

# Pop, Tech + Culture with Marcus Collins Transcript

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**Chris Congdon:** Today's guest is an engineer, music maker, and advertising guru. His work with Beyonce and Apple has put him on a path to become a leader in culture – which he calls the biggest cheat code ever to influence human behavior.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbauski.

**Rebecca Charbauski:** Hi Chris. Dr. Marcus Collins is today's guest. His new book called "For the Culture" is filled with examples about how to harness the power of culture to influence people – both in the world of marketing and in our workplaces. He is the head of strategy at Wieden + Kennedy New York and a clinical assistant professor of marketing at the University of Michigan.

**CC:** After our interview with Marcus, Robin Rosebrugh will join us. Robin is a workplace researcher who works with Steelcase as an Architecture & Design Manager. She's also one of the most well-read people you'll ever meet. Robin will talk to us about how the places we work can help influence behavior and, ultimately, culture.

**RC:** If you know anyone who needs to have a better day at work, or is interested in harnessing culture to influence behavior, we'd really appreciate it if you share this podcast with them.

**CC:** Welcome to Work Better Marcus, thanks for being here.

**Marcus Collins:** Thanks so much for having me. I am super stoked for this.

**CC:** Oh thanks. I'm really excited to talk to you too because I think your book is really fascinating and all the work that you've been doing on culture is really interesting especially with where we're all at right now in terms of our work. But if you wouldn't mind I'd love for you to talk a little bit about your journey – how you got to the place where you're writing this book because it feels like you have done so many different things in your life, I felt a little humbled when I was looking at it going, "How did you do all of this stuff?" Do you mind just giving us your backstory a tiny bit?

**MC:** Sure. It's best captured in the Beatles song "The Long and Winding Road." It looks better in the rearview mirror than it did going through it. But ultimately I'm a kid from Detroit born and raised and I did really well in math and science in high school. So, the thing you did in the 90's if you were into math and science was go into engineering. That's why I did studied material science engineering because I was really excited because all the polymers - thought they were kind of cool and while I think they're very interesting I don't know that's the best way to describe polymers as cool. What I really want to do is yeah a little bit a little bit that was cool.

**CC:** Yeah, a little nerdy.

**MC:** I'm totally cool of being a nerd but I was really excited about what music was and I didn't really love my engineering courses because I didn't feel like I was in the right frame to take them in so I started taking some courses in the school of music. I really fell in love with major 7's. I really fell in love with these chord changes that I knew so familiarly from listening to music my whole life like Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson and Babyface and I felt like it was the first time I remember being excited about learning as an adult. So, I went home and said mom and dad I think I want to be a songwriter and my mom and dad said I think you're crazy because it is not what you want to do. So, as parents will have you do, I went back to school in the summer and finished my engineering degree and went to the music industry and had some success. It wasn't sustainable but had some success as a songwriter producer.

**MC:** And the business. The company I started didn't fare so well. So I went back to school to get my MBA to figure out this disruption that was happening in the marketplace of music known as digital and from the MBA program here at the school of business at university of Michigan, I went out west to go work at Apple. I met Matthew Knowles who has a daughter named Beyonce. He says let me get this straight? You were an engineer and you started a music company. You have an MBA, you work at Apple iTunes and you're black. Like, who are you man? You're a unicorn. You don't exist.

**CC:** Ah! He just "happens" to have a daughter...

**MC:** (laughing) So, it's like, no, I exist. So he says well you should run digital strategy for Beyonce and I said yes sir I should do that. So I ran digital strategy for Beyonce during the I am Sasha days which is an amazing time to be in the Beyonce business. I mean, there's not like there's ever a bad time but this was a uniquely amazing time because she was sort of ascending from just being Beyonce. The megastar to being queen B as we know her today and I went from the music world into the world of advertising and it's really where I found my footing. I started to explore the behavioral sciences inside of advertising, understanding why people do what they do and the better I became in understanding those things the better I became at being a practitioner and the better practitioner I was the more curious I was about the scholarship and that really became the two worlds that I occupy - the convergence of the two - of practice and academia - and I explored the academic side even further finishing my doctorate degree and then becoming a professor. So now I sit right at the convergence of the two, bridging the academic practitioner gap between how we put Ideas in the world as practitioners and then how we integrate those ideas as a scholar.

