



Cadence Bank Podcast: In Good Companies

S4E4 - Nurture Your Culture: Dr Marcus Collins on the Power of Culture in Business | Dr. Marcus Collins

OVERVIEW: A recent Deloitte survey shows that our professional expectations have shifted in the past decade. In 2023, our youngest workers want jobs aligned with their values, where they have a purpose and find a sense of belonging. Increasingly, our workforce looks for good company culture, first and foremost. So how does culture drive strategy? And how can it help your business thrive? We ask Dr. Marcus Collins, an award-winning marketer, professor and author of the best-selling book "[For the Culture.](#)"

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT:

[00:00:00] **SFX:** Intro Music In

[00:00:00] **Marcus Collins:** As hiring managers, as leaders of organizations, we find people who share the same ideology, the same belief as we do. Because when they come to work, they're not coming to work for this transactional exchange; they're doing the work because they're intrinsically rewarded. Because doing the work, it's a way by which I'm able to, to self actualize. And that's unbelievably powerful.

[00:00:24] **Patrick Pacheco:** I'm Patrick Pacheco, and you're listening to season four of *In Good Companies* from Cadence Bank. The podcast is where we guide you through the forces shaping your business inside and out.

[00:00:33] **SFX:** Intro Music Out

[00:00:33] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** Here's a question for you: what makes a *good* job? I mean – a really good one? Is it salary and benefits? Or is it... The team you see every day? The meaning of your work? Research by Deloitte shows that, in the past decade, our professional expectations have changed. Today, our youngest workers want jobs where they belong. Where they keep good relationships with colleagues. Businesses with purpose, in line with their values. In short: they look for culture, first and foremost. So how can culture help your business? That's a question for today's guest...

[00:00:34] **Marcus Collins:** My name is Marcus Collins. I'm a marketing professor at the Ross School of Business and the author of the bestselling book, *For the Culture.*

[00:00:44] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** Marcus knows the ins and outs of culture. Fifteen years ago, he was in the music industry, running digital strategy for Beyoncé. After that, he worked in advertising for big agencies, like Doner. He saw firsthand how culture drives marketing, but also – what it *means* to people...

So Marcus dug deeper and asked the hard questions. What does culture mean, actually? How can we use it to reach the right people; add new talent to our teams; and work better together? He turned his research into a book, *For The Culture*. And today – we get a crash course. From marketing your products to hiring your team – culture is the foundation to a good company. Simple, right? Well, maybe not quite.

[00:00:45] **Marcus Collins:** There's no external force more influential to human behavior than culture, full stop. And when you hear that, you go, "Yeah, that makes all the sense in the world. Totally." But if you ask five people to define culture, you would get 55 different answers, and that's a problem. We often say in the world of advertising, we need to get our ideas out in the culture, or we need to be informed by culture, what's going on in culture, or even when we're hiring people, we have a foosball table in the kitchen. We have a great culture here. Just culture, culture, culture, culture, culture. And as I was investigating, I realized that my understanding of culture was superficial at best. I had some intuition about what culture was or what was cultural, but I didn't really have the language to describe it. And I found myself in practice being hamstrung and being able to leverage its power in any sustainable or consistent way. If we can't fully describe a thing, how do we ever fully harness its power? So I started to study it, and when I did my doctoral work at Temple, I wanted to see how brands of branded products spread or propagate within a cultural context. This is when I came to understand culture through a sociological lens and then through a consumption lens, then an organizational lens, and then society writ large. So the book provides some language of Rosetta Stone by which we can talk about culture so that we can harness and operationalize its power. It provides a point of view on what culture is, and language for how we use it, and then gives the reader some skills in how to exercise it in their work. The idea of all this is that once we have language, perspective, and skills, we also have a responsibility. The book sort of ends with this sort of call to responsibilities, ethical, moral compass that tried to instill in the readers that saying these things that we now have possession of, these skills that we now have the ability to leverage, we now have a responsibility to use them ethically.

[00:02:51] **Patrick Pacheco:** So most of the time in our podcast when we talk culture, we mean company culture, but it seems like you're talking about culture in a much broader sense in some ways. So what's your working definition of culture?

