



**QUESTLINE**  
Leading Progress

# **Is a 'Wonky' Project Culture Sucking the Energy out of You and Your Project?**

**The Case for Better Human-Centric Leadership Development  
and Support for Project Leaders**





# The Project Leadership Conundrum

**At Questline we believe that Project Leaders deserve high quality Human-Centric Leadership Development and Support yet currently they are less likely to receive this than their non-project peers in the organisation.**

Here, we offer a case for Project Leaders and Managers to rebalance their focus from traditional 'hard' process driven skills and continue to develop essential human-centric leadership skills which will help strengthen project culture and in turn make projects more likely to succeed.

We want to raise awareness and continue that constructive conversation towards addressing the Project Leadership conundrum:

**Whilst, in the age of AI and digital transformation, projects are including more advanced technology, the impact on people has not decreased.**

In fact, the human element has only increased in importance as organisations and teams grapple with the new opportunities within the disrupted digital landscape.

Yet, we still see Project Leadership leaning towards the more technical and process centric development and support which, although important, is missing the biggest factor in project success – a strong project culture.

'Culture' can be somewhat ambiguous as it can pertain to 'everything' and for this reason we sense that the 'harder' more tangible skills are often more tempting to develop. This, coupled with an 'arms race' to gain the latest in technological accreditations, whilst wholly appropriate for your technical specialists, may not be the wisest investment for Project Leaders.

To help address this, we offer our interpretation of the definition of culture and highlight the wider elements Project Leaders can equally leverage in order to develop a strong, aligned culture.

Finally, we make the link between project risk and project success, highlighting the positive impact Project Leaders can have on culture and the rationale of focussing on *all* elements of culture not least, the crucial human-centric aspect.

Many thanks for taking the time to engage and as always, we welcome constructive dialogue.

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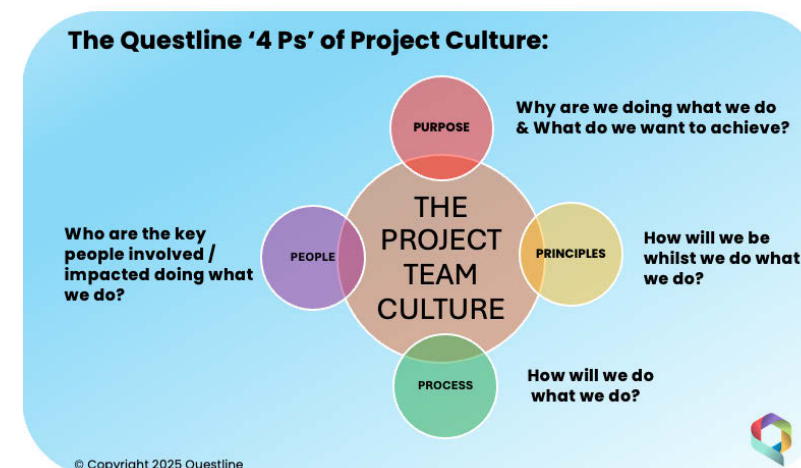
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# Project Culture & Project Success

Deal and Kennedy (2000) recognise culture as *"The way things get done around here"* and whilst a 'strong' culture can be unique to specific teams, I tend to sum up a strong culture in one word; **'Aligned'**. This is where you can *feel* the energy moving in the same direction, generally towards a common goal. Conversely, I define a **'Wonky'** culture as one where energy and focus is diluted towards conflicting or competing objectives making the overall mission feel harder – not impossible – just harder.

We can break down *"The way"* using a familiar analysis technique – Who, What, Why and How (let's park *When* and *Where* for now) and in doing so identify the distinct elements or our **'4 P's' of Project Culture** helping to give us some tangible levers Project Leaders can use to influence culture:



Peter Drucker famously (*may not have*) said *"Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast"* and whilst wholeheartedly agreeing with the sentiment, we are showing that strategy can be seen as a sub-element (under *Purpose*) ensuring that culture remains the single biggest factor in Project success.

I recognise that creating and nurturing project culture is an ongoing evolving activity, one that Project Leaders in particular must continuously be alive to, rather than a one-off prescriptive process. Yet failing to get a handle on any single element will make the project more risky and therefore less likely to succeed.