**CC:** I'm also a little nerdy and I'm nerdy about what you were just talking about like human behavior. I want to talk particularly about your work on culture. But I just want to let all of our listeners know. Don't worry I am going to ask some questions about Marcus's work with Queen B because we just got to know a little bit more about that. So we'll get to that but let's start out talking about culture because you know culture is one of those things that we use the term a lot but I don't know if everybody really has the same understanding of what culture is. Some would describe it as when you think about culture from a company perspective and a corporate perspective - that people say that you can't duplicate culture. Culture is unique within each organization and one of the things that you said that really struck me is that there's no vehicle more influential to human behavior than culture. So for a human behavior geek I really wanted to hear you just talk a little bit more about how you think about culture.

**MC:** It's perfectly said there Chris that cultures are those things that that we talk about colloquially, it's a part of our vernacular but our understanding of it isn't quite concrete. In fact, if you ask 10 people to define culture, you're probably going to get 30 different answers. And one would say well, Okay, so what? What's the big deal? But to your point that there's no force more influential on human behavior than culture, full stop right? What we buy, where we go, what we do, where we work if we work, how we work, who we marry if we marry. Where we vacation. What we eat, how we bury the dead. All these things are byproducts of our cultural subscription and the better we understand those things the more likely we are to impact them whether you are bringing your products to market through commerce, whether you are leading an organization and you want people to behave a certain way or rather you are trying to get people to sign up for your newsletter or vote for your candidate or join your church. We're all in the business of influence and behavior to one degree or another which makes culture like the biggest cheat code ever. The better we understand it, like the better Rosetta stone we have to talk about it, the more likely we are to operationalize it. So I think about culture through David Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of sociology. He described culture as a system of values, symbols and norms that demarcate who people are and what the expectations of people like them are. That's powerful because to your point it's hard to copy culture because people have very specific beliefs. Cultural norms are social norms rather than language and the only way we understand them is to get very close to them to understand the nuances of them right? Ah, which is why you know we can look at 1 thing and it means something to 1 person believing something else to someone else right? You know it's why for some, cows are for leather. For others, it is a deity and for some its dinner. Or why for some a rug is decor, for others it's a souvenir and for some it's a place of worship right? So copying those things requires great intimacy and that's why it's hard or some say impossible to copy one's culture. You can copy the executions, you could copy sort of how it manifests but the anchor of culture is our identity and the beliefs and ideologies that we hold and those things inform what we wear, what we do but we go how we talk, how we behave based on the expectations of what it means to be someone like us.

**CC:** You broke it down in your book into 3 elements. I found those really helpful ways to think about culture. Do you mind talking about those 3 elements a little bit Marcus.

**MC:** If you extrapolate Emile Durkheim's definition of culture is his lens of culture and think about it there is a more contemporary lens gentleman by the name of Raymond Williams who is a cultural scholar or theorist, a critic actually. He would talk about culture as like a system of systems that are anchored in our identity, who we are, how we self- identify because of how I self- identify I hold a set of beliefs and ideologies right? These are stories I tell myself about the world right? Beliefs I hold the truths that I hold about the world - stories I tell us about the world and who I am in those stories the character I play and because of my ideologies and beliefs I therefore exercise myself in a way that is aligned with those ideologies and beliefs right? The artifacts that I donned, what I wear, are the behavior that is normative for people like me. And the language that we use right? The code words, the jargon, saying colloquialisms and then those things are expressed through cultural production. The movies I watch, the music I listen to, the literature I take in. The comic books that I read, the podcasts that I listen to and the brands and branded products from which I consume are all byproducts of my cultural subscription For instance, um I grew up listening to hip hop watching the Cosby Show and studying and reading the bible. Because of those things I have a specific take on aesthetics like a fashion aesthetic from hip hop or what it means to be a good parent beyond my parents being a good model right from the Cosby show and then what it means to be moral and upright from reading the bible. The cultural product that I read is someone who self-identifies as a Christian. As a hip hop fan it not only reflects what people like me do but it also sort of gives instruction of what people like me ought to do.