[00:03:05] **Marcus Collins:** Yeah, so I think about culture through a sociological lens, particularly through a gentleman by the name of Émile Durkheim. He would talk about culture as a system of conventions and expectations that demarcate who we are and what people like us do. It's a system of norms, a governing operating system that dictates what is acceptable for people like

us, and who are we, we are our identities. Within this context, we share a point of view of the world, beliefs, and ideologies as our shared collective understanding of reality, and then we tell ourselves stories about said reality through the ideologies. So for instance, for some, a cow is leather, for others, it's a deity, and for some it's dinner. Which one is it? It's all those things depending on how you see the world and who you are as an organization and as an institution. And because of your beliefs, you navigate the world accordingly, right? If you believe that a cow is a deity, then you engage with the cow and the world through a particular lens. There are a set of artifacts that we do, behaviors that are normative, and the language that we use, and these things make up the system that is our way of life. So because of who we are, we see the world a certain way, and because we see the world a certain way, we navigate the world a certain way, and then we express ourselves through shared work. And we think about culture broadly. We think about it through art, literature, film, music, television, and dance, and brands of branded products become ways by which we express our identity, the beliefs we hold, our shared way of life, and our shared expression. And I think you're right, when I talk about culture, I think about it from a macro lens because of how all-encompassing and pervasive culture is. But the same mechanisms that drive culture at that macro level are the same mechanisms that drive culture at an organizational level and at a consumer level as well.

[00:05:10] **Patrick Pacheco**: That's it. So I used to teach law and economics, and I would start with these papers on normative systems, and that's what they were. They were what drive the social norms and how normative systems get picked with the idea being that economics is a potential normative system for behavior. But I'd lose them with that.

[00:05:27] **Marcus Collins**: You're so right. I mean, the idea of culture, is a meaning-making system that is a measurement of normality. What is normal? There are social pressures pushing you, telling you to be normal, telling you to dress a certain way, to act a certain way, to drive a certain vehicle, to wear your hair a certain way if you have hair, to marry a certain kind of person, to go to a certain kind of school, to work at a certain kind of company, to vacation certain places, to eat certain things, to bury the dead a certain way if you bury the dead. All these things are byproducts of our cultural subscription and there are social forces telling us to be normal, telling us to operate within the conventions and expectations of people like us. And since we are social animals by nature, as Aristotle put it, we are given to being in a community. We are given to be together. We want to belong, and we promote social solidarity in our ability to belong by adhering to the cultural characteristics of people like us.

[00:06:34] **Patrick Pacheco VO**: So culture is about coming together, in more ways than one. Your community gives you an accent, a sense of humor, a way of socializing... It changes how you interact with the world. And those behaviors? They have everything to do with business.

[00:06:34] **Marcus Collins**: Marketing is the act of going to market. And why do we go to market? To get people to adopt behavior. That's the job of marketers. And what I argue in the

book is that whether you have a marketer in your title or not, you are a marketer, and in some way or another you're trying to influence people to adopt the behavior, whether it's to buy something, to download something, to vote a certain way, to get your boss to promote you or to be more productive, to get your kid to eat peas. I mean, we're constantly influencing behavior. We're all marketers in that way. And there is no external force more influential to human behavior than culture. So culture becomes the cheat code to get people to adopt behavior. Now, the question becomes, well, what people are most likely to adopt behavior?

[00:07:18] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** I don't know about you, but for me – one look at my social media, and I know who's influencing me. Everyone I follow is either a friend or someone who inspires me. They're people whose vision of the world I want to share. And according to Marcus, that's exactly the point.

[00:07:18] **Marcus Collins:** If we're trying to get people to move, the people we should be targeting are the people who see the world the way we do, or I refer to them as the collective of the willing. So then the job of you, marketer, leader, manager, activist, politician, your job then is just to preach the gospel. When you talk about the world through your point of view, through your cultural lenses, the way you see the world and your ideologies, the stories that you tell yourself and tell the world about the world, people go, "Finally, someone said it. Man, I've been feeling that way forever, and finally, someone said it." And then they go take your message, your product, your cultural production, and they go share with people who are just like themselves as a way to present and project their own identity. And that's unbelievably powerful because when we look at the world that way, we start to activate a network effect that gets things to propagate, not through our voices, but through the voices of people that have much more credence with their people than we do.

