, and equally in business. It is easy to recognize and impossible to define. It is a mystique. It cannot be achieved without immense effort, training, and cooperation, but effort, training, and cooperation alone rarely create it" (quoted in Schlesinger, Eccles, and Gabarro, 1983, p. 173).

With a population of only slightly more than two million people in the 1770s, how was the United States able to produce an extraordinary leadership team that included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington? In World War II, did anyone believe that Britain's Royal Air Force could defend the island nation against Hitler's Luftwaffe? As Winston Churchill later commented, "Never have so many owed so much to so few."

Did anyone expect the Iraqi soccer team to take home the Asian Cup in 2007? With all the turmoil and strife at the time in Iraq, it is hard to picture the country even fielding a team. And how could two graduate students who came from opposite ends of the earth (Michigan and Moscow), and who initially didn't like one another, create a company whose name—Google—became a global household word?

Are such peak performances simply a great mystery—beautiful when they happen but no more predictable or controllable than California's next earthquake? In this chapter, we scrutinize a classic case of a team that achieved a state of transcendence. Tracy Kidder spent a year embedded in a group of engineers, intimately observing it in operation. The story takes us directly to the symbolic roots of flow, spirit, and magic.

THE EAGLE GROUP'S SOURCES OF SUCCESS

Tracy Kidder's *Soul of a New Machine* (1981) is the dazzling account of the time he spent at the minicomputer firm Data General in the 1970s with a group of engineers who created a new computer in record time. Despite scant resources and limited support, the Eagle Group outperformed all other Data General divisions to produce a new state-of-the-art machine. The technology they developed is now antiquated, but lessons drawn from how they pulled it off are as current as ever. (Unless otherwise attributed, page number citations in this chapter are to Kidder's book.)

Why did the Eagle Group succeed? So many groups of engineers—or educators, physicians, executives, or graduate students—start out with high hopes but falter and fail.

Were the project members extraordinarily talented? Not really. Each was highly skilled, but there were equally talented engineers working on other Data General projects.

Were team members treated with dignity and respect? Quite the contrary. As one engineer noted, "No one ever pats anyone on the back" (p. 179). Instead, the group experienced what they called mushroom management: "Put 'em in the dark, feed 'em shit, and watch 'em grow" (p. 109). For over a year, group members jeopardized their health, their families, and their careers: "I'm flat out by definition. I'm a mess. It's terrible. It's a lot of fun" (p. 119).

Were financial rewards a motivating factor? Group members said explicitly that they did not work for money. Nor were they motivated by fame. Heroic efforts were rewarded neither by formal appreciation nor by official applause. The group quietly dissolved shortly after completing the new computer, and most members moved unrecognized to other parts of Data General, or to other companies. Their experience fits later successes at Cisco Systems, about which Paulson concludes, "All personnel are driven by the desire to be a part of a winning organization" (2001, p. 187).

Perhaps the group's structure accounted for its success. Were its members pursuing well-defined and laudable goals? The group leader, Tom West, offered the precept that "not everything worth doing is worth doing well." Pushed to translate his maxim, he elaborated, "If you can do a quick-and-dirty job and it works, do it" (p. 119). Did the group have clear and well-coordinated roles and relationships? According to Kidder, it kept no meaningful charts, graphs, or organization tables. One of the group's engineers put it bluntly: "The whole management structure—anyone in Harvard Business School would have barfed" (p. 116).

Can the political frame unravel the secret of the group's phenomenal performance? Perhaps group members were motivated more by power than by money: "There's a big high in here somewhere for me that I don't fully understand. Some of it's a raw power trip. The reason I work is because I win" (p. 179). They were encouraged to circumvent formal channels to advance group interests: "If you can't get what you need from some manager at your level in another department, go to his boss—that's the way to get things done" (p. 191).

