3| Leading a Culture of Quality

"Leadership is essentially a task of persuasion—of winning people's minds and hearts."

— Stephen Denning, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*

When Arylee McSweaney accepted a new role at Etsy as Senior Manager of Test Engineering Strategy, she was tasked with changing the engineering culture to incorporate more test automation and improve QA standards.

One of the first areas she wanted to focus on was increasing the ownership of quality across the business by motivating engineering teams to budget time into their development sprints to write tests.[1] She soon realized that the reason they weren't writing the tests wasn't because they didn't think it was important. There simply wasn't enough time to account for doing tasks like writing tests while in the middle of development sprints. They faced the tradeoff between writing tests and dealing with

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[1] Arylee McSweaney, conversations with the authors.

aggressive release deadlines. The deadlines were winning, despite the complications it could create down the line.

Arylee could have gone about changing their thinking by challenging them head-on. Instead, she decided to go about it in a smart way. She started with a survey, asking engineers for their input and ideas around quality improvement. One significant insight from the results was that the engineers wanted better mechanisms for voicing their wins, challenges, and failures, especially around automation.

She created Etsy's first "lightning talk" series, known across the organization as "TEST Etsy." These were quarterly events where engineers at any level could voice their ideas and frustrations, with attendees often including their fellow engineers, managers, and even the CTO.

The personal stories they shared resonated with everyone, giving the engineers personal validation regarding their challenges, from their peers as well as their managers. Beyond that, it helped leadership better understand their situation and the reality of their workload. And vice versa: it helped shift the engineers' perception of quality to better understand leadership's priorities.

When the engineers made quality a higher priority, doing things like budgeting time for writing test scripts during development came naturally. She supported this change in thinking by circulating a weekly TEST report whereby each engineering group could measure their performance against others'. Progress soared across the board. Soon

after, allocating time for testing-related tasks became an integral part of their software development lifecycle (and remains so to this day).

Arylee isn't alone in having to use her influence and persuasion skills to drive change. As leaders, we often invest hours of time doing some form of non-sales selling. Daniel Pink, author of *To Sell Is Human*, found that people who are in non-sales-based roles spend nearly 40% of their time (roughly twenty-four minutes of every hour) engaged in some form of persuading, influencing, or convincing others.

There are four major areas to master in order to influence your quality narrative and adjust the culture of quality within your company:

- **Knowing whom you need to influence** and what their motivations, goals and fears are
- **Creating empathy to increase alignment and understanding** between teams and individuals
- **Supporting the narrative with evidence** to add weight to your ideas
- **Cultivating internal champions** to help create momentum

The best leaders use the above methods to get everyone around them on board with the changes they want to make.

Know Whom You Need to Influence

The first step in instilling your quality narrative is to know whom it is you need to influence. In most situations, there is normally more than one person that you'll need to

persuade to get buy-in to your ideas. Start by writing down a list of all of these people, from your boss to your peers or even people in another manager's team.

Next, consider these questions for each person:

- What are their goals and objectives?
- What concerns/challenges do they face in their day-to day-role?
- Why would they object to your idea?
- How does your idea impact them and their teams?

Once you've answered these questions, you'll notice how different the motivations are for each of the people you've listed. Use this as a basis to find a way to speak the language of the person you're trying to influence. Find what's important to them, and then frame the issue in terms that make them sit up and take notice.

Instead of talking about features and information, highlight the benefits your idea can deliver, especially as it relates to their worries and wants. Paint a picture of the future: what will it provide them with that they don't have now?

At a recent CIO Panel, former CIO of Shared Services at Procter & Gamble, Andy Walter said that, when speaking to senior management, you need to "raise the discussion" and answer a basic question for them: "What can I do with my business, now that I have this, that I couldn't do before?"

This means that, when speaking with a management audience, you should focus the discussion around customers and the effects on the business.

Shesh Patel, Engineering Manager at *The New York Times*, understands this principle perfectly. He adapts how he presents his ideas based on whom he is speaking to.[2] For example, when he wanted to implement a new project that would reduce the time it took to run regression tests, he adapted how he explained it to different people.