*Project Success* here is left open as these are your unique objectives. Typically, I would see success as *'Delivering value at the right time without breaking people along the way'*.

Finally, one other important factor is to acknowledge the wider organisational culture. In my experience, projects have the added advantage of being able to create a strong project sub-culture. In an ideal world there would be perfect harmony but in practice, as long as the project is delivering value, then it can be left to develop organically (for better or for worse). If there are potential material impacts from the wider organisation or programme, they can be raised as a risks and escalated.

Now, let's delve into each element and highlight some key levers which will help Project Leaders move towards and maintain a strong aligned culture.



# Purpose – Why Are We Doing What We Do?

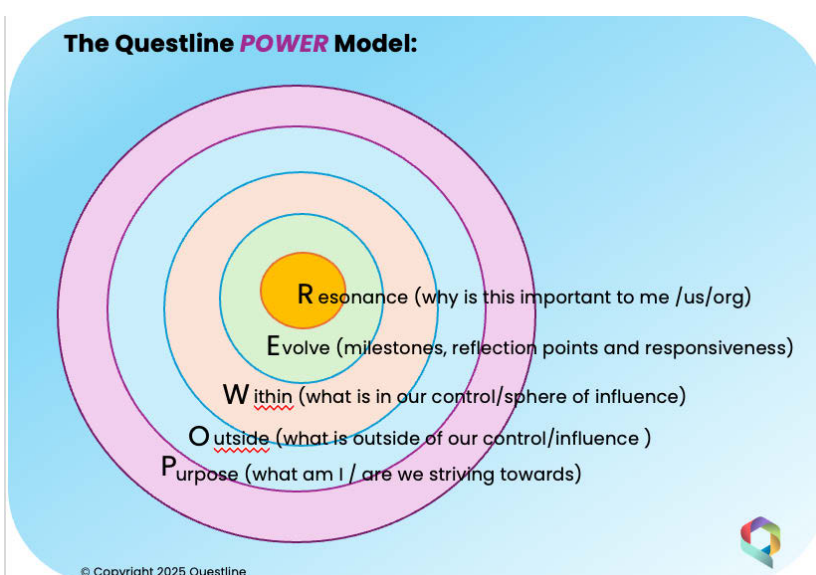
Although I mentioned that there is no prescription, we need a place to start, so as always, let's "Start with Why".

*Purpose* will define your direction of travel whilst *Resonance* helps you and the team understand your importance and the value of each activity within.

There's a lovely story of a NASA Janitor in the 1960's who was asked by the President before the successful Moon Missions "So what is your role here?" to which the Janitor responded, quick as a flash, "I'm helping put a man on the moon!"

At *Questline*, we use our **POWER** model to help tease out *Purpose* and *Resonance* as well as recognising what is inside our sphere of influence and what is not whilst identifying any natural milestones which will help us evolve towards our objective.

Of course, we're not forgetting *SMART* objectives – very sensible but lacking a little *oomph* in the *Resonance* department.

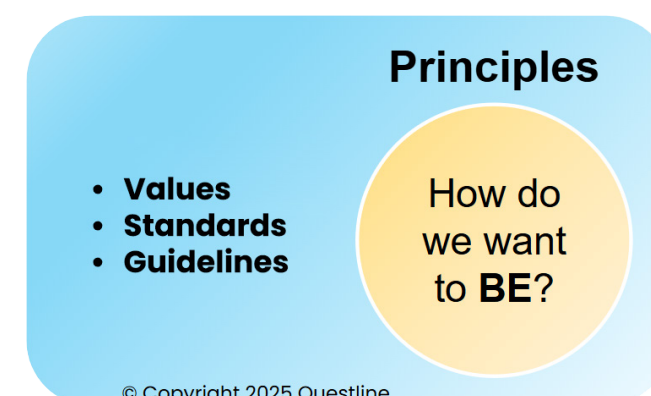


The Questline **POWER** model is a neat tool to compliment the process of defining your project *Purpose* (what) and *Resonance* (why) and importantly, just like the NASA Janitor, the whole team can point to their contribution and regularly self-correct, including Project Leadership.

**Q: Can your Project Leaders and teams define exactly what the project is trying to achieve? Can they define why it is important to the strategic direction of the organisation and the valuable role they play? Do your Project Leaders know *their* purpose and the value they add?**

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# Principles – How Do We Want To be?