**CC:** Yeah, that is a super interesting way to kind of reflect on it and the importance of it that you don't necessarily recognize when it's happening in your work. I feel like there's a language that we speak in my family. There's a language that we speak that is very different from the language that we speak in the Workplace. But if you don't speak that language - if you don't understand it - it's really hard for you to feel a part of that.

**MC:** That's right. 1000% mean language is an invitation that signals to people that you're one of us when you use our isms, you use our vernacular, so I take W Kennedy for instance at the organization I work for Ra around strategy in the New York office right? We have a lot of sayings.

We say, " come in stupid," or "shut up" when people are talking. Fail Harder. I mean we have these isms that are expressed through the words that we use and when people say it you go? Oh you're one of us right in every network or community. We have these sets of cultural characteristics, beliefs, artifacts, behaviors and language that govern what it means to be a part of this organization if you self identify as such. Now, there are people who are in our organization who will say, "Yeah I work here but I don't feel like I'm in the in-crowd or I don't feel like I'm like a part of the community and those people are always on the fringe right? Those people aren't as engaged, but it's the people who buy into the cultural characteristics. They not only drive the manifestation of those characteristics but also they know what the expectations of their behaviors ought to be and therefore they behave accordingly.

**CC:** Another area that I'm kind of nerdy about is neuroscience and just anything that has to do with the brain and I was really fascinated in your book when you talked about how the brain reacts to messages around culture versus if I'm a leader in the organization and I'm just talking about it. That's different from how our brain reacts to it and how it drives people to act. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

**MC:** Absolutely. So there's a part of the brain that we know as the limbic system that's associated with emotions right? Trust, love, loyalty – all the gooey stuff that relationships are made of – as associated with the limbic system, because of its connection to the hippocampus and the amygdala that are really hot spots for memory right? So when we experience something emotionally sort of tattooed to our hippocampus or our amygdala so that we know how to respond the next time it happens right? We know what to do by not only our emotions associated with the limbic system. So this decision making and behavior – and we know this intuitively because we call that intuition “I just felt it in my gut.” I don't know why I felt it in my gut and therefore I decide to do X Y and z. You had a feeling in your gut. You felt it in your limbic system and because of that you moved accordingly and it's hard for us to describe those gut instincts. It's hard for us to describe intuition because the part of the brain associated with articulation is in the Neocortex – a different part of the brain and not only is articulation associated with the neocortex but so is rationality right? So it's easy for us to describe the rational things but hard for us to describe the emotional things. It's like you have a Kirk brain and a Spock brain right? Your Spock brain is data driven, insight focused and your Kirk brain is like, “Man, let's just do this based on what I feel.” So how do leaders motivate people to move? It's not through rational arguments. It's through activating the emotional part of the brain activating the limbic system and culture. It's extremely emotional because it is associated with who we are. It's our identity because of who I am. People like me do something like this and when someone preaches the gospel associated with our shared belief or shared ideology, it's more inclined to activate the limbic system than telling me facts and it is much more aligned with our rational brain. Now here's the good part: when you can emotionally evoke the limbic system, and then have rational arguments to support it, good night that is one plus one equals 3 right? That is that putting 2 hands together makes something even more powerful right? Chapman puts it this way. Yeah, you start with the soul and end with the cell right? you start with the soul, start with the emotional part. Then in the rational arguments it creates the justification that people need to say “this is what I'm going to do and it makes sense but it also feels right.”

**CC:** I just wanted to go back and point out in case, other people didn't catch this, your reference to the Spock brain and the Kirk brain, if you didn't watch Star Trek, you would have no idea what Marcus was talking about so I feel like we have that cultural connection because I'm like “yes, I know exactly what you mean,” that evokes something in my mind when I think about who those 2 characters.