[00:08:18] **Patrick Pacheco:** So how do you identify your congregation or what happens if you identify a congregation and realize you're in the wrong congregation? If you're a manager and everybody else is a different congregation than you are, it seems like it's going to impact your success with that group...

[00:08:33] **Marcus Collins:** Totally. But this means for managers, it's a great imperative to be judicious about who you hire. We often hire people because of their expertise. We hire them because they've done the job elsewhere, and been successful, so they're definitely going to be successful here. But we also know that that doesn't always work. But we rely on that as a shortcut to mitigate the possibility of us hiring incorrectly. But what I would argue is that just as much as we look at experience, we need to look at shared points of view, and shared way of life. There's a great illustration of this in what's known as the bricklayer's parable. You've probably heard of it before. And the idea is this, if I drive down the street and I see you, Patrick, laying bricks, I go, "What are you doing?" And you go, "I'm laying bricks." You have a job, you lay bricks.

But if I drive down the street and I see you laying bricks, I go, "What are you doing, man?" You go, "Oh, I'm building a church." Well, you have a career. You build churches. But if I drive down the street and see you laying bricks, I go, "Dude, what are you doing?" And you go, "I'm building a house of God." You have a calling. Which one of you is more excited about going to work every day? The one with the calling. And that's the idea, is that we find people who share the same ideology, the same belief as we do, because when they come to work, they're not coming to work for this transactional exchange that I'm going to give you my time, you give me money, and that's why I'm here. Don't ask me for anything else. I ain't staying until after five o'clock.

I ain't coming in earlier than nine o'clock. This is a transactional relationship. And that's how we typically think about work. But the people who are fired up about the work they do, they're doing the work, not just because they're being rewarded or being compensated, but because they're intrinsically rewarded by the work. Because doing the work is a way by which I'm able to realize my own ideological manifestation of the world. It's a way by which I'm able to self-actualize, and that's unbelievably powerful, which means then as managers, as hiring managers, as leaders of organizations, we've got to be very judicious about the people that we bring in. Are people here just because of the value propositions, i.e. the name looks good on their resume, the benefits are good, the pay is great, or are they here because they believe? I think when they believe, you're going to get more out of them and they get more from you. The reciprocity of that relationship goes far beyond the transactional.

[00:11:12] **SFX:** Ad Music In

[00:11:12] **Ad:** At Cadence Bank, relationships define us. That's why we make a point of getting to know you. Because it helps us serve you better. Visit [CadenceBank.com](https://www.CadenceBank.com) to learn more. Cadence Bank. Member FDIC.

[00:11:27] **SFX:** Ad Music Out

[00:11:27] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** To harness the power of culture - you must find your identity. Figure out what your business is really about, and you'll know who you want on your team. Then, there's only one thing left to do: put it out to the world.

[00:11:27] **Marcus Collins:** So I read about this and then I give an example in the book about an organization that focused on internal culture as a way to get more people to show up. So GE, here's a company that's been around for about 130 years now, nothing sexy about GE. Most of their bigger business is B2B, selling wind turbines and things like that. But GE, in 2015 or 2016, somewhere in that timeframe, GE decided to do a national campaign like a big above-the-line campaign to the general public that was meant to drive new hire acquisitions. So this is an HR play that they're running on television. Big ad. And the name of the campaign was called What's the Matter with Owen? And the vignettes you saw of this gentleman playing Owen, is that no one

understands him. They say, "You work at GE, so you're going to work on trains. You work at GE, you're going to work on these very industrial things." And Owen goes, "No, no, I'm going to work on the systems that run trains. I'm going to work on the networks that make these things work." People are like, "Huh? I don't understand." And the question becomes, what's wrong with Owen? Why doesn't anybody get him? And the foil here, the reveal is that GE as a company, their co-founder Thomas Edison, would say, "I look at what the world needs and I go invent it. We invent the future, we make the future, we build the future." And here's Owen saying, "That's what I'm about, building the future." And GE is telling these stories of this fictional character, Owen, as a way of saying, "At GE, we get you. We understand. No one else understands you, but we get you because like you're trying to build the future. So come get a world-changing job at GE." That campaign ran for 18 months, I believe, and in the 18 months, they saw an 800% increase in job applications to GE. Now, in those commercials, there was nothing about salary, nothing about 401k, nothing about benefits, nothing about where you'd be located. Instead, people were driven by the notion of building the future. And that's unbelievably powerful, unbelievably powerful because we typically think that the way that we get people to do things is value proposition driven. Dangle the carrot in front of them, and they'll go chase the carrot. And as long as you keep the carrot in front of them, they'll keep on running. But what this shows us is an illustration of what the literature has been telling us for well over a century. It's who we are, and how we see the world, those are the things that govern how we show up in the world.

