

Chapter 1

Culture

*Culture drives expectations and beliefs;
expectations and beliefs drive behavior;
behavior drives habits;
and habits create the future.
It all starts with culture.*

Create a Winning Culture

Mike Smith



In January of 2008 I was hired as the head coach of the Atlanta Falcons. Most of the time when head coaches are hired, they are not coming into a very good or stable situation. It is not the norm to replace a coach who has just won the Super Bowl and is riding off into the sunset, like Bill Walsh after Super Bowl XXXIII or Bill Cowher who only coached one more season after Super Bowl XL. When I was named the coach of the Atlanta Falcons, they were a team that had been through quite a bit of recent turmoil and struggled to win consistently throughout the history of the franchise. In their 42 years, the Atlanta Falcons had never had back-to-back winning seasons. They had always for some reason or another struggled with consistency and sustainability. For example, from 2000 to 2007 the Falcons had five different men stand on the sideline in the role of head coach. The 2007 season had been an extremely difficult one, in which the first-year head coach had resigned after 12 games—three-quarters through the season—to return to coach at the college level. The quarterback, who was not only the face of the franchise but also without a doubt one of the most popular players in the NFL, was headed to federal prison. While none of this was the fault of the ownership and executives of the Falcons organization, such extreme and unfortunate events

can create a challenging, almost dysfunctional, working environment. Needless to say, the culture of the team was in shambles.

Jon and I talked several times on the phone about the state of the Falcons' organization and it became very clear that if I was going to turn this team around, the first step would be to focus on transforming the culture. While the football coach in me wanted to attack the X and O issues and work with first-year general manager Thomas Dimitroff to calibrate the roster for the upcoming season, I knew the biggest priority was to create a winning culture in which every member could thrive and excel. This meant we would not only have to create the right culture for the team but also for the rest of the organization.

Build Your Culture Up and Down

Mike Smith

I've always believed that culture is defined and created from the top down, but it comes to life from the bottom up. This meant that I had to build our culture by working with the leadership group (i.e., the owner, general manager, and executives), the coaching staff, and the football team. To strengthen the culture among the leadership group, it was important to reiterate to the owner, team president, and general manager the shared beliefs, values, and expectations that we had discussed in depth when I was interviewing for the head coaching position. It was important to have collaborative conversations on a regular basis to discuss the changes we were making and why we were making them.

To develop a strong culture on the team level, we started to evaluate players on their character and attitudes in addition to their football skills. Changes to the roster were not solely based on the players' abilities on the field. We also looked very closely at the intangibles that each player would bring to the locker room. We wanted to have team members who were going to positively represent the organization on and off the field. It was important that we had players who were going to be good teammates and citizens.

We made sure that our owner, Arthur Blank, knew why we were making these adjustments to the roster and how they supported the culture we were trying to create. We had to make it clear that these changes, both by addition and subtraction, were going to be about upgrading our roster both on and off the field. All of these moves were in line with the coaching philosophy, values, and principles that we had talked about before I signed on as head coach. We were not going to be adding any outliers to our organization, no matter how much talent they had. With support from the owner and the organization's top leadership, Thomas and I set out to build a new team culture from the ground up.

During the first off-season, Thomas and I worked very closely. It was not unusual to have multiple daily meetings. We made a very conscious effort to make sure that we met at the start and the end of every day to discuss all facets of football operations. Meetings about personnel always involved what a player could bring to the locker room and the culture of the team. We both knew that building a team would be much more complex than just adding the best available athletes. We also had discussions about how the support staff and the interaction

between football operations and the rest of the organization were progressing.

It wasn't enough to just build a team culture. To have sustained success, we needed a winning organizational culture, and I knew that by working closely with the leadership group to define and set the culture, we would be able to have that. I needed the owner and leaders to buy in and be an integral part of the process. Their buy-in needed to be as deep as the players'. I also knew that to create a successful team on the field, I needed to involve more than just leadership, players, and staff. We needed *everyone* in the organization to buy in.

Everyone Creates Your Culture

Mike Smith

Culture consists of the shared purpose, attitudes, values, goals, practices, behaviors, and habits that define a team or organization. Many coaches focus only on the culture shared by the players, but the fact is that everyone in an organization shapes the culture. To be successful, you need everyone in your organization thinking, believing, talking, and behaving in sync. You need everyone to be aligned with the same beliefs, expectations, behaviors, and habits. Thomas and I learned quickly that the beliefs and behaviors of the past had to go and we needed to instill new ways of thinking and acting that everyone could follow.