**MC:** What a powerful observation. You're right and this is the thing about cultures that we take for granted. We just said it. We're not even thinking, realizing “Oh you definitely know what I'm talking about but not everybody knows that right? not everybody knows Spock and Kirk without saying it's from Star Trek but you knowing that, go “Oh I get the reference and now we are connected,” and if you didn't get the reference you're like “I don't know what this guy is talking about and we therefore would feel disconnected.” This is the power of culture. It's so powerful it connects us, and because we are connected we're more inclined to act alike, act similarly.

**CC:** Speaking of that, you talk a lot about people finding their congregation or finding their people and we're thinking a lot along the same lines from a workplace perspective because we're trying to think about how can work feel more like a community, like you're a member of the community as opposed to, "I just go there and I do this job and I have this transactional relationship." How do I have that more emotive relationship with people? This is where we're going to talk about Beyonce everybody because this is you talking about her fans and how they actually self-organized and I was wondering if you could share that story with everybody?

**MC:** Sure thing. One of my biggest learnings in my career was actually one of my biggest failures. I was tasked to run digital strategy for Beyonce and I had a lot of things I was responsible for that were part of my mission. One of which was helping move her offline fan club online. Now we're talking like 2009, 2010 so this is very early in the major adoption of social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter but these things were really coming into being at the time. It's like oh I could definitely do this. This is an easy one - check this off the book very easily. So, we tried to build a community for her - the entire team wasn't just me - tried to build this community for her, the fan club, this online fan club that we were building, and when we launched it, it was a party that no one showed up to and I don't say that with hyperbole. It was not as engaged as we expected considering Beyonce's fandom or considering Beyonce's stature and we're asking ourselves, what's going on here. Why isn't this thing working and we realized as we looked across the social web that there's a community of people that had self congregated. They'd brought themselves together without any of our help right? They brought themselves together because they saw the world similarly, they believed. And they called themselves the beehive right? They believed what Beyonce believed and they assembled together not because of their fandom as much as their shared beliefs and ideologies and they had their own language they established. They had their own social norms they established. They had their own artifacts that they established for themselves and the team said whoa. What? what? Why are we trying to build this thing where it already exists? Let's just go help them. Let's facilitate that community and make that the fan club and you know fast forward to today. That's Beyonce's official fan club. The beehive wasn't built it was it was facilitated. I think that as we think about the companies or organizations that we run the takeaway for me is the idea isn't we're going to build this thing anew. Instead we're going to find people who see the world the way we do and invite them to be a part of the organization that happens to work here. They bring their skill sets here. But we're building a community right? We're building a community of people who see the world similarly so we interview folks. We're asking about their transactional things or their value propositions, right? I have this skill. That's great. But what do you believe? How do you see the world? Talk about the frames by which you translate the world and someone could be extremely talented but if they don't subscribe to the same ideological point of view that we do then are they the best fit for us and we're not talking about hiring the same kinds of people. This isn't about echo chambers, it's about shared belief. My work at Apple was really illuminating for me in this way that Apple has so much diversity in the kinds of walks of life that people have there - may not be as racially and ethnically diverse - but definitely people with different factions of life have different cultural subscriptions right? They all come together to work at Apple - the thousands of people and tens of thousands of people that do - but the thing that unites them is a shared point of view. They're there because they believe in challenging the conventional norms - bucking the the conventional status quo. And that's what unites them. We look at Apple and say they have a great culture so much so that we'd say that it's a cult-like brand. That's how salient the cultural characteristics are. So as we think about our companies, yes, we want to bring the most talented people together - 1000%. But if we want to take advantage of the power of culture then find people who are not only super talented but also see the world the way we do. Some of us aren't just coming here to find a job - but coming here to find community. We find ourselves in a far more powerful position as an organization to really harness the power of culture.

**CC:** What advice would you give to a leader who's trying to build their culture and you look at a place like Apple and it's really clear that they're challenging the norm as you said. Not every business has that same kind of emotive - or maybe they don't feel like they have that same kind of emotive mission or vision of the world. What would you say to somebody who's, I don't know, making automotive parts, or something like that? How do you apply some of these concepts that you're talking about?