When speaking with the leadership team, he focused on the number of dollars saved by implementing the idea, as well as what could be done with the savings to further improve the team's ability to release high-quality products. When communicating with the product team, he highlighted how it would improve the whole team's ability to release new features quicker. Likewise, while talking with the engineers, he underscored how it would affect the engineer experience, emphasizing everything from how it would make their release process easier, to the reduction in the number of flaky tests they would have to deal with—a point he knew was a major frustration for the team at the time.

One idea, three different ways of aligning it with individual goals.

By knowing more about the person you want to influence, you can ensure that the way you communicate appeals to them. By tailoring your message this way, more people will buy into your ideas, as they will have a clearer understanding of what's in it for them.

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[2] Shesh Patel, conversations with the authors.

Create Empathy to Increase Alignment and Understanding

When a car's wheels are out of alignment, steering becomes harder. Your tires begin to wear unevenly, causing a subtle drag on the car. Your fuel efficiency drops. It becomes dangerous to move at high speeds and, in extreme cases, it can even lead to an accident.

The same is true for misalignment in your company.

But achieving alignment is hard. How can you help people with diverse viewpoints and responsibilities to better understand the reality and mentality of their counterparts? Each team has a different perspective on quality. They all think and talk about it differently.

To paraphrase the classic quote from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you never really get to know a person until you walk around in their shoes. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of someone else. When team members better understand the work that goes into each other's role, they have more context to understand how to work together.

In an effort to solve this dilemma, you might try an approach adopted by Ben Horowitz (the venture capitalist behind Zynga, Twitter, and Stack Overflow): what he calls the *Freaky Friday* Management Technique. After watching the famous body-swap film, he decided to switch two of his executives whose departments had "[gone] to war

with each other."[3] The Head of Sales became the Head of Customer Support and vice versa. He called the result "miraculous." Horowitz said:

> *From that day to the day we sold the company, the sales engineering and support organizations worked better together than any other major groups in the company, all thanks to* Freaky Friday*, perhaps the most insightful management training film ever made.*

What really happened here was an increase in empathy and understanding of each other's role. This created a shared perspective on how to reach an end goal. When it comes to applying this kind of thinking inside teams, you could use a less extreme approach, such as cross-functional pairing sessions.

These pairing sessions are designed to have people from different disciplines work together to share ideas and avoid misalignment later down the line.

At social network Xing, Senior Product Designer Nikkel Blaase pairs his designers with developers "so that we can easily discuss layouts and technical restrictions, or can make fast decisions. Communication is a key factor when it comes to collaboration with developers."[4] Pivotal Labs take it one step further by having their developers and designers pair together for half a day to fix design tweaks, an otherwise frustrating task

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[3] https://a16z.com/2012/01/19/the-freaky-friday-management-technique.
[4] https://uxdesign.cc/how-designers-work-with-developers-7552be5e40e9.

to do via their internal chat system. This kind of activity saves time and builds empathy between departments.[5]

Atlassian, the makers of software products like Jira and Confluence, have a great way of pairing the developers with their quality teams. The quality function focus on "quality assistance" wherein they show the engineers how to get better at testing their own code, especially with exploratory testing techniques.[6] Armed with that, the engineers can think through scenarios more clearly and spot their own bugs before the code leaves their desk.

In other cases, like in Arylee's example, the empathy isn't targeted between teams but between management and those in more operational roles. In these situations, increasing the visibility of what teams do on a day-to-day basis through "lunch and learns" or lightning talks can encourage more open communication about challenges and successes. Management can also go one step further and spend time sitting with the team to understand what they are actually doing.

Support the Narrative with Evidence

You can use different forms of evidence to support your quality narrative. Some forms of evidence will be internal, utilizing information and data that already exist or

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[5] https://medium.com/product-labs/how-designers-and-developers-can-pair-together-to-create-better-products-e4b09e3ca096.
[6] https://www.atlassian.com/inside-atlassian/qa.

creating small experiments with internal teams. Other forms of evidence may be external, utilizing information outside of your company.