[00:14:16] **Patrick Pacheco:** When I took over the group at Cadence, the asset management and trust group, I went out and hired a number of people and they were in bigger firms making more money, and I approached them all the same, said, "I'm going to pay you less money. You're not going to have a group of analysts sitting outside your door that you can walk out at 6:00, throw something on their desk, and tell them you need it in the morning. If there are new marketing materials you want, you probably have to create them yourself, but you're going to have a role in the way the bank does business and this group. From now and into the future, from the long-term, you're going to have a role and you're going to have local decision-making. It's not a fiduciary officer that's sitting in New York or North Carolina or something else." And I'd say, "Are you interested?" And every single one said, "I'm interested." And they're all very impactful employees. It's been great. So you have a quote in the book I found really interesting. It says, "It's not what you say, it's what people hear." And can you explain what you mean by that?

[00:15:07] **Marcus Collins:** Yeah. When we're communicating, we're communicating through our perception of reality in hopes that people receive it the way we intended it. A frequent rift that my wife and I have is that she'll ask me to do something and I go, "Yes, dear." And she'll go, "Why you say it like that?" And I'm like, "I just said, 'Yes dear.'" She's like, "That's not what your face said though." So what I am communicating is not being translated with the same intentionality that I meant it to be, which means that because people see the world differently and translate the world differently through their cultural lenses, what people say isn't always what they hear. And that means when we talk, we have to be unbelievably proximal to who these people are. We have to have intimacy to understand how they'll see it and translate it. So now, after being married for

11 years, I go, "Don't say it like this, Marcus, because you know exactly what Alex is going to say. Watch your face because you know exactly what she's going to say," because I know her so well now, and that's my wife of 11 years. It took me some time to get there. So when we are communicating to the public, when we're communicating to our employees, to the organization, we are communicating to many people with different meaning-making systems; therefore, our chances are much higher communicating with people who see the world the way we do. We have to be very mindful, be very empathetic, to think of all the many permutations, all the many ways by which our message might be received and translated through these people, and that requires a tremendous effort of empathy.

[00:16:53] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** Staying in tune with people's emotions is delicate work. It takes practice and sometimes, you're going to fumble. So how do you avoid any major missteps?

[00:16:53] **Marcus Collins:** There are three things to consider. The first is things aren't the way they are. They are the way that we are. That's why for some, a cow's leather. For others, it's a deity. For some, it's dinner. And therefore, there is no objective truth. The truth is subjective, right? So when you start with that framing, you go, even though I see it this way, even when I read these words out loud, when I hear them and I see them manifested, I see it this way, someone might see it differently. And they're not wrong, and neither are you. They're not wrong. Neither are you. The first. The second is that we have to develop a muscle for empathy. We have to set aside our biases, our ethnocentrism, all the ways in which we apprehend the world through our cultural lenses and see the world through someone else's lenses and go, "Okay, if I say this, someone may see it this way and they may see it that way. Should I say it? Is it worth saying or should I find another way to say it? Even though I feel like it's the perfect metaphor, even though I feel like it's the perfect illustration, if I say it this way, I'm going to upset Chris, but if I say it that way, then I might offend Mary. Is it worth it?" Probably not. But the only way you can know how Chris and Mary might interpret it is to have close proximity, which leads to the third thing. We have to be really good at communicating in ways that evoke emotion. Because even if the words make all the rational sense, if they evoke the wrong emotion, none of the rationality matters. We are not rational human beings. We're rationalizing human beings. We make our decisions emotionally and then we justify them rationally. Therefore, when we're preaching the gospel, when we're talking to people, when we're communicating, we have to think about it like are we evoking the emotion that we want? Because it's the emotion that's connected through a shared ideology. It's the way we see the world that makes us feel wrong. I don't like what she did because that was disrespectful. Well, why? Or that offended me. Why? Because of how you see the world of what you think is acceptable. The emotional parts that we have come from, the beliefs and ideologies that we hold, which is why shared beliefs and ideologies are so unbelievably important.