**MC:** That calls to mind what's known as the bricklayers parable and the idea is this: say I'm driving down the street and I see you on the side of the road Chris and you're laying bricks. I go "Chris what are you doing?" You say "I'm laying bricks Marcus." You have a job. You're a bricklayer right. Driving a little while later, and I see you laying bricks and say Chris what are you doing? And you say "oh I'm building a church" or now you have a career "I build churches." I'm driving on the street a little later and I see you laying bricks. I go "Chris what are you doing" and you say "I'm building the house of God." Now you have a calling. Which Chris is more excited about coming to work every day? The one that has a calling. The one that is here not just to do a job - the one that's there because they're contributing to something far greater than themselves. You know there's folklore about John F. Kennedy that after we chose to go to the moon, one day according to the lore, he was visiting NASA and he saw a janitor sweeping the floor. He goes up to the janitor, who says hey how's it going Mr. President? JFK says I'm doing well. And then JFK asked the janitor, "What are you doing?" And the janitor says "oh I'm putting the man on the moon Sir." Here's the janitor sweeping the floor, sweeping the floor and he understands the assignment that everybody in this organization, even if you are doing what some would say would be the most remedial task of cleaning, you are laying a brick to put people on the moon. You are laying a brick to build the house of God. And that's how we should think about our organization. Whether you create sheet metal or create screws, whether you grow apples or you make Apple computers, the organization is why we are here because we see the world similarly and everybody has a role to play.



**CC:** Since we're talking about building cathedrals, I want to shift the conversation a little bit to literally talking about place but physical places where people gather because we're in a time right now where I think a lot of organizations are trying to figure out how they're working differently - with more people working remotely, some people working physically and in the same places and I'm just curious how you see place playing a role in terms of cultivating culture. What might we do differently if you have a thought on that one?

**MC:** The physical environment is important because to your point, the physical environment is like a temple. It's sort of a prompt cue for us to say when we are here we act a certain way. It's like for me, I act one way when I'm out with friends than I do when I'm in the church sanctuary. I'm still the same Marcus but that physical space is a prompt for me to say oh these are the expectations of people like me, these are the behaviors, artifacts and language that are expected of me with these people. So when thinking about the physical environment of our organization. They should be a prompt not that I go here to get work done. Not just that but I go here and there's a certain way that I show up. There's a certain way that I'm meant to be. So the idea then is how do we curate the physical environment such that they are not there. There are multiple prompts that keep me in that head space but also create the psychological safety that is necessary for me to do everything I need to do to get done. It's more than just we have a foosball table in the kitchen - those are just superficial. The idea is what do we believe and how do we curate the space to be signifiers of that belief right? How do we curate physical space such that they're not only reminders of what I'm supposed to do but they actually help me do that very thing.

**CC:** You've also written in your book that when we achieve collective agreement people don't join because of who we are. They do it because of who they are and I know that this could be about brand and your work in branding but it also feels like it could be a workplace. Can you talk more about how it might relate to attracting or retaining talent in terms of how we work with people?

**MC:** I think of it this way: that we often think that as an organization we're going to go recruit some talent. We're going to go to a college campus or put a post out on LinkedIn or whatever the outlets we're going to go get people and we're going to tell people how great we are – value propositions of what it means to work here – to work with the amazing people, we pay well and we have 401K and we have this, we have that – all things about who we are. I think the idea is to instead sort of subvert that and think more about who they are. And say I want to talk to you people who see the world like this because we see the world similarly and we're looking for people who have a worldview, ideology and belief about the world that governs how they show up in the world. People joined the organization not because of who you are, they joined the organization because of who they are and who they happen to be, congruent with the organization. I choose this organization because it is an extension of who I am or who I want to be. It's me. It is a reflection, a receipt of my identity and the moment that the organization no longer is that, people retreat from it internally. People refer to quiet-quitting or they become disengaged and they go, "Look man I'm just here for a paycheck now we're in a transactional relationship" and they go, "Is there a better way to get a better paycheck at a different company?" Then they search for somewhere else. But people who stay at a job where they've been at the same title for a long time, – their pay is only incrementally increased but they stay because of course I'll be here. This is home for me. These are my people. This is who I am. This is me? They stay because of who they are not necessarily because who the organization is. The organization is an outcome of their own identity and they decide they pick when those things are congruent.

