

Performance Insights from "The Barcelona Way" by Professor Damian Hughes

Author: Tim Wigham . December 2021

This book is a brilliant read for anyone interested in a proven approach to creating a high-performance team culture. I found it additionally interesting to watch the Amazon Prime series *All or Nothing: Manchester City* at the same time as I was reading this because one of the central figures in both stories is Pep Guardiola; previously captain and coach at Barcelona, now manager at Man' City. Any culture is driven by leadership behavior so being able to observe as well as read about Pep's leadership was highly informative.

The importance of culture is no longer up for debate which is why Google and other massive companies invest so much in getting it right. Hughes references five culture models: Star model - Real Madrid (hire the best players), Autocracy - Chelsea (rotate the manager), Bureaucracy - Liverpool (profit over performance), Engineering - Borussia Dortmund (logic and detail), Commitment - FC Barcelona (more than a club).

The book then goes on to unpack a **Commitment Culture**. A model for success in any team. The acronym BARCA represents five steps to achieve this.

1. Big Picture - Camp Nou | Cruyff | Catalan (Identity)
2. Arc of Change: Cultural Signposts - Dream, Leap, Fight, Climb and Arrive (Transformation)
3. Recurring Systems and Processes - Constant Repetition gets the Message Home (Ritual)
4. Cultural Architects and Organisational Heroes - Respected Role Models (Legacy)
5. Authentic Leadership - Stand for Something (Leadership)

The bracketed words are my intuitive interpretations of the steps that Hughes puts forward. They tie into very similar high-performing teams like the All Blacks and Springboks in rugby, whereby legacy, loyalty, and leadership are fundamental to finding FIRST!

Big picture

There are four factors in a commitment culture; imagination, illustration, participation, and integration. For me, the first two are about mindset and method, the latter two require moodset - the right climate for

excellence. Moodset is driven by leadership and teamwork.

Hughes expands on the criticality of **why what, and how** as these three pillars secure buy-in from the team "... when the why is important enough, people just find a way." Our *why* is our central belief and needs to inspire almost spiritual reverence.

The *what* requires clear guidance; "What do you want the team to know, feel and do?". There should be no ambiguity.

How is about behaviours, and Guardiola is very clear on his expectations for how he expects the team members to behave; humility, hard work, and being a team player. In order to get a team to listen and commit in the first place, Hughes makes the very important point that coaches and leaders need to have these 3 'C's; credibility, clarity, and courage (cojones!). Cruyff had the courage and cojones to call it like it is, to tell the truth no matter how hard that was to hear. Alex Ferguson at Man' United is also said to have had this trait.

My interpretation: Top Tier Transformation Trait - Tell Transparent Truth to Tighten Team Trust! Ten Talismanic 'T's'!

Arc of change

Hughes identifies five stages that every change-journey involves; dream, leap, fight, climb, arrive. He references the movie *Alive* which unveiled on the big screen the unimaginably tough true story of a plane crash in the Andes and how some of the Uruguayan rugby team on board survived. One of the survivors of that experience spoke to the Barcelona team. The stages in his story were extreme but analogous. Guardiola had brought in "Nando" the survivor to tell his story.

Stories are incredibly powerful and can be inspirational as Hughes explains. Pixar uses a formula for their stories which is instructive; once upon a time there was ____, every day ____, one-day ____, because of that ____, because of that ____, until finally ____! I can apply my own story as follows; once upon a time I was a junior at boarding school, every day we had to make our beds to a certain standard for inspection after breakfast, one day someone decided to intimidate and antagonise me while preparing for

inspection, because of that I stood up for myself and confronted him, because of that I earned self-respect and a reputation for standing up to bullies until finally I was voted by my dorm-mates to lead our boarding house.

Rituals and ceremonies, symbols, and traditions can be incredibly powerful for any team if respected and repeated with relevance. Guardiola made a point of respecting significant family events affecting his campaign teams, and significant achievements like young players on debut were always given priority. In most top-tier teams, being handed the shirt for a game is a sacred ritual. These milestone moments are memorable and molding for the players involved.