Group members were also unusually direct and confrontational: "Feeling sorely provoked, [David] Peck one day said to this engineer, 'You're an asshole.' Ordered by his boss to apologize, Peck went to the man he had insulted, looking sheepish, and said, 'I'm sorry you're an asshole'" (p. 224).

The group was highly competitive with others in the company: "There's a thing you learn at Data General, if you work here for any period of time . . . that nothing ever happens unless you push it" (p. 111). They also competed with one another. Their "tube wars" are a typical example. Carl Alsing, head of a subgroup known as the Microkids, returned from lunch one day to find that all his files had become empty shells: the names were there, but the contents had vanished. It took him an hour to find where the real files were. Alsing counterattacked by creating an encrypted file and tantalizing the team, "There's erotic writing in there and if you can find it, you can read it" (p. 107).

Here we begin to encounter the secrets of the group's success. The tube wars—and other exchanges among group members—were more than power struggles. They were a form of play that released tensions, created bonds, and contributed to an unusual group spirit. A shared and cohesive culture, rather than a clear, well-defined structure, was the invisible force that gave the team its drive.

From the Eagle Group's experience, we can distill several important tenets of the symbolic frame that are broadly applicable to groups and teams:

- How someone becomes a group member is important.
- Diversity supports a team's competitive advantage.
- Example, not command, holds a team together.
- A specialized language fosters cohesion and commitment.
- Stories carry history and values and reinforce group identity.
- Humor and play reduce tension and encourage creativity.
- Ritual and ceremony lift spirits and reinforce values.
- Informal cultural players contribute disproportionately to their formal roles.
- Soul is the secret of success.

Becoming a Member

Joining a team involves more than a rational decision. It is a mutual choice marked by some form of ritual. In the Eagle Group, the process of becoming a member was called "signing up." When interviewing recruits, Alsing conveyed the message that they were volunteering to climb Mount Everest without a rope despite lacking the "right stuff" to keep up with other climbers. When the new recruits protested

they wanted to climb Mount Everest anyway, Alsing told them they would first have to find out whether they were good enough. After the selections were made, Alsing summed it up this way: "It was kind of like recruiting for a suicide mission. You're gonna die, but you're gonna die in glory" (p. 66).

Through the signing-up ritual, an engineer became part of a special effort and agreed to forsake family, friends, and health to accomplish the impossible. It was a sacred declaration: "I want to do this job and I'll give it my heart and soul" (p. 63).

Diversity Is a Competitive Advantage

Though nearly all the group's members were engineers, each had unique skills and style. Tom West, the group's leader, was by reputation a highly talented technical debugger. He was also aloof and unapproachable, the "Prince of Darkness." Steve Wallach, the group's computer architect, was a highly creative maverick. According to Kidder (p. 75), before accepting West's invitation to join the group, he went to Edson de Castro, the president of Data General, to find out precisely what he'd be working on:

"Okay," Wallach said, "what the fuck do you want?"

"I want a thirty-two-bit Eclipse," de Castro told him.

"If we can do this, you won't cancel it on us?" Wallach asked. "You'll leave us alone?"

"That's what I want, a thirty-two," de Castro assured him, "a thirty-two-bit Eclipse and no mode bit."

Wallach signed up. His love of literature, stories, and verse provided a literary substructure for the technical architecture of the new machine. Alsing, the group's microcode expert, was as warm and approachable as West was cold and remote. He headed the Microkids, the group of young engineers who programmed the new machine. Ed Rasala, Alsing's counterpart, headed the Hardy Boys, the group's hardware design team. Rasala was a solid, hyperactive, risk-taking, detail-oriented mechanic: "I may not be the smartest designer in the world, a CPU giant, but I'm dumb enough to stick with it to the end" (p. 142).

Diversity among the group's other top engineers was evident in specialty as well as personality. One engineer, for example, was viewed as a creative genius who liked inventing an esoteric idea and then trying to make it work. Another was a craftsman who enjoyed fixing things, working tirelessly until the last bug had been tracked down and eliminated.

