Culture is a set of principles and behaviors that guides the employees of a business. To be effective, they are usually closely linked to the mission of the club.

The Army builds its culture around discipline. Why? Because if you don’t listen to orders, someone might die. 30 seconds late to a meeting and you put your whole team at risk. If you are not prepared at all times, it’s life-threatening. The army in the old days would go out of its way to beat the individuality out of you so you followed orders without complaint. Everyone had the same haircut, everyone wore the same clothes, the same rations went to everyone, the same discipline was meted out if you broke the code. Thinking outside the box was not the job to be done, following orders was.

Facebook started out as ‘move fast, break shit’ because global domination could only be achieved if they grew at an exponential rate.

Netflix has a ‘no rules rules’ culture. They believed that to dominate entertainment and the tech that underpinned it, they need to hire the best people in the world, pay them more, and give them total accountability for decision making. They chopped back all the rules, reduced bureaucracy, and held great people to high standards. If you don’t hit the mark at Netflix, you get a nice severance and big ‘see ya.’

Apple worked off a Think Different mindset. When Microsoft was selling its software to go on other systems, Apple revoked all the licenses so they could control the whole experience. When companies were inventing MP3 players, internet machines, and dumb mobile phones… Apple put them all in one place on an iPhone. Everything they do is underpinned by elite design. I’ve pitched to them and if you have a single error on a deck, it will derail a whole meeting because they are obsessives when it comes to the details… because that is ingrained in their culture.

When you know what you stand for, you build a culture around that idea. You hire people that want to be part of that culture, that understand the rules, and want to live in that world. It’s a sorting mechanism internally, if you don’t agree, go somewhere else, because the reason for being is in a culture deck you live by.

I once wrote a culture deck and someone on my team said it felt like I’d written the rules for a cult, my response, ‘kind of.’

I’ve written extensively about the lack of honesty Arsenal have had for who they are and where they are in this modern world. We have gone through a very public identity crisis over the past 20 years. Ideals that kept us at the top for a long time changed because the world changed. Stability was a point of pride, but it eventually became the reason for stagnation.  Class was used to differentiate us, but it eventually ended up as an excuse for not competing. When we slipped out of the top 2 clubs for wealth, we didn’t accept that drop in class, so sat in denial for many years.

To get to culture, we first need to know what the mission of the club is: **GETTING BACK TO THE TOP OF FOOTBALL BY WINNING BIG TROPHIES**

Nothing else matters. The number 1 priority should always be about what happens on the pitch. Football clubs exist to win trophies. A club as steeped in history as Arsenal needs trophies to progress and grow. If we’re not striving to do that, commercial revenue will dry up, new fans will stop feeding into the system, efforts in the community will be limited, our influence will wane, and we will eventually fade into the background of elite-level football.

We need to be honest about who we are:

* We are not the richest club in the world
* We will have to create a sustainable model of football. i.e. self-funded
* It will take time

What do we have going for us:

* 60,000 seater stadium
* A club name that still cashes cheques
* The best online fanbase on the planet
* A loyal IRL fanbase that will still buy tickets and support a project they understand
* We are based in London
* We have a prestigious history
* Players and managers still want to come here
* Elite London corporate folk would take pay cuts to work at the club

There are also softer elements that might play a big role in establishing some of our cultural pillars. The consultancy we’re using should meet with fans and ask what makes Arsenal special.

We are class. Arsenal do things the right way.

We are diverse. Our fanbase has always been reflective of London.

We are great in the community. Arsenal PR pays attention, we invest in locals, and we try and do the right thing.

These sorts of ideas might stop the club creating a WIN AT ALL COSTS culture deck. That’s not us and it’s not who we want Arsenal to be.

Some more truth:

To get back to the top, we’re going to have to innovate, we’re going to have to be smarter than our opposition, we’re going to have to make money work harder, and we are going to have to be fucking relentless in the pursuit of our objectives.

Football-wise, we’ve already moved to the **honesty** phase:

We signed a hot shit young coach with the hope of him growing with us vs signing Jose Mourinho or Carlo Ancelotti.

We signed young players with 2 years of experience under their belts with the hope of them reaching their peak with us in 3 seasons’ time.

We leaned into our brand to attract them, promising them a platform to succeed they wouldn’t get at other Premier League clubs.

**If that is our football objective, what does it mean for our corporate culture? What does it mean for The Arsenal Way?**

If you can’t be the richest, you have to be the smartest.

That means you have to hire innovators.

That means you need to create an environment where innovators thrive.

That might mean you don’t hire sportspeople who say ‘well, that’s just the way we do it’

That might mean the ‘Bank of England’ baggage of the past needs to be shaken from the board of directors because banks are not innovators, they are supposed to represent stability. Well, our stability has gone, so being likened to a bank has to die. Who are the best sports execs in world sport? Who is doing hot shit in football that is putting a small club on a higher level? Who is the best technology person in the game that can upgrade our app?

That will mean a different marketing story, that will mean a different pitch deck from the sponsorship team who have been selling the same boring story that hasn’t moved our commercial revenues in the right direction for a long time

If The Arsenal Way is about innovating our way to success, it shifts the entire vision of the corporate structure. It sets the tone for who you hire, how they operate, how they are rewarded, how they are judged, and the behaviours they need to elicit to win at Arsenal.

When you establish a clear vision, it also tells you who needs to leave a business. At a very famous hedge fund that has a book about culture, they have a process of ‘sorting’, they go through the literal scores of staff and clear out anyone not cutting the mustard. That might not be The Arsenal Way, but when you re-establish a culture, you need to be ruthless about who works in it. Because, like sport, a couple of bad eggs can bring down the performance of everyone else.

Arsenal are not risk-takers, we haven’t been demanding of ourselves, we haven’t been good at holding ourselves accountable to a higher standard, we haven’t done a good job with our fans, the most interesting thing we’ve done in 15 years was last summer on the sporting side. Stan Kroenke has treated Arsenal like a piece of property he has accrued, as long as it gains 5% every year, he doesn’t need to worry about what’s going on. Well, other clubs in the market are gaining 15-20% a year and we have been left in the mud.

Fixing the culture at Arsenal is about so much more than people feeling good. It’s about making people understand the direction of Arsenal and giving them the tools to succeed at delivering the vision.

… and I know there are a lot of people saying you don’t need a culture deck to succeed, which is true, but without doubt, the very best organizations in the world have the very best cultures. Customer service can be automated or it can be John Lewis. Payments systems can be something boring, or it can be Dan Price of Gravity payments who gets on the Good Morning America show because he believes paying all his staff $70k makes for better business.

Culture isn’t necessarily about feeling good, it’s about knowing what the job to be done is and what behaviors will be rewarded. All the best managers in the world of football will tell you that culture drives performance. Even the managers that aren’t good will tell you the same. If you think it’s just tactics and a smack on the arse that has Pep Guardiola’s team dropping 100 points per game you are very wrong.

So in short, it’s good that someone at the club has recognized the culture is bad, and it’s good they are moving forward with fixing it. I’m just not sure it shines the brightest light on our inexperienced leadership.