Speeches can inspire and ignite excellence. They can make listeners feel fired up. Obama is a recent reference point for the emotional power of speech. Other famous orators include the likes of Churchill and Mandela. Hughes highlights that Guardiola applies learnings from great speakers. A great line that he uses is this one; "An individual talent is worth much less when he does not invoke team values."

A **relationship-based approach to leadership** has the following four core principles. These so-called soft skills are intangible but invaluable:

1. Create belonging through a clear and vivid identity.
2. Be vulnerable. This promotes psychological safety and trust.
3. Speak to the whole person - connect beyond the workplace.
4. Tell the truth to promote honesty and trust.

Small wins, small progressions, and marginal gains are what underscore true transformation to high performance. British Cycling is a great reference point for this. No Tour de France wins in 100 years and then six in a row after the intervention by David Brailsford.

Recurring systems and processes

Habits, feedback loops, and focusing on the correct leading indicators... These are some of the aspects that Hughes highlights from Guardiola's exceptional Barcelona culture.

Guardiola was appointed to be the *keeper of the flame* at FC Barcelona as he transitioned from player to coach. This reminds me of the book *Primed to Perform*, which talks about fire-starters and fire-watchers who are critical for maintaining a culture of excellence. If the flames are not continuously fuelled, the fire will go out.

Xavi was the playmaker around whom the legendary Barca team of the 2010s was built. He orchestrated the teams in which he played to win everything on offer for club and country. Xavi was known as the *Machine* for his receive - pass - offer style to practice and play. Simple precision in execution. Diligent, unselfish collaboration at the highest level. Metronomic.

Hughes introduces the concept of *Fundamental Attribution Error*. This I find very interesting. Wikipedia defines as follows: In social psychology, fundamental attribution error, also known as correspondence bias or attribution effect, is the tendency for people to under-emphasize situational and environmental explanations for an individual's observed behaviour while over-emphasizing dispositional and personality-based explanations. We are largely a function of our environment.

What is interesting is that in the Barca team before Pep became coach, Xavi was viewed as dispensable. His style did not suit the prevailing climate which valued talent over team-play. Yet once the climate changed, Xavi became the indispensable conductor of the orchestra. Performance climate can make or break the value of the individuals involved. We have seen this time and again. Graham Henry took over at the All Blacks, Rassie Erasmus at the Springboks. Same players, different coach, different climate, different results.

Response to adversity, character, competitiveness, and grit, are the indicators of longer-term success.

Hughes says that our habits are stitched into our environment. It, therefore, follows that if you change your environment, you have a (better) chance of changing your habits. A new training ground for FC Barcelona in Jan 2009 happened to coincide with the start of their irrepressible rise to stardom. In private, away from the media, the team was able to embed and instill humility, hard work, teamwork.

Feedback loops comprise four stages according to Hughes: Evidence, relevance, consequence, and action. He also cites the example of speed radars which provide immediate feedback to drivers on the

exact speed that they are going relative to the speed limit. Most of us can relate to these radars and they are a perfect 'compression' of the feedback loop in action. We immediately learn that we need to slow down or face the consequences!

The OODA loop (observe, orient, decide, act) emanates from a Korean War fighter pilot. For me the key with this model is decisiveness. The quicker you fail, the quicker you learn and therefore decide again, until the action leads to success.

Guardiola was a fan of punctuality which is a trait of any high-performing team. In fact, discipline is critical for excellence. Tardiness provides a form of feedback, a leading indicator of bigger issues with players on the team. He confronted these issues decisively but empathetically in order to disrupt inertia.

Hughes references action triggers and a quote from the US Navy Seals; "Under pressure, we descend to the level of our training." Practice until you can't get it wrong. The All Blacks apply a similar approach to their training of the basics. Peter Bills notes in *The Jersey* about the All Blacks, the late Jerry Collins was made to do a thousand passes a day off his left hand until he could pass as well as off his right! Repetition for reflex reliability under pressure. Simple.

1. Automaticity or autopilot. Let our unconscious brain do its magic. Just play.
2. Mastery through exhaustive practice.
3. Visualisation and imagination before realisation!