**CC:** You're reminding me of when we were interviewing employees probably about a year ago and when we asked people why they would want to come work for Steelcase, I was expecting to get more of what I'd call kind of the MBA answer of here's where I see my my career going, but what everybody talked about is our commitment to the environment and sustainability. I found that so fascinating that I was like "Wow this is who they are and they wanted to work for a company that shared that same value" and I just found that super interesting that that was the thing that people just kept coming back to. I was like, "wow!"

**MC:** That's such a powerful thing because I tell MBA students don't lead with your resume, lead with your value propositions. I worked here. I did this. Start with my name is Marcus and here's how I see the world. I believe that for instance I believe that. Marketing is the act of going to market and the core function of marketing is to influence behavior and I want to work at an organization that is committed to not only creating products that are helpful for people but their marketing activity is driven to get people to adopt behavior. And you do that all the time in your work and I feel like this is the kind of place where I'll be better at that and if your organization believes that they go whoa hey this person's one of us and the conversation completely changes and that person is not like all the other candidates you just interviewed that person. This woman sounds like us and it makes people much more inclined to get hired not just because of their skill set but because of their congruence with the community.

**CC:** That feels so familiar having that conversation. Yeah, they sound like us. So let's carry that another step further because when we think about the advertising world that you're working in, obviously we've seen the rise of influencers. I'm obviously more likely to buy something if there's somebody like me or who I consider a friend or you know if they recommend it. When you think about culture within an organization, is there a new influencer? Is it the leader or is it the employee? Do you think that's changing?

**MC:** Sure, I'd say that influence is not analogous with authority right? One may have authority but not a lot of influence. One may have power but not a lot of influence, at least direct power, but not a lot of influence. Influence is the ability to lead, to push people a certain way based on their behavior and their characteristics right? So the idea then is that there are people who can be the lowest on the totem pole. That could be super influential because people trust them because they have credence within those people. You could be the CEO of a company but people don't trust you and therefore though you have authority your influence isn't as great unless you directly impose power on them. So I would change the way we think about that to say who are the most influential people in the building, those are the people who have the highest probability of encouraging other people to act and typically those people are people with a set of close strong ties with people in the organization and weak ties. They call them bridges right based on the structure of the organization. So this idea of influence isn't just how many people you can touch or people know you, but it's really about where you sit within the structure of the network of the organization and the more likely you are to identify those people who have strong ties and a collection of weak ties and those people are reflective of the collective thinking of those people. That individual is more likely to be influential than someone who has a big, you know, glossy title.

**CC:** Do you think it's different in terms of building culture and influence? Do you think there's a difference between really large organizations like Apple where it's very dispersed around the world? How they need to do that versus maybe a smaller or more midsize business?

**MC:** It's definitely much harder. The big organization is much, much harder. Robin Dunbar refers to this as the Dunbar Number that there is a maximum sort of cognitive ceiling. The amount of relationships we can hold that we can manage, that we can groom and we can nourish and when the organization exceeds that number which is about 150 people then it gets really hard for the organization to act as one as a unit so the bigger their organization is the more fractured it becomes. So the idea is how do you make these different fractures still ladder up to the overarching culture of the organization? Super difficult thing to do when you're a smaller organization. You know everybody. Not only you know everybody, I can see everybody about the physical space that we're in - the physical space. I can observe people's behavior and I know what to do. I'm observing through social proof what's expected of people like me. Oh this is how we hold the elevator. This is what we do at the coffee machine. I had to observe these things. I know how to mimic them. But when there are - when it's a large organization - it's hard to observe everybody. So I started observing people who are most like myself and we find ourselves in these smaller network communities. We were designed as human beings to be a part of these smaller tribes, these networks, these communities right? So that's the benefit of having a smaller organization right? So we create departments now and the departments have their own culture. The idea is that the culture of that department is a different manifestation of the overarching culture of the organization and that's the job of the department head to ensure that there are localized expectations. But those expectations are not antithetical to the expectations of the broader organization.