**These are essentially the guidelines we can all subscribe to as a team which will help inform us as we move into the 'unknown' world of project delivery.**

Ideally, *Principles* and *Values* will be congruent (at least not conflicting) with the wider organisation and programme. That said, they can exist separately as they will be influenced by the unique nature of the delivery mission.

So why are project *Principles* & *Values* so important? As humans, we all have personal principles and values, and even the most technologically advanced projects are still an inherently human activity. Therefore identifying and aligning with a clear set of principles sets the natural base framework for our culture.

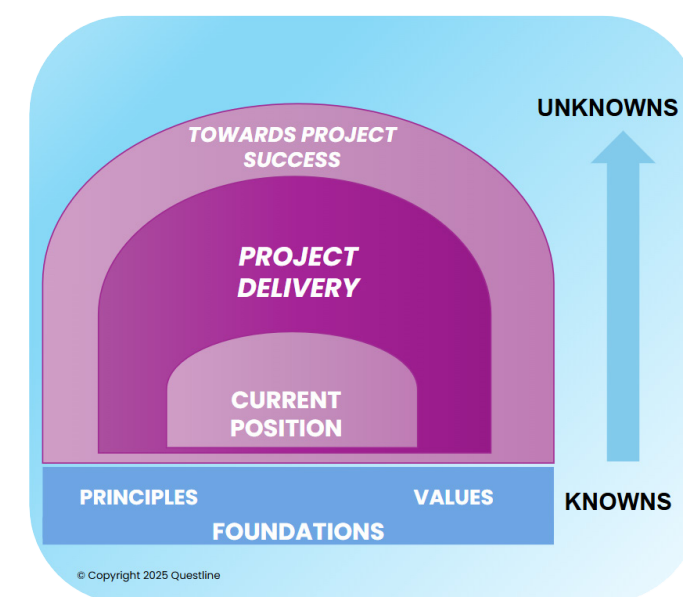
Having a clear *Principle* and *Value* framework is particularly important in times of pressure, acting as a familiar foundation from which to navigate the many unknowns of project delivery, providing that all important psychological safety to the team.

Similarly, if there are times when the team is deviating from the agreed framework, they offer a neutral

platform from which to discuss rationally as opposed to personally and emotionally.

Identifying *Principles* and *Values* is also a great exercise to bring new or growing teams together to forge *Collaboration* as well as helping to refine aligned *Processes*, which we'll cover later.

Finally, as a Project Leader, knowing your personal principles and values can help develop *Emotional Intelligence* (more on that later too...).



**Q: Do you have documented Team Values or Guiding Principles?**

**If not then a great place to start is your organisational values which are likely published on your company or clients' website. Aligning with these ensures congruency and can offer a neat nucleus from which to evolve.**

**Q: Are your Project leaders aware of their personal values and principles?**



# Processes – How Do We Want To Do This?

There are literally hundreds of micro-processes within a project and a similar number of methodologies and approaches claiming to be the efficiency silver-bullet. Here is not the place to advocate for one or the other yet one thing we at Questline subscribe to is that some level of *Agility* is effective.



*Agility* has become the aspiration within organisations and teams and so it is worth noting that it has roots in the *Rapid Software Development* revolution of the 1990s. One of the most powerful principles in terms of impact on culture is *Maximising the amount of work not done*. Effectively, a call to action to carry out work only if it can be directly linked with a valuable outcome (which we have described above in our **POWER** model).

Similarly, another tenet of *Agility* is its evolutionary nature; that is subscribing to the obvious (yet sometimes forgotten truism) that we cannot hope to know everything at the start of a project or phase. Therefore, let's proceed and evolve the learning as we go, following value and embracing the fact that change is likely and indeed an opportunity. This leads to the creation of smaller, natural increments within the plan as well as encouraging live prototypes and MVP's to help facilitate our learning and front-load value and ROI.

Going further, why are these points important? Firstly they drive efficiency as it ensures that we only explore what we see as valuable at that time and we are not tempted to 1) Do stuff because we have always done that. 2) Do stuff that is shiny but not so valuable to the business. 3) Miss opportunities due to the inevitable changing requirements. Secondly, it avoids trying to 'boil the ocean' and falling in an expensive heap after delivering nothing - which sucks the life (and budget) out of the team, naturally degrading motivation.