Keystone habits drive all other habits. There were two of these at Barcelona; the five-second rule and possession are nine-tenths of the game. The first means that the team should get the ball back from the opposition within five seconds of losing it, the second creates more chances and exhausts the opposition. A virtuous cycle.

The locker room is a microcosm of the entire team culture. Hughes references the importance of organisation and atmosphere in the changing area for players in any team. In non-sporting organisations, this is the conference room, the boot room, or even the recreational area. Subtle belonging cues as described by Daniel Coyle in *The Culture Code* can be informative of the bigger picture to the keen observer.

The "Rondo" is a kind of piggy-in-the-middle where three players keep the ball from one who is trying to get it. Very simple, but arguably the best microcosm of a game. As such it is a simple but incredibly effective way to build the core skills or excellence, EG one-touch passing, accuracy, and finding/holding space. The question for those of us looking to apply the metaphor to our own workspaces is, what is my team-building "Rondo"?

Hughes references another of Daniel Coyle's books; *The Talent Code*. This explores the chemical benefit of deliberate practice such as Rondos. Muscle memory is built and myelin strengthens and contains the neurons and synaptic connections to boost impulse speed, or instinctive performance. In summary, a growth mindset believes that brain and body performance can improve with learning and deliberate practice. The only catch is that by definition, deliberate practice requires discipline, diligence, and determination!

For keystone habits, Hughes recommends REPS. Repeating, engagement, purposefulness, strong immediate feedback. Keystone habits need to be the right leading indicators, and they need plenty of REPS!

An environment that offers a constant measure of the correct trademark behaviours and keystone habits, will build the right culture for the bigger picture!

Cultural architects and organisational heroes

Hughes references a Harvard Business School insight on culture:

Culture is what happens when the leader isn't in the room, which is of course most of the time.

The famous adventurer Ernest Shackleton referred to "leaders without authority". Hughes calls them "Cultural Architects". From my point of view, these definitions also perfectly describe the best business coaches in any business setting. At Exceed we call ourselves performance coaches or servant leaders. Informal leaders, champions, and advocates who provide essential motivation and engagement to others on a daily basis.

Hughes talks about peer pressure or better labeled, "peer perception". We do things because we see our peers do them. Behaviour is contagious. We need cultural architects to challenge groupthink and

complicity when it comes to poor behaviours. Cultural architects are able to influence the mindset of others and able to extend a leader's shared mental model of success.

Hughes references a view from Carlo Ancelotti the footballer. There are personality leaders and technical leaders. There is a place for both; those with strong personalities and those who quietly lead through a very professional example. Some have both traits but both types are important for a high-performance culture.

The opposite of cultural architects is cultural assassins. Adam Grant talks about "takers". They are the same beast. Individuals who are focused on "me" rather than "we". Cultural assassins need to be removed from the bus as soon as possible otherwise they will sabotage any chance for genuine high performance. Lionel Messi was led astray by some bad apples at Barcelona in his early days. Thankfully Guardiola intervened in time.

Cultural architects are leaders within the group who are role models of the attitude, language, and behaviours that are desirable for progress and success. Ideally, they are chosen by peers as that is the strongest endorsement from those that will be following. Hughes asked 20 elite coaches what they do to choose cultural architects. He asked for a ranking against talent, attitude, and behaviours.

Hughes compares the choice-making models of consequences (cost v benefit), and identity (what would someone like me do). A strong identity can drive intense loyalty.

The section on identifying talent I found truly fascinating. The findings of numerous high-performance selectors is that growth potential is more important than current performance.

Early ownership and grit are two factors, the latter representing stubbornness, resourcefulness, creativity, and adaptability. In other words, the character will drive the stubborn pursuit of growth which trumps current competence when selecting...

Empathy and how team members treat each other turn out to be a strong leading indicator of success

too. Group norms that caused the members to mesh well were valuable. An example is equality in the distribution of conversational turn-taking, something which Daniel Coyle references in *The Culture Code*. High average social sensitivity was another feature of high-performance teams. Teams that are like family just have to get a nanosecond of a glance at the eyes of another and they intuit what their teammate is feeling. The ability to consider perspective through the eyes of a teammate is fundamental to excellence.