**CC:** Large organizations are working on diversity. It's a huge issue that we're certainly focused on and I'm just curious what you think about how developing this cohesion, this cultural cohesion, how that happens when or how do we do that in the best way when we're also trying to create a very diverse organization with diverse perspectives and diverse experiences.

**MC:** I think that we talk about DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) and we tend to focus on diversity first like how do we make sure that it's a diverse body of people because that is a proxy for a diverse body of perspectives. But I think that the idea is to actually start with the I then the E then the D. Start with inclusion because you probably have people in the organization who are representative of different perspectives and different backgrounds. They're already diverse and when you have people who are already in the organization who don't feel included, you bring other new voices and new people in that those people are going to feel disenfranchised too, soon. If you have diverse people in the building who don't feel they're a part of the organization when new people come who are diverse. They won't feel like there is a central density, a gravitational pull for people like themselves and they'll be just like the other people who aren't included right? So, to first start, make people who are in the building now feel like they are part of the organization. That they have a seat at the table. They're part of this thing. And then they'll see the table is equitable with everyone else - that their voice is just as important as everyone else and then we start to bring more new diverse voices to the table and be sure that those people have a seat at the table so their voices are heard. We're not looking for people who are clones of us, just people who believe what we believe and as a result we can work towards a collective goal but the direction that we go to get there can be different right? You know I work at the University Of Michigan Ross School of business as well. Tons of different perspectives here. But we're all united under one goal - to find the good in business. Do good in the world by doing good business. We all believe that but the manner in which we do that differs and it's that heterogeneity, that diversity of thought that gets us to better solutions.

**CC:** I love that! Marcus, you've given me a big smile. Just thinking about this idea of starting with inclusion first I think that's just such a great insight. Marcus, I have just enjoyed talking to you so much today. I think we could talk for another hour, but I know that you are obviously a busy person so I'm going to let you go and just thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you.

**MC:** I'm grateful for the time. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

**CC:** After talking with Marcus I really wanted to talk to my colleague Robin Rosebrugh who joined us from Vancouver, Canada. In her role there, she's supporting the architectural and design community and drawing on her background as an organizational psychologist. I knew that she would be intrigued with some of the things that Marcus had to say so thanks for joining me today Robin, I appreciate it.

**Robin Rosebrugh:** Thank you for having me here, Chris. I'm really happy to have listened to that episode with Marcus and learned so much about what culture is. I don't think I had a clear definition before that.

**CC:** He did have a great definition. I really appreciated that too and I loved some of the examples he talked about in terms of how place plays a role in communicating to us about culture and about behaviors that are appropriate within that culture. I loved his example of talking about how you might behave differently if you're hanging out with friends or if you're in a church or a library. You know those spaces just tell you kind of what's appropriate. I'm just curious what you think about that when it comes to work? How might we think about designing places to help curate the culture that we want to have?

**RR:** There's a lot of different factors around that and I really like how he described those pieces of culture impacting our behavior and our language and everything and it comes back to those visible things, the social cues and norms that we can observe and see when we're in the workplace together. But also the little trinkets that we might see on somebody's desk whether it's a picture of their pet - and I always use this example of I have an Aussie shepherd too and it's like if I see somebody with one I'm going to be like let's talk about those first eighteen months and all the things that they ate in our house!" and it's a jumping off point to really develop that rapport with somebody and trust and it's really important that we have that trust in the workplace because it leads to the ability to be able to take risks - something as simple as asking questions or sharing new ideas when we don't have our own desks anymore. So we had this WorkLab in Vancouver which is something that Steelcase explored in various different cities where we had this pop-up and we explored what the future workplace could look like and brought many different tours through and had these amazing conversations about this evolution of workplace and culture was a big piece of that. And with non-owned desking, how can you create that? One of the brainstorms that came out of it was well maybe it's something as simple as having instant print cameras that people can take home at the end of the day and you have this community board like you would see in any neighborhood Starbucks and people could post or literally post with a thumbtack their images the next day of their activities. The people in their life that they care about kind of facilitate those conversations with others. If I see somebody posting a photo on this board and it's this hike that they did over the weekend and it's one that I've been thinking about doing then I'm going to go have a conversation with that person. Even if I didn't know them prior so it allows for those connections to really form.