[00:19:25] **Patrick Pacheco:** So I used to do a lot in the political world and helped a lot of campaigns, and I guess we'd call this activating your base. How do you get those folks that think

the way you do? But that leaves a whole lot of undecideds out there. So how do you reach these undecideds, these new markets that have maybe a little different ideology? How do you step over that into the other culture? And can you? Can you be in 2, 3, 4, or five different cultures and still be true to who you really are?

[00:19:53] **Marcus Collins:** Sure, absolutely. I think that this is sort of the best part about finding your base, the collective of the willing. They go preach the gospel on your behalf and they convince people with whom they have closer connections than you ever have. And this isn't just a qualitative assessment. We know this statistically as the diffusion curve, and the idea is this, that diffusion curve, that typical bell curve that you know from middle school and high school, that that bell curve is the representation of how value is distributed in a population. Everything that is not manmade, that is not human-made abides by that distribution. That's why we call it the normal curve. And the more the middle you are, the more normal you are. So to your point, well, how do I get those normal people, people who are not my people, but everyone else? And the myth is that we should be talking to the middle, the normal consumer, the normal employee, the normal American, the normal person. And the thing about those normal people is that there are forces pushed on them telling them to be normal, to act a certain way, to dress a certain way, to go a certain place, which means that they, by their very nature, are practicing a risk aversion strategy. So they're less likely to move anyway. They're not the first who's going to buy your album, not the first who's going to vote for you, not the first who's going to download your movie or subscribe to your newsletter. They're not the first to do anything. They're going to look at everybody else first, which means statistically, empirically, if we want to reach those people, we have to activate the tribe, the people on the fringe, the people who "seem weird", because everything that is normal today, everything that's in the middle of that diffusion curve, all started on the fringe side. Whatever movie you just saw or show you watched last, it wasn't because you saw an ad for it. It's because someone was like, "You need to be watching Succession. You're playing yourself." And you go, "Oh, I guess I need to watch Succession because everybody's watching Succession." So the idea is that we get to scale in the aggregate, not by talking to people who don't see the growth the way we do, but by activating people who do.

[00:22:09] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** Thinking outside the box will take work – active work! Because most of us *like* being in the norm. And it's a humbling thought, right? We're not really immune to a trend; we're all on that curve... Even us, on the business side.

[00:22:19] **Patrick Pacheco:** Do you think the majority of companies who are marketing their products do try to appeal to that middle and miss out on where they really need to be?

[00:22:27] **Marcus Collins:** Of course, because it's efficient. It's like blasting a message to the middle and prayerfully, hopefully, God willing, Inshallah, we'll be able to reach people. And if we reach them, maybe, maybe we can convert 0.012% of them. That's the entire marketing communication business. We actually call it the sales funnel. It's so fluid and commonplace that we keep doing it because there are social pressures telling us to be normal. That's what we

learned in business school, and that's what we're told when we're in the industry and we keep doing the same thing expecting different results, and it becomes much more expensive to reach audiences because there are more people in the middle, normal, and therefore it's louder, it's more congested, it's more saturated. That's why the Super Bowl is so expensive. That's why advertising during prime time is so expensive because that's where everyone is. But this is what we do. Not because it's accurate, but because it's fluid. Not because it's real, but because it's easy.

[00:23:30] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** It's clear that culture is a powerful tool for business. And it's up to us to use it for good. You know the saying... With great power comes great responsibility.