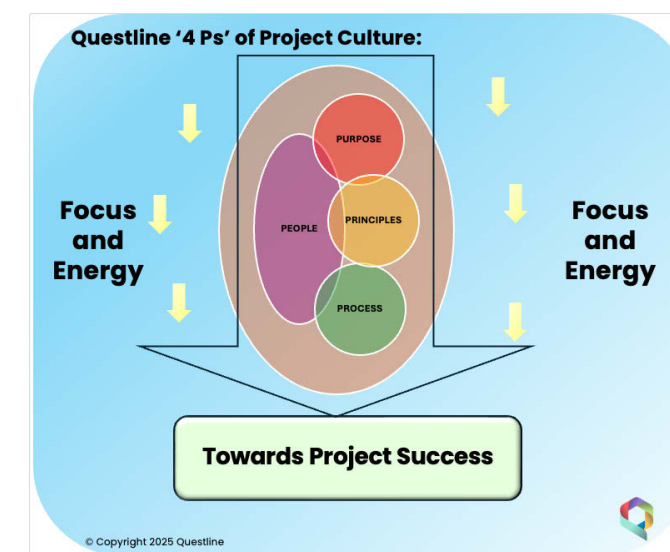
Processes can also cover budget management, planning and requirements, feature management as well as governance and using the levers above combined with *Guiding Principles* can help refine and align these processes towards our goal. We can also recognise the place technology (collaboration tools) and AI can have here in optimising processes and workflows yet this should still not blindside Leaders into avoiding the human elements.

**Q: So are your deliverables too big to digest? Can you break down into bite-sized chunks and include natural, regular milestones (eg 2 weeks) constantly checking on understanding and priority? Are you encouraging collaborating between business and tech teams to establish and continually follow the value?**

**Our Project Culture Radar is now available at**  
**[www.questlineglobal.com](http://www.questlineglobal.com)**

# People & Emotional Intelligence

Finally, on to the most important element of Project Culture which is of course the *People*. It is *People* who live and experience 'the Culture' so it is no surprise to see that *People* are intertwined with all our other elements.



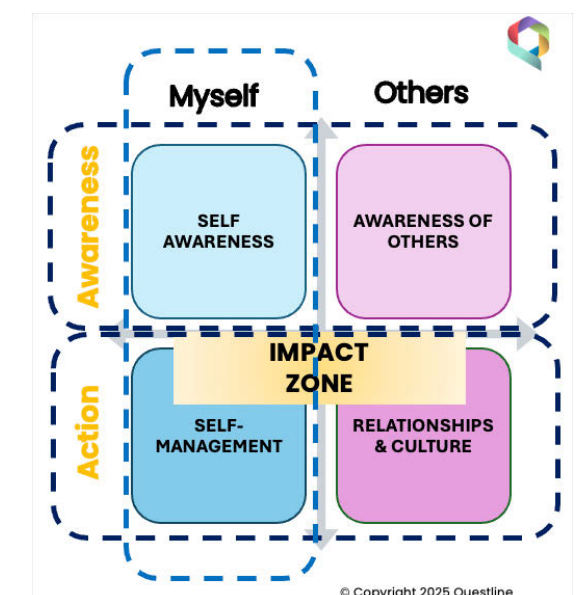
We consider *People* to include Project Leadership (which is often overlooked) and ask what is the most important lever *Leaders* can pull to strengthen culture?

*Emotional Intelligence* is the ability to recognise the difference between an *emotional* response and a rational response which, in the dynamic world of project delivery, is an extraordinary skill to possess. We see *this* as the single biggest lever at the Project Leader's disposal.

*Self Awareness* is the gateway to *Emotional Intelligence*, allowing clarity in understanding how certain situations can *Impact* their own behaviour and offering a choice on response.

With this understanding, the ability to relate to and understand other team members and stakeholders can help build relationships and foster collaboration (which we will touch upon next).

The good news is that *Emotional Intelligence* is a learned and honed skill which, if leaders are given time to regularly step back and work on, can develop alongside other more process centric skills.