For this reason, when I gave the team Jon Gordon's book *The Energy Bus* that first year, I also gave it to everyone else in the organization. I wanted us all thinking the same way. *Everyone* included the executive team, operations people, sales

and marketing folks, equipment managers, maintenance staff, food service workers, and anyone else in the building. Reaching everyone in the Atlanta Falcons organization was a challenge, but I made it a priority to connect with everyone in the organization, and distributing Jon's book was a part of this process.

Besides getting *The Energy Bus* into the hands of as many people in the organization as possible, I spent the majority of my time those first few months as head coach meeting with as many people as possible, to introduce myself and have conversations about their specific jobs. It was important for them to know that their roles in the organization were important and that they were going to be an integral part of our team's success in the future. I didn't want there to be one culture in the locker room and a different culture in the rest of the building. I wanted us to be *one team*, with *one culture*. I believed that because the support staff and members of the off-field departments came into contact with our players, they should also share a positive attitude. Their outlook and pride in their work would enhance our chances of being an organization that can be great both on and off the field. While it was obvious that the players needed to help build a winning team, it was just as important for the people outside the locker room to enjoy being part of the process. I let everyone know that my role was to assist them in doing their jobs and together we would build a winning team. Then, throughout the years, I backed up my words with actions, and I believe this had a big impact on our overall culture and success. As a leader, it is so important that your words equal your actions. It is imperative that you make sure that you go through a self-evaluation process on an almost daily

basis to make sure that your actions are in line with your words. You must do what you say and say what you do.

X's and O's Are Overrated

Mike Smith

Professional athletics is probably the most competitive industry in the world. The NFL is designed for parity in many ways, with a hard salary cap, free agency, and the draft system. During my seven years in Atlanta, 22 percent of all games played in the NFL were decided by three or fewer points and 45 percent of the games were decided by seven or fewer points. When almost half the games come down to the final possession, it makes the margin for error very small. I guess that is why the game is so popular and the phrase “on any given Sunday” is so true.

With the competition so heated, everyone is looking for an edge. Teams spend millions of dollars every year trying to gain an advantage and be better than the rest of the league. They will spend money on athletic performance, analytics, coordinators who offer new offensive and defensive schemes, and so on. All of those have merit and you have to be doing everything possible to improve your organization. When you are dealing with the best athletes and coaches in the world, there is a fine line between winning and losing. You have to be well prepared both physically and mentally to go out and compete each week. You must have a great game plan, and it's essential for coaches to call the right plays and for players to execute effectively. Strategy is important. Execution is imperative. However, the most overlooked aspect in team sports, and what most coaches and leaders fail to grasp, is the fact that

it is your culture that will determine whether your strategy works and is sustainable. It is the culture you create that is going to determine whether your players perform and execute.

Every week you will face very difficult circumstances that are completely out of your control. There are going to be injuries that effect match-ups, the ball is not going to bounce your way, and there will be mistakes made both by players and coaches. The strategies and game plans are going to change from week to week. In the face of all this, it is your culture that will be the driving force to create the resiliency, toughness, passion, and attitude to overcome the obstacles in your way. The wildcat came and went. The spread option was hot for a year or two. Certain plays work for a while until opposing teams figure them out. X's and O's are important but culture is the rock that your organization must be built upon—and if you do it the right way, you'll have sustained success, as we did for five years. The last two years are another story, however, and later on I'm going to share what we learned from that.

Sustained Culture = Sustained Success

Jon Gordon

I couldn't agree more with Mike about the importance of culture. Mike and I had many conversations about culture and it was very exciting to see him put his beliefs and plan into action. As someone who writes, speaks, and thinks a lot about culture, I loved watching the principles take hold in real life. Theory is one thing; practical application is another. But what Mike did and the way he did it is a great demonstration of why organizations with sustained cultures have sustained

success. Culture drives expectations and beliefs. Expectations and beliefs drive behaviors. Behaviors drive habits and habits create the future. If you look at the most successful organizations in business, sports, health care, and education you notice they all have great cultures. Indeed X's and O's are overrated. I once spoke at a football clinic years ago on the topic of culture. I had five people in my session. The workshop on X's and O's had 500 people in it. I knew then that most people don't understand that X's and O's won't sustain success. Culture will. You must spend more time on building your culture than on everything else. Culture is what produces wins over time.