[00:23:30] **Marcus Collins:** The thing we've been talking about, it's neither good nor bad. It just is. It just is. The fact that we are influenced by people like ourselves is just how we're wired. It just is. However, the difference between it being neutral or without value then rests on the intention of the user. Because the same things that can get people to work at GE, to get people to vote for your candidate, to get people to buy concert tickets, to get people to save, those are the same tools, the same cognitive levers that could be pulled to get people to be radicalized by ISIS. Therefore, the users that is us, those who become knowledgeable about these cognitive heuristics, now have a responsibility to use them ethically. Now, the thing about ethics is that ethics are culturally mediated. So for some, one thing is ethical, for others, it's not. So in the book, I try to make the argument that we have to be very mindful about how we use this knowledge because we can be hurtful to society and to individuals.

[00:24:53] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** Ethics are complex. Sometimes, we can't navigate them intuitively. So while practice won't make perfect, it will make progress. Just follow the Marcus method.

[00:24:53] **Marcus Collins:** In my work, in my practice, I offer a rubric that I use that I call IPO. I-P-O, that is intentions, perspectives, and outcomes. So the intentions are, what are my intentions in doing this thing? Why am I doing this thing? Is it just to make money? Is it just to get my candidate elected? Is it self-serving? Or is there a benefit to the end consumer? Is there a benefit to the voter? Is there a benefit? Am I doing this in such a way that I am contributing to the exchange? And they go, "Yes, my heart's in the right place." Again, that is a subjective measurement. And then I go, "Okay, so what's the perspective of the people that I'd be engaging?" That is, how might people who are not me perceive this piece of work, this speech, or whatever I'm putting out in the world, how might they perceive it? Which requires me to set aside my perspective and adopt the lens of someone else, being empathetic. And particularly from the most marginalized community, that could potentially bump into the thing I'm putting in the world. So now I have my intentionality that I measure to be good. I have a perspective of people who are not myself, and I go, "I think this is going to be okay. No one's going to be offended. I think the people will get it." Then I say, "What are the potential outcomes? What could

go wrong? If people don't get it, what's the worst that can happen?" And it's those three variables that I use as a calculus to say, "I'm going to do this thing. I'm going to do it." But if it passes the sniff test on intentionality, doesn't pass on perspective, and the outcome, the worst that could happen is pretty bad, I go, "I'm not doing it." Even though I have the best intentions in the world, I'm not doing it because of what it might mean to people who are not myself. I think that's really important.

[00:26:56] **SFX:** Outro Music In

[00:26:56] **Patrick Pacheco VO:** In many ways, culture is the company you keep; it says a lot about who you are. So to turn culture into power, remember this:

Culture is a set of values and ideas for how the world works. It's something we share with our peers. So, use this to define your business identity. Ask yourself: What do we care about? How are we perceived? Who do we want to work with? And remember: your answers might change over time!

Once you're clear on who you are, put yourself out there. Find those who identify with you. They become your congregation... And connect your company with its community.

Keep in mind that we all want to belong... Which means, we might struggle to branch out. So find ways to expand; bring in new people... And stay mindful of your actions; they will affect who you work with.

Finally: culture is not right or wrong. It's a neutral thing. So creating a good environment for your company? In the end, it's up to you.

I'd like to thank Marcus Collins for a fascinating and energetic conversation. We have much to learn from his knowledge, passion, and boundless curiosity.

[00:26:56] **SFX:** Outro Music Out

[00:26:56] **Patrick Pacheco:** In Good Companies is a podcast from Cadence Bank, member FDIC, Equal Opportunity Lender. Our production team is Sheena Cochran, Eydie Pengelley and Natalie Barron. Our executive producer is Danielle Kernell. This podcast is made in collaboration with the team at Lower Street. Writing and production from Andrew Ganem and Lise Lovati. Sound design and mixing by Ben Crannell.

[00:27:15] **Patrick Pacheco:** Do you want to hear more in good companies? Of course, you do. Rate and review the show so we can bring you more episodes and even bigger guests. It only takes a second. So pause the podcast and do it right now. I'll wait. Still waiting...

[00:27:31] **SFX:** Fade Out

[00:27:31] **Patrick Pacheco:** I haven't got all day here, guys. Let's go.

[00:27:34] **Disclaimer:** *This podcast is provided as a free service to you and is for general informational purposes only. Cadence Bank and its affiliates make no representations or warranties as to the accuracy, completeness, or timeliness of the content in the podcast. The podcast is not intended to provide legal, accounting or tax advice and should not be relied upon for such purposes.*

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