**Q: Are your Project Leaders given the time and space to work on their own *Emotional Intelligence* and *Self Awareness*?**

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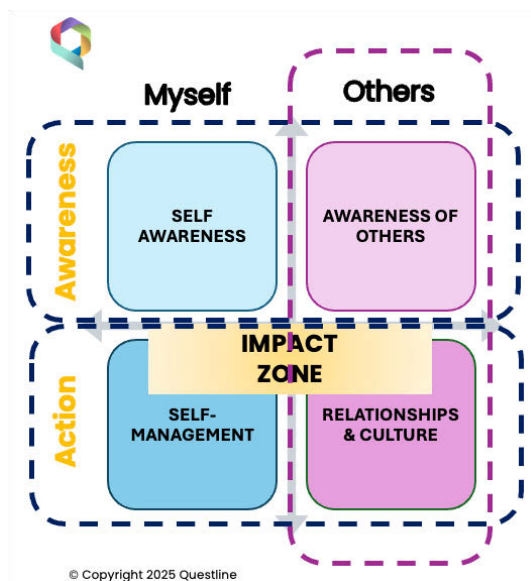


# People & Collaboration

As we consider what, alongside *Emotional Intelligence* can have the biggest influence on the wider project community and culture it is useful to offer a definition:

**Project:** A collaborative or individual enterprise that is carefully planned to achieve a particular aim | *Oxford English Dictionary*

So, by definition, organisational projects could not be projects without collaboration and we believe that this is the single most important barometer of a strong, aligned project culture. Collaboration can boost the other elements; it can lead to greater clarity of *Purpose*, it can lead to stronger *Principles* and *Values* and improved *Processes* as well as having a positive effect on the motivation of the team.



Collaboration can be added as one of your *Principles* or *Values* and amplified through identifying them. Regular refinement of the *Process* element through consistent contact with the technical and business teams to determine business value also forges inherent collaboration. This is where the interlinking, holistic nature of Culture is brought into full focus.

Collaboration will look different in organisations and teams especially with the distributed, global nature of many initiatives yet there are some indicators that immediately spring to mind.

**Q: Are your Leaders promoting *Collaboration* through:**

- Reducing work in *hard* silos preventing cross pollination of ideas?
- Promoting regular, collective feedback?
- Working with the business to respond to changing requirements, priorities and value?
- An openness to continual improvement?

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# Project Risk and a Strong Culture

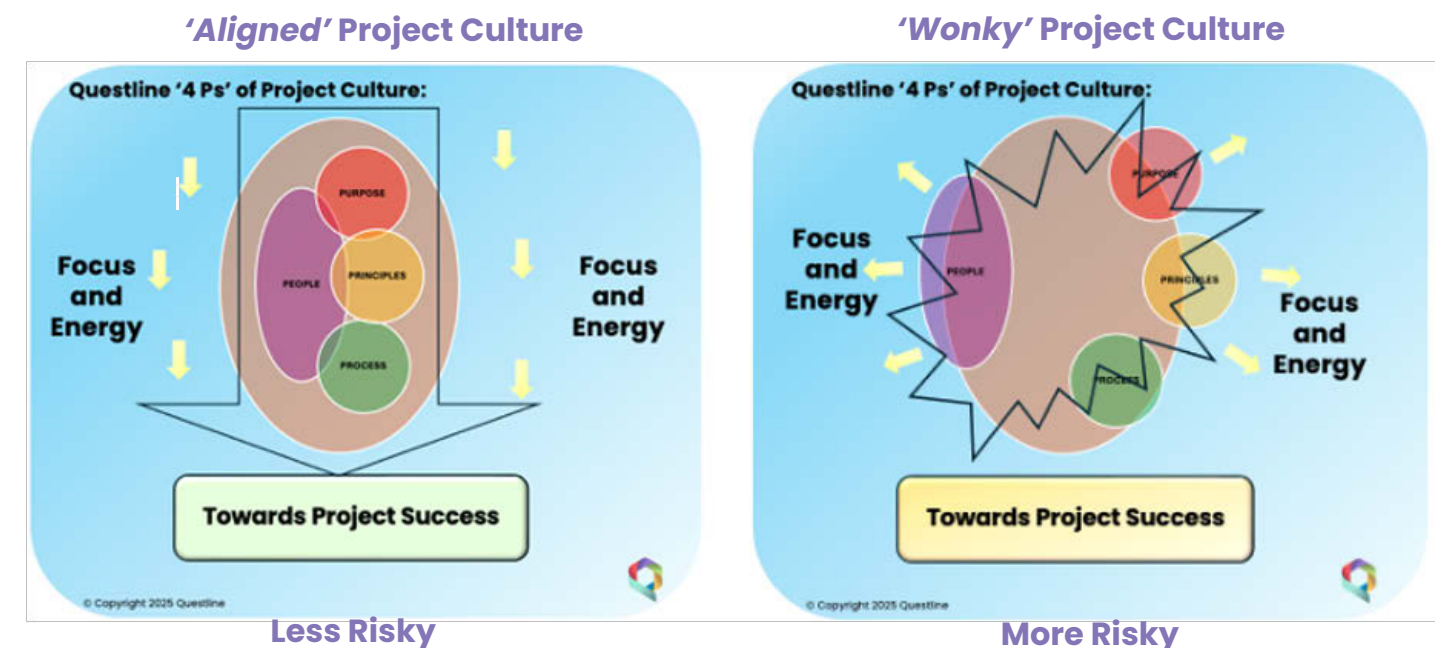
Summing up, we have shown the '4 P's' of Project Culture and given a whistlestop tour of their meaning – so what can we conclude?