Know What You Stand For

Jon Gordon

If you are looking to build a new culture or transform the one you have, the first questions you should ask yourself are, "What do we stand for?" and "What do we want to be known for?" For example, for my book *The Hard Hat*, I interviewed coach Jeff Tambroni, who helped build Cornell lacrosse into a national powerhouse, to ask him how he did it. He said, "We know who our people are. We know who fits our culture." Jeff built a culture that was defined by a blue-collar work ethic (symbolized by a hard hat), as well as selflessness, teamwork, relentless effort, and continuous improvement. By knowing what their culture stood for, Jeff and his staff were able to choose the right people who fit their culture. When you know what you stand for you can find the right people who stand for the same things as you. Brad Stevens, the head coach of the Boston Celtics, told

me that your culture is not just your tradition. It is the people in the locker room who carry it on. When you have people who fit your culture and carry it on, it comes to life in a powerful way.

Knowing what you stand for is just as important in the business world. When Apple was just the two Steves (Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak), they knew the culture they wanted to create. They wanted to challenge the status quo. Everything they did was influenced by their culture: the people they hired, the products they created, and the campaigns they ran. This approach still influences everything at Apple. Apple is famous for saying that culture beats strategy. What you stand for drives everything else.

I had the opportunity to speak to Southwest Airlines a few years ago, and they told me how consultants suggested they charge passengers to check luggage since the competition was doing it and they could make millions of dollars in additional revenue. Southwest considered their proposal but in the process asked themselves an important question: “Is this what we stand for?” They went straight to their purpose statement: “To connect people to what’s important in their lives through friendly, reliable, and low-cost air travel.” They ultimately decided that if they were for everyday fliers and low-cost air travel, they shouldn’t charge baggage fees. You would think they would have missed out on a lot of money, but a funny thing happened. Southwest started to get new customers because the airline didn’t charge for bags. They ran advertising campaigns highlighting the fact that bags fly free, and they gained market share in the process. Their revenue grew to new heights. It’s a great example that once you know what you stand for, decisions are easy to make. Both your strategic

decisions and those made on the fly. When your culture dictates your decisions you will enjoy sustained success.

Process and Milestones

Mike Smith

Knowing what you stand for is essential. From the moment I took over as the coach of the Atlanta Falcons, I knew the kind of culture we needed to create and I defined it for the team. The seven responsibilities everyone had were to:

1. Have fun, work hard, and enjoy the journey.
2. Show respect for every person you have contact with in the organization.
3. Put the team first. Successful teams have teammates that are unselfish and willing to put their individual goals behind the team's goals.
4. Do your job. It is defined, but you must always be prepared for it to change (especially if you're a player).
5. Appropriately handle victory and defeat, adulation and humiliation. Do not get too high in victory or too low in defeat. Be the same person every day.
6. Understand that all organizational decisions aim to make the team better, stronger, and more efficient.
7. Have a positive attitude. Use positive language (both verbal and body language).

I told our team each year that if we were able to consistently meet these expectations, then we would be well on our way to

establishing a culture where team members can thrive in the ultimately competitive NFL. I also made it very clear from the beginning that we were going to be a team that focused on the process of preparing for each practice and game, not on the outcome of our entire season.

Don't get me wrong; the NFL is all about results, and teams are ultimately judged by the number of wins and losses that they accumulate each year. If you don't win enough, you will get fired. I even joked with our general manager, Thomas, when I took the job that he didn't hire me to retire me; he hired me to fire me. It was just going to be a matter of time. Very rarely does the coach get to leave on his own terms in today's NFL. Thomas and I had many discussions about how we wanted to beat the odds so I could be one of the few that go out on their own terms. Those first five years, we were well on our way to accomplishing that goal. Prior to the start of the 2014 season, there were only six coaches in the league that had longer tenures at the same team than my six seasons in Atlanta. Amazingly, during my seven years as head coach, the league saw 66 head-coaching changes. That is the equivalent of the entire league turning over more than twice. You can see why former Falcons coach Jerry Glanville in 1988 said that, when it comes to head coaches, NFL stands for "Not for Long."