West buffered the team from upper management interference and served as a group "devil." Wallach created the original design. Alsing and the Microkids created "a synaptic language that would fuse the physical machine with the program that would tell it what to do" (p. 60). Rasala and the Hardy Boys built the physical circuitry. Understandably, there was tension among these diverse, highly specialized individuals and groups. Harnessing the resulting energy galvanized the punts into a working team.

Example, Not Command

Wallach's design generated modest coordination for Eagle's autonomous individuals and groups. The group had some rules but paid little attention to them. Members viewed de Castro, the CEO, as a distant god. He was never there physically, but his presence was. West, the group's official leader, rarely interfered with the actual work, nor was he around in the laboratory. One Sunday morning in January, however, when the team was supposed to be resting, a Hardy Boy happened to come by the lab and found West sitting in front of one of the prototypes. The next Sunday, West wasn't in the lab, and after that they rarely saw him. For a long time he did not hint that he might again put his hands inside the machine.

West contributed primarily by causing problems for the engineers to solve and making mundane events and issues appear special. He created an almost endless series of "brushfires" so he could inspire his staff to douse them. He had a genius for finding drama and romance in everyday routine. Other members of the group's formal leadership followed de Castro and West in creating ambiguity, encouraging inventiveness, and leading by example. Heroes of the moment gave inspiration and direction. Subtle and implicit signals rather than concrete and explicit guidelines or decisions held the group together and directed it toward a common goal.

Specialized Language

Every group develops words, phrases, and metaphors unique to its circumstances. A specialized language both reflects and shapes a group's culture. Shared language allows team members to communicate easily, with minimal misunderstanding. To the members of the Eagle Group, for example, a *kludge* was a poor, inelegant solution—such as a machine with loose wires held together with duct tape. A *canard* was anything false. *Fundamentals* were the source of enlightened thinking. The word *realistically* typically prefaced flights of fantasy. "Give me a *core dump*"

meant tell me your thoughts. A *stack overflow* meant that an engineer's memory compartments were too full, and a *one-stack-deep mind* indicated shallow thinking. "Eagle" was a label for the project, and "Hardy Boys" and "Microkids" gave identity to the subgroups. Two prototype computers received the designations "Woodstock" and "Trixie."

Shared lingo binds a group together and is a visible sign of membership. It also sets a group apart and reinforces unique values and beliefs. Asked about the Eagle Group's headquarters, West observed, "It's basically a cattle yard. What goes on here is not part of the real world." Asked for an explanation, West remarked, "Mm-hmm. The language is different" (p. 50).

Stories Carry History, Values, and Group Identity

In high-performing organizations and groups, stories keep traditions alive and provide examples to channel everyday behavior. Group lore extended and reinforced the subtle yet powerful influence of Eagle's leaders—some of them distant and remote. West's reputation as a "troublemaker" and an "excitement junkie" spread through stories about computer wars of the mid-1970s. Alsing said of West that he was always prepared and never raised his voice. But he coolly conveyed intensity and the conviction that he knew the way out of whatever storm was currently battering the group.

West also possessed the skills of a good politician. He knew how to develop agenda, build alliances, and negotiate with potential supporters or opponents. When he had a particular objective in mind, he would first sign up senior executives.

Then he went to people one at a time, telling them the bosses liked the idea and asking them to come on board: "They say, 'Ah, it sounds like you're just gonna put a bag on the side of the Eclipse,' and Tom'll give 'em his little grin and say, 'It's more than that, we're really gonna build this fucker and it's gonna be fast as greased lightning.' He tells them, 'We're gonna do it by April'" (p. 44).

Stories of persistence, irreverence, and creativity encouraged others to go beyond themselves, adding new exploits and tales to Eagle's lore. For example, as the group neared completion, a debugging problem threatened the entire project. Jim Veres, one of the engineers, worked day and night to find the error. Ken Holberger, one of the Hardy Boys, drove to work early one morning, pondering the state of the project and wondering if it would ever get done.