Internal Evidence

Having internal evidence that your idea is worth pursuing has the huge advantage of being relatable to the people inside your company. This increases the level of empathy available when aiming to create change.

Arylee used internal surveys to gather information on what the team cared about, giving her useful evidence based on the engineering team's feelings around quality. An alternative approach is to perform a small internal experiment to prove the merit of your idea.

In the early days of Airbnb, code was hitting the production servers without many checks and this was becoming problematic as the team scaled. Lou Kosak, one of the engineers at the time, started a small internal experiment to see how they could change the way the team worked. He wrote the following in a blog post:[7]

Eventually, a few people...started submitting pull requests for their changes. This was never introduced as a mandatory policy; we never disabled pushing to master or shamed people for doing so. But as those few, then a team, then several teams started doing this...it became clear that this process of peer review led to less bad code hitting production, and therefore fewer outages.

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[7] https://medium.com/airbnb-engineering/testing-at-airbnb-199f68a0a40d

With the success of the experiment, Lou and the rest of the engineering team ensured that all new hires were briefed on best practices that involved submitting pull requests, This naturally led to everyone adopting the same practices over time.

Shortly after, the engineers decided to include writing tests with any new code, while also beginning to educate teams about the importance of testing: they spoke at meetups, held "office hours" and shared recommended readings to increase their teams' knowledge. New hires were also made into champions of testing, while further investment was made into the testing infrastructure, making it easier to write and run tests.

By gathering evidence in a small way, Lou and his team were able to influence the whole testing process.

External Evidence

If you don't have internal evidence, you can also use external evidence. However, the effect of external evidence is different. Rather than adding empathy, it is used to increase credibility, illustrating that your ideas are proven and have a high chance of being successful. There are many different sources you can use: data from industry studies, presentations from talks, or even books (like this one) that have examples from well-known companies.

When using external evidence, make sure you have a good understanding of what the statistics really mean or why the example worked. Otherwise you could end up falling

into the "How to Test" Narrative mistake we discussed in Chapter 2 where there isn't enough understanding of how it needs to be adapted to your current situation.

Cultivate Internal Champions

Groupthink, consensus, or social proof—no matter what you call it, there is influence in having others around you who share the same ideas as you.[8]

To lead change, you will need help, whether it comes from your boss, your peers, or people who report to you. Your allies don't necessarily need to be in the development or quality teams.

Discover executives and other key stakeholders who might be receptive to your ideas and focus on fostering a relationship there. You might need to follow Lou's example at Airbnb and start a grassroots effort to find like-minded professionals, people who believe that quality is at the heart of software success. Anyone in your organization who sees the importance of making quality a higher priority is a potential ally...and the more you work to lead the effort at establishing a better quality narrative, the more these types of potential allies and champions will make themselves known.

When it comes to promoting ideas around quality, the Atlassian quality team focuses on sharing QA best practices, enhancing product/feature quality, and improving development-QA workflows. Spotify have a similar role with a slightly different job

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[8] This is Robert B. Cialdini's sixth principle of influence. His book *Influence* is a great read to understand the psychology of persuasion.

description: their "Quality Advocates" are tasked with promoting the importance of quality itself within the company.

Once you've begun gathering your internal champions, if you're lucky, you may even one day write an article echoing Lou's words from Airbnb: "I'd like to share with you how we…changed our culture to make testing a first-class citizen."

By focusing on developing your skills around influence and persuasion, you'll be able to forge a stronger culture around quality within your company.

Chapter 3 Summary (TL;DR)

- In order to lead quality inside your company, you must become a student of persuasion and influence.

- Ways to improve your influence include:

    - **Knowing whom you need to influence** and what their motivations, goals and fears are

    - **Creating empathy to increase alignment and understanding** between teams and individuals

    - **Supporting the narrative with evidence** to add weight to your ideas

    - **Cultivating internal champions** to help create momentum