Hughes reveals some observation research of family dynamics. There are four roles consistently played: Initiators, blockers, supporters, "detachees".

There is an interesting reference to research into accidents in the aviation industry and the cockpit dynamics leading up to those tragic events. Malcolm Gladwell discussed this in his book as well. Culture and human factors led to many of the events. Junior pilots were afraid to question the authority of the Captain. The solution was a series of steps to follow to get the attention of the Captain; start by stating the facts, then challenge using the Captain's first name to grab his attention, if that still does not work, take action to get control of the issue.

The role of the cultural architect is to create more leaders.

Authentic leadership

Cruyff said that in order to coach you need to be able to influence, seduce, convince, and understand the team members. Hughes makes the point that leadership is about commitment while management is about compliance and control. Servant leaders are able to sacrifice self-interest and sell the bigger picture to the stake-holder community. They inspire and motivate through consistent and transparent behaviour, language, and action.

I love the way this book emphasizes the importance of the environment; the atmosphere and the energy surrounding the team. It is more than twice as important as the actual technical training focus in any workspace. I call this [Moodset](#). Good coaches create the right climate for the team to perform.

The cultural fit between the leader and the team is very important. It is often overlooked or assessed in

hindsight, IE survivor bias. Using the right questions to assess the cultural fit of a leader for a team can help to get insight. Asking about the preferred work environment, leadership style and values can help provide useful clues as to the prospect's suitability for the leadership role.

Hughes' explanation of how Guardiola got the job at Barcelona ahead of Jose Mourinho, and then how he moved Messi to a different position after a poor performance, reveals the importance of Guardiola's fit to Barcelona Way. He talked about taking over a legacy from Cruyff and he respected that legacy to the point of listening to Cruyff's earlier advice about not staying too long. Guardiola even knew when to leave in order not to stick around for too long. That reminds me of Nelson Mandela leaving the South African presidency after one term rather than overstaying his welcome. Servant leaders serve the greater good. They do what is best for the team.

Authentic leaders articulate their priorities, then they apply consistency and transparency to all aspects of their leadership. Leading by example and honoring trademark behaviours is critical. Hughes references Guardiola's approach of placing guardrails to protect the right culture - a way "wide enough to empower but narrow enough to guide".

Guardiola's guiding principles or trademark behaviours were these; show humility, work hard, the team first. Intuitively we know this is required to achieve excellence, yet too many teams allow ego to detract from collaboration and progress.

Level 5 leadership as described by Jim Collins who wrote *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, includes the clear message that the STOP doing principle is most important for success. The power of NO. Hughes gives some of his own examples; Stop checking email during peak morning writing hours, stop accepting meetings or calls initiated by others that you would not have initiated yourself, stop going to bed after 11 pm. Great list!

Trust, security, and sincerity are fundamental pillars of a good coach. Coaches need to help people solve their problems too. Listening to others and encouraging a "devil's advocate" mitigates the dangers of groupthink which is when everyone is too agreeable and there is an insufficient challenge. Finding and plugging holes is why advance planning and creating the conditions for the challenge is so healthy in progressive teamwork.

Procedural justice is important for transparency. Allow input from everyone and really listen. Then make a decision. For priority planning, Hughes provides a fire-fighting analogy. Fire fighting is urgent and important, fire prevention is important. False alarms are urgent while fire escapes are distractions and excuses rather than doing what needs to be done.

Authentic leadership is about sending the message that we are all in this together. Hughes talks about the X factor and the X spot, the point at which a player can see the finish and gets a flood of endorphins that boost energy for the home straight.

But a commitment culture is about the journey, not the destination. It can be achieved by groups who are committed to doing what it takes.

True culture transformation requires world-class servant leadership, an inspiring and highly recognizable identity, the right rituals, and of course exceptional role models or "first followers" within the wider leadership group. Has your team got what it takes?

The post "Performance Insights from "The Barcelona Way" by Professor Damian Hughes" was first published by Tim Wigham here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/performance-insights-from-barcelona-way-professor-damian-tim-wigham/>

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