He was startled out of his reverie by an unexpected scene as he entered the lab. "A great heap of paper lies on the floor, a continuous sheet of computer paper

streaming out of the carriage at [the] system console. Stretched out, the ship would run across the room and back again several times. You could fit a baby in there. . . . on it. Veres sits in the midst of this detailed description of American history . . . He's examined it all. He turns to Holbeger. "I found it," he says" (p. 207).

Humor and Play

Groups often focus single-mindedly on the task, shunning anything not directly work related. Seriousness replaces goodness as a cardinal virtue. Effective team balance seriousness with play and humor. Surgical teams, cockpit crews, and many other groups have learned that joking and playful banter are essential sources of invention and team spirit. Humor releases tension and helps resolve issues arising from day-to-day routines as well as from sudden emergencies.

Play among the members of the Eagle project was an innate part of the group process. When Alsing wanted the Microkids to learn how to manipulate the computer known as Triske, he made up a game. As the Microkids came on board, he told each of them to figure how to write a program in Triske's assembly language. The program had to fetch and print contents of a file stored inside the computer. The Microkids went to work, learned their way around the machine, and felt great satisfaction—until Alsing's perverse sense of humor tripped them up. When they finally found the elusive file, a message greeted them: "Access Denied!"

Through such play, the Microkids learned to use the computer, coalesced into a team, and practiced negotiating their new technical environment. They also learned that their playful leader valued creativity.

Humor was a continuous thread as the team struggled with its formidable task. Humor often stretched the boundaries of good taste, but that too was part of the group's identity:

[Alsing] drew his chair up to his terminal and typed a few letters—a short code that put him in touch with Triske, the machine reserved for the use of his micro coding team. "We've anthropomorphized Triske to a ridiculous extent," he said.

He typed, WHO.

On the dark-blue screen of the cathode-ray tube, with alacrity, an answer appeared: CARL.

WHERE, typed Alsing.
IN THE ROAD, WHERE ELSE? Triske replied.
HOW?

ERROR, read the message on the screen.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," said Alsing, and he typed, PLEASE HOW.

THAT'S FOR US TO KNOW AND YOU TO FIND OUT.

Alsing seemed satisfied with that, and he typed, WHERE.

RIGHT FUCKING NOW, wrote the machine.

WHY, wrote Alsing.

BECAUSE WE LIKE TO CALL [pp. 90-91].

Throughout the year and a half it took to build their new machine, engineers of the Eagle project relied on play and humor as a source of relaxation, stimulation, enlightenment, and spiritual renewal.

Ritual and Ceremony

Rituals and ceremonies are expressive occasions. As parentheses in an ordinary workday, they enclose and define special forms of symbolic behavior. What occurs on the surface is not nearly as important as the deeper meaning communicated beneath discernible happenings. With little time for anything not related to the task of building the machine, the Eagle Group intuitively understood the importance of symbolic activity. From the beginning, leadership encouraged ritual and ceremony.

As one example, Rasala, head of the Hardy Boys, established a rule requiring that changes in public boards of the prototype be updated each morning. This activity allowed efforts to be coordinated formally. More important, the daily update was an occasion for informal communication, bantering, and gaining a sense of the whole. The engineers disliked the daily procedure, so Rasala changed it to once a week—on Saturday. He made it a point always to be there himself.

Eagle's leaders met regularly, but their meetings focused more on symbolic issues than on substance. "We could be in a lot of trouble here," West might say, referring to some current problem. And Wallach or Rasala or Alsing would reply, "You mean you could be in a lot of trouble, right, Tom?" It was Friday, they were going home soon, and relaxing; they could half forget that they would be coming back to work tomorrow" (p. 132). Friday afternoon is a customary time at the end

of the work week to wind down and relax. Honoring such a tradition was all the more important for a group whose members often worked all week and then all weekend. West made himself available to anyone who wanted to chat. Near the end of the day, before hurrying home, he would lean back in his chair with his office door open and entertain any visitor.