So when it came to outcomes, you bet I wanted to win. I wanted to coach as long as possible and win as much as we could, but I knew the best way to do this was to *not* focus on a season's outcome, but instead use a practice-to-practice, game-to-game process. My intention from the beginning was not to focus on goals, but on preparation and milestones. After all, every team in the league has the same goals so it's not your

goals that will lead to your success but your commitment to the process, one game at a time, that will define your season.

When we had our first team meeting of the off-season, the message was that we were going to focus on the process of building the team. The majority of the first meeting was to explain the sequencing of an NFL season. The team was shown the layout of every practice up to the start of the first week of the season, and the entire off-season program was laid out for them in detail. When I say detail I mean *detail*. The coaching staff had accounted for every minute in the meeting rooms and on the practice field. It was important for players to see that the entire off-season had to be planned and that everyone knew what we would be doing every single day in the classroom, in the weight room, and on the field. The players were aware that we were going to be very systematic in the way that we prepared. They knew the exact number of plays that we were going to run in the off-season and the amount of time that was going to be invested into the different situations that could arise in a game. There were not going to be any surprises in terms of what we did in our meetings and on the field. We were not going to concern ourselves with our overall record; instead, we were going to focus on mastering the skills to be the absolute best team we could be in 2008.

As we got to the opening week of the season, I addressed the team about how we had progressed through the off-season programs, mini-camps, and the preseason. We felt that we had made great strides in the progression of preparing for the grind of the NFL season. It was at the Monday meeting prior to the start of the season that I told our team that we were

not going to have any goals in the traditional sense, and that we all knew how we were going to be evaluated at the end of the season. I told them that we were going to focus on *milestones* and that after we accomplished one, we would be presented with the next. The first milestone was to win a game and we were going to get that chance the coming Sunday. They were also told the importance of first impressions. You only get one chance at a first impression and that moment, good or bad, usually sets the tone for the season. We definitely took advantage of leaving a great first impression. The very first pass attempt of the season was a 62-yard touchdown throw from Matt Ryan to Michael Jenkins. After that, we went on to win the game. First milestone accomplished. The next milestone was to start a streak and win on the road. Despite the positive energy that remained after our first-game win, we lost the next game, and our milestone shifted. Now instead of starting a winning streak, we aimed to avoid back-to-back losses. I let the team know that if we could go the entire season without losing back-to-back games and put together at least one two-game winning streak, we were going to like where we were in November. After that, we made it a milestone to beat our division opponents because winning our division would be the most direct path to the playoffs (or as some call it, the *second season*). After each new game, I presented a new milestone to attempt to accomplish. I told them that the more milestones we were able to reach, the better our standing would be at the end of the season. In 2008, our focus was on the journey, not the destination. We looked up in December and clinched a playoff berth in our first season.

Focus on the Root, Not the Fruit

Mike Smith

Milestones and process were a big part of our culture and philosophy those first five years and, as a result, we had unprecedented success as a team and organization. But sometimes success can be your worst enemy if you allow it to change your culture and approach. Jon had often told me that if you focus on the fruit and ignore the root, the tree will die, but if you continue to care for the root and focus on your culture, process, people, and purpose, then you'll always have a great supply of fruit. Those first five years, we focused a lot on the root and had a lot of fruit. We won a lot. Our culture was strong. But then we fell one play short of going to the Super Bowl. In the 2012 NFC Championship game, we were 10 yards away from winning the game. We had put together a six-minute drive and had the ball on the San Francisco 49ers' 10-yard line. It was third and four with just over a minute to play. Matt Ryan was knocked to the ground on an incomplete pass and injured his shoulder, but, as he had done so many times in his first five years, he showed his resilience and continued playing. No one realized how serious his injury was, and on fourth down, Matt's pass attempt to Roddy White was incomplete. With that, our chances of playing in the Super Bowl against the Baltimore Ravens—where I had previously coached—evaporated.