Let's look at this through the lens all Project Professionals will understand – RISK.

A project leader's role is to make project delivery more likely. They do this by *identifying, managing, mitigating and communicating risk*.

If project leadership focusses too closely on any single element, for example *Process* (where budget, planning and feature management typically sit), they are potentially missing large sources of Risk.

Below, we see a strong '*Aligned*' culture versus a '*Wonky*' project culture – which one is less risky and therefore more likely to deliver?



Project Leaders can continue to go with the flow or they can choose to *affect* the flow recognising that they represent the largest influence on the Project Culture. In our work we sum this up as **IMPACT**:

**IMPACT:** To have a strong effect or influence on a situation or a person  
*Cambridge Dictionary*

Project Leaders need to remain alive to Risk across *all* elements of culture and above all, the *People* and, therein, lies our simple **call to action**:

**Organisations must continue to support their Project Leaders in Developing their Unique Human-Centric Leadership skills**



# Post Script...

**We want to make the case for *Better Quality Human-Centric Leadership Development and Support for your Project Leaders* which will in turn enhance team culture, minimise project risk and make project success more likely.**

We believe that your Project Leaders are not getting the same level of Leadership Development than their non-project peers in the organisation. Recognising there are genuine reasons for this, we want to constructively engage, highlight and overcome these barriers which is the primary reason for creating this *thought partnership* piece.

I have used my 15+ years of project experience to spark the ideas here yet I am always conscious that experiences are varied and different. So if any of the areas covered resonate, I would love to hear from you. If you have further thoughts or ideas on any other levers that may come into play to enhance your culture similarly, let me know.

## One more thing...

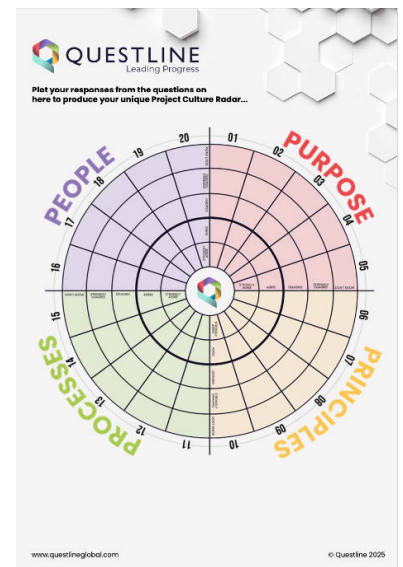
We have also developed the *Project Culture Radar* to accompany this paper which can help Leaders quickly identify potential sources of Risk relating to culture and this is available to download on our website.

I'm looking forward to continuing the conversation with you.

Best Wishes

Anthony

Managing Partner, QuestlineGlobal.com



## Further Reading

*Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Deal and Kennedy (2000)

*Start with Why*, Simon Sinek (2009)

*Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman (1995)

*Rapid Application Development*, James Martin (1991)

*Original Agile Manifesto*: [www.agilemanifesto.org](http://www.agilemanifesto.org)

**Questline exists to help your Leaders strengthen culture, create more impact and make more progress through specialist Human-Centric Leadership Development and Support Partnerships.**

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