In addition to recurring rituals, the Eagle Group members convened informal ceremonies to raise their spirits and reinforce their dedication to a shared, intensely real mission. Toward the end of the project, Alsing instigated a ceremony to trigger a burst of renewed energy for the final push. The festivities called attention to the values of creativity, hard work, and teamwork. A favorite pretext for parties was presentation of the Honorary Microcoder Awards that Alsing and the Microcoder Team instituted. Not to be outdone, the Hardy Boys cooked up the PAL Awards (named for the programmable array logic chips used in the machines). The first presentation came after work at a local establishment called the Cain Ridge Saloon. The citation read as follows (p. 250):

Honorary PAL Award

In recognition of unsolicited contributions to the advancement of Eclipse hardware above and beyond the normal call of duty, we hereby convey unto you our thanks and congratulations on achieving this "high" honor.

The same values and spirit were reinforced again and again in a continued cycle of celebratory events:

Chuck Holland [Alsing's main submanager] handed out his own special awards to each member of the Microteam, the Under Extraordinary Pressure Awards. They looked like diplomas. There was one for Neal Firth, "who gave us a computer before the hardware guys did," and one to Betty Shanahan, "for putting up with a bunch of creepy guys." After dispensing the Honorary Microcoder Awards to almost every possible candidate, the Microteam instituted the All-Nighter Award. The first of these went to Jim Guyer, the citation ingeniously inserted under the clear plastic coating of an insulated coffee cup [p. 250].

The Contribution of Informal Cultural Players

Alsing was the main organizer and instigator of parties. He was also the Eagle Group's conscience and nearly everyone's confidant. For a time when he was still in college, Alsing had wanted to become a psychologist. He acted like one now. He kept track of his team's technical progress, but was more visible as the social director of the Microteam, and often of the entire Eclipse Group. Fairly early in the project, Chuck Holland had complained, "Alsing's hard to be a manager for, because he goes around you a lot and tells you people to do something else." But Holland also conceded, "The good thing about him is that you can go and talk to him. He's more of a regular guy than most managers" (p. 105).

Every group or organization has a "priest" or "priestess" who ministers to spiritual needs. Informally, these people hear confessions, give blessings, maintain traditions, encourage ceremonies, and intercede in matters of greatest importance. Alsing did all these things and, like the tribal priest, acted as a counterpart to and interpreter of the intentions of the chief:

West warned him several times, "If you get too close to the people who work for you, Alsing, you're gonna get burned." But West didn't interfere, and he soon stopped issuing warnings.

One evening, while alone with West in West's office, Alsing said: "Tom, the kids think you're an ogre. You don't even say hello to them." West smiled and replied, "You're doing fine, Alsing" [pp. 109-110].

The duties of Rosemarie Seale, the group's secretary, also went well beyond formal boundaries. If Alsing was the priest, she was the mother superior. She did all the usual secretarial chores—answering the phones, preparing documents, and constructing budgets. But she found particular joy in serving as a kind of den mother who solved minor crises that arose almost daily. When new members came on, it was Rosemarie Seale who worried about finding them a desk and some pencils. When paychecks went astray, she would track them down and get them to their intended recipients. She liked the job, she said, because she felt that she was doing something important.

In any group, a network of informal players deals with human issues outside formal channels. On the Eagle project, their efforts were encouraged, appreciated,

and rewarded outside the formal chain of command; they helped keep the project on track.

Soul Is the Secret of Success

The symbolic side of the Eagle Group was the actual secret of its success. Its soul, or culture, created a new machine: "Ninety-eight percent of the thrill comes from knowing that the thing you designed works, and works almost the way you expected it would. If that happens, part of you is in that machine" (p. 273).