After that, everything changed. As an organization, we felt we had been one play away from going to the Super Bowl and, suddenly, getting there became the only thing we cared about. As an organization, we were obsessed. Unfortunately, that affected the way the team and the organization approached

the upcoming season. Instead of starting over from the beginning and continuing to focus on the process, one practice and one game at a time, we only cared about the outcome. We stopped setting milestones and only focused on getting back to the playoffs. If we didn't make it to the Super Bowl, the season would be considered a failure by the media, our fan base, and many within our organization. The pressure was on, and all of us felt it—our ownership, our quarterback, our team, and me—and, looking back, I allowed the pressure to steer us away from the very things that made us successful. I didn't fight enough for our culture. I stopped building the culture up and down. I did a very poor job of making sure the new members of the team, staff, and organization understood the culture that we had worked so hard to create. We all learned the hard way that culture can change almost as quickly as the momentum in a football game. Looking back, it's not a surprise that in our last two seasons we experienced the outcomes we did. I let outside forces and pressure weaken our culture. When we stopped tending to the root, the sports world saw our tree wither.

You Have to Fight for Your Culture and Team

Mike Smith

Nothing better demonstrates how much our culture had withered than the second half of the 2014 season. As we were fighting for a playoff spot despite having a losing record, the signs were obvious that the culture within our organization was not healthy. As an organization you want to do everything in your power to minimize and eliminate distractions for the players and coaches so your team can focus on being their best on the field. The last

thing you want is for your own organization to be the cause of the distraction. Unfortunately that's exactly what happened as we were trying to make the playoffs.

The self-inflicted distractions started prior to the Monday night game played in Green Bay. An article was written in the *New York Post* and was attributed to an unnamed source within our organization. The article stated that the coach of the Jets would be the choice of the owner if the Falcons made a change. Unfortunately we lost the game against Green Bay and it only made people wonder if the report was true. I didn't think much about the report at the time but it did hit me that in my six-and-a-half years with the Falcons we never had a report with an unnamed source and all of a sudden, there was one.

In week 16 against the New Orleans Saints, the morning of the game it was reported that if the Falcons lost to the Saints that I was going to be fired according to a source with the team. Not something that you want your team to see scrolling across the bottom of the TV screen at the pregame meal and in the locker room. Thankfully we went out and played one of our best games of the year and won. It set up the "winner goes to the playoff" game against the Carolina Panthers the next week. I was happy that we won but again it struck me as strange that there was another unnamed source discussing my coaching future.

The morning of the "winner goes to the playoff" game against Carolina, at the pre-game meal, it happened again. In the pregame shows it is reported that the Falcons have hired a search firm to assist in the search for a head coach if the Falcons make a change. Are you kidding me? We have a chance to make the playoffs and someone within the organization is leaking this news to the press. Unfortunately we went out

and played probably the worst game in our seven year tenure. Even worse, I let it happen.

Through the first six seasons I showed the players on the team that I would literally fight for them. Whether it was telling a trash talking player from an opposing team to shut his mouth and get off our sideline or getting in the middle of a scrum on our sideline and getting fined by the league office for making physical contact with an opposing player, my team knew that I was all in with them and was willing to fight for them both mentally and physically. But when the unnamed sources and news leaks started happening, I didn't fight for the team like I should have. I thought that if we won, the leaks and news would go away. I was focused on the outcome instead of fighting for my team and culture. People often ask me who was leaking the information, but truthfully I really don't care. That is not the issue here. What matters most is that I did not ever formally address these three specific incidents internally and externally. I did not fight for my team. I needed to attack this straight on. Each media report was a major distraction and did not give our team the best chance to go through our preparation, focus, and win. I should have addressed the news reports with the team. I should have called an urgent meeting with our leadership team, addressed the news leaks, and demanded that whoever was doing it needed to stop sabotaging his own team. Instead of hoping that winning would solve the situation, I should have not let this situation happen. I helped create our culture and I should have fought for it until the end. I have made many mistakes along the way. No leader is perfect. But this was one mistake I wish I could do over.

I'm sorry it happened, but now it's one of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned, and one that I can share with you so you don't make the same mistake. That's why I want to encourage you to build your culture, value it, live it, reinforce it, and fight for it. Make sure the new people joining the team and organization know what you stand for. No matter what happens, whether you win or lose, keep focusing on the root. Forget what happened last season. You must have amnesia about past negative outcomes and a great memory of all the little things you did to create success. Focus on the process and don't let outside or inside forces sabotage your culture. My first five years are an indication of what happens when you stay true to your culture and process, and my last two years are a great example of what happens when you don't.

So now that you know what went wrong those last two years, let's talk about what we did right the first five years and how we built our culture and team with the additional C's, starting with *contagious* energy. If you focus on what Jon and I share with you and stay true to your culture, I'm confident you'll experience sustained success.