**CC:** Right? Yeah, which is great and I know that when we're together physically we have an opportunity even if we don't have the shared... or if we don't own our own desks anymore. Now, think about that when we're working remotely. How do we help communicate those kinds of things? You can see my books. I can see your background that gives us a little bit of affinity. But it sometimes doesn't always feel like you get - because it's curated I guess - to be on the screen. Sometimes it doesn't always feel like you get that kind of authentic feel that you do when you just run into somebody in the cafe or something like that. I also wanted to ask you, from an attraction and retention point of view, this idea about how the organization communicates what it stands for and that maybe it's not as important that you know that it's about the organization. But it's about whether people see themselves, see their values, reflected back to them in the organization and that comes back to this whole notion of creating belonging that we've been talking about for a long time. I would love to hear your take on how we create that sense of belonging. Do you think it's important? Does it matter to people or should we just say do your work and I don't care if you feel a sense of belonging? I think I know your answer on that one.

**RR:** I think it is. I know it is so important. In 1975 this scientist William Baumzweiger discovered that it's actually a fundamental human need. It's something that is essential for human flourishing which is something that we talk about wanting to create in a workplace and there are a lot of ways that we can do this. We can help people connect with each other in a workplace. If you think about it, how many hours do we spend in a workplace? We don't connect in our neighborhoods at home in the same sort of way or with our community naturally so workplaces really are where most people are now finding a sense of belonging, so being able to create that is extremely important to lead to well-being for them to be able to get their best work done. So yes, super important how we can create that through space. There are a multitude of ways whether it's activities or space-based. There was a great example recently with Adobe. They created their founder's tower and I really love the design element that they put into it which is queued through color theory and neuroscience, where they have 3 distinct different themes and then a whole bunch of different spaces that people can choose to get their work done in but these color themes draw people in because of the certain energy and vibe. That's there if you're going to all the calm blue spaces. It may be something that you innately need and you're going to be connected to people who are also wanting to be in that space. It doesn't need to be through color. It could be a space that is full of plants and Biophilia and softness and light colors and if you're drawn to that. You may be just needing a bit less sensory overload versus somebody who needs that energy fix from being in the purples and oranges and bright colors and a lot more energy through volume and everything in that space that's going to draw different people, allowing them to find their own people to connect with outside of their departments. You can also possibly do it through different activities. So instead of just doing pizza Friday which brings everybody together but doesn't allow people to really connect over a shared sense of belonging. You can have something where you really get to know your employees and find out what their passions and interests are and curate personalized events for those different groups so that it can be something as simple as bringing somebody in and teaching them how to make that perfect sourdough that they may not have mastered during the pandemic or having a class on painting or even dedicating a room in the office for people to practice. Create a band together or have a choir practice or something like that. So that way they're connecting to people that have shared interests and that's where you're going to get a really deep sense of belonging in the workplace.

**CC:** Those are lovely thoughts. I just would appreciate something different from this pattern that we've gotten ourselves into that started with the pandemic of these you know like 30 minute back-to-back video calls. Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. Who has time to make sourdough bread or even talk to their colleagues? So I mean just breaking that pattern I think would be huge toward creating the kind of culture where people want to belong. Robin I know, like you, I could talk about this forever, but I just appreciate you coming in and sharing a few thoughts with our listeners today about how we could go about creating those kinds of cultures where people want to work. Thanks for joining me today.

**RR:** Thanks for having me Chris.

**CC:** Thank you for being here with us. If you enjoyed this conversation – share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at [steelcase.com/research](https://steelcase.com/research) to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox.

**RC:** Join us next week for our conversation with Anya Kamenetz. Anya covered education for many years including for NPR. Her newest book is *The Stolen Year: How Covid Changed Children's Lives, And Where We Go Now*. We'll talk about the work happening in our classrooms. How online and hybrid learning are impacting kids and teachers. Plus, she has some inspiring success stories to share as well.

**CC:** We hope you join us.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

### **CREDITS**

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