All the members of the Eagle Group put something of themselves into the new computer. Individual efforts went well beyond the job, supported by a unique way of life that encouraged each person to commit to doing something of significance. Their deep commitment and unwavering spirit jelled in the ritual of signing up. Both were then intensified and expanded by diversity, exceptional leaders, common language, stories, rituals, ceremonies, play, and humor. In the best sense of the word, the Eagle Group was a team, and the efforts of the individual members were interwoven by symbolic fiber. Cultural elements were the heart and soul of the group's success.

The experience of the Eagle Group is not an outlier. After extensive research on high-performing groups, Vaill (1982) concluded that spirit was at the core of every such group he studied. Members of such groups consistently "felt the spirit," a feeling essential to the meaning and value of their work. Bennis (1997) could have been writing about the Eagle Group when he concluded, "All Great Groups believe that they are on a mission from God, that they could change the world, make a dent in the universe. They are obsessed with their work. It becomes not a job but a fervent quest. That belief is what brings the necessary cohesion and energy to their work" (p. 1).

More and more teams and organizations, like the Eagle project or SEAL Team Six, realize that culture, soul, and spirit are the wellspring of high performance. The U.S. Air Force, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, embarked on a vigorous effort to reaffirm traditions and rebuild its culture. The air warfare arm of the U.S. military added "Cohesion is a principle of war" to its list of core values. Project Warrior brought heroes—living and dead—forward as visible examples of the right stuff. The Air Force also instituted a "reblue-ing" ceremony to encourage recommitment to its traditions and values.

Other organizations have taken similar steps. In 2006 Starbucks' performance began to slide, then dip. By 2007, the company's stock price had fallen by

42 percent. In February, Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz sent a confidential memo to top executives linking the downturn to slippage in the firm's culture: "Over the past 10 years, in order to achieve the growth, development and scale necessary to go from less than 1000 stores to 13,000 stores and beyond, we have had to make a series of decisions that, in retrospect, have led to the watering down of the Starbucks Experience, and what some might call the commoditization of our brand" (p. 23).

The "confidential" memo became public, and bedlam reigned at Starbucks. Schultz resumed his former role as CEO and took immediate steps to breathe new spirit into the company's once vibrant way of life:

- A brainstorming meeting of company leaders to ponder the question: what is the soul of Starbucks?
- A ritual evening closing of 7,100 Starbucks outlets nationwide for an evening to refresh baristas in the texture and magic of a perfect espresso
- A meeting of top executives and managers to review, refine, and revive the company's values
- A large meeting of shareholders featuring, with dramatic panache, new products, a frequent customer reward program, and a new espresso machine
- A meeting in New Orleans of almost 10,000 Starbucks managers—a gigantic celebration with themes of "Onward" and "Believe"; a recommitment to the company's cultural history, values, and ways; and, to seal the deal, a rousing speech from Bono

Both examples, the Air Force and Starbucks, confirm an important truth: too much emphasis on sorties flown or quarterly numbers can divert attention from sustaining and revitalizing culture. That, in turn, can jeopardize the outcomes an organization or team is trying to maximize. Team Six, Starbucks, Zappos, and other successful companies and teams understand this lesson and live it. When asked, "How much of your time do you spend dealing with cultural issues?" a wise executive said, "Not enough—maybe half my time."

CONCLUSION

Symbolic perspectives question the traditional view that building a team mainly entails putting the right people in the right structure. The essence of high

performance is spirit. If we were to banish play, ritual, ceremony, and myth from the workplace, we would destroy teamwork, not enhance it. There are many signs that contemporary organizations are at a critical juncture because of a crisis of meaning and faith. Managers wonder how to build team spirit when turnover is high, resources are tight, and people worry about losing their jobs. Such questions are important, but by themselves, they limit imagination and divert attention from deeper issues of faith and purpose. Managers are inescapably accountable for budget and bottom line; they have to respond to individual needs, legal requirements, and economic pressures. Leaders serve a deeper and more durable function if they recognize that team building at its heart is a spiritual undertaking. It is both a search for the spirit within and creation of a community of believers united by shared faith and shared culture. Peak performance emerges as a team discovers its soul.