

*Character* LAB

# CULTURE BOOK



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# OUR VISION



“

Intelligence plus  
character—that is  
the goal of true  
education.

Martin Luther King Jr.

”

# WHY A CULTURE BOOK?

Culture is like a garden: It'll grow whether you tend it or not.

We want a good garden, intentionally cultivated.

This Culture Book explains *what* we do every day. It describes *how* we do it. Most importantly, it articulates *why* we do it. In short, these pages describe the Character Lab way.

# OUR HISTORY

Character Lab was founded in 2013 by one scientist—Angela Duckworth—and two educators—Dave Levin, and Dominic Randolph.

Today, we are a group of scientists, educators, and designers. We create and communicate scientific insights into how children thrive.

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- January 2012**  
Angela Duckworth, Dave Levin, and Dominic Randolph conceive the idea for Character Lab on a street corner in Manhattan
  - July 2013**  
501(c)(3) incorporation
  - April 2014**  
Website launched
  - August 2015**  
First annual Educator Summit
  - November 2015**  
Angela Duckworth becomes Scientific Director
  - January 2016**  
Character Lab's headquarters move from New York City to Philadelphia

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- April 2017**  
Angela Duckworth assumes role of CEO
  - September 2017**  
First online Playbook launched
  - January 2018**  
Research Network launches with 16,000 students
  - September 2018**  
Sean Talamas promoted to Chief Operating Officer
  - October 2018**  
New [characterlab.org](http://characterlab.org) website is launched

# OUR VALUES



# HOW WE WORK

We know that character is not one thing, but many. Character encompasses strengths of heart, mind, and will.

Character Lab culture embodies all three.

Two of our core values are strengths of heart: kids first and excessive generosity. Two of our core value express strengths of will: grit and kaizen. Our final core value is a strength of mind: uncompromising honesty.

These values guide how we work and explain why we'll succeed.

# KIDS FIRST

Our bottom line is, simply, have we measurably improved children's lives?

*What this looks like:*

- Doing less, better. We all have projects dear to our hearts. But we prioritize those that help kids the most.

*What this sounds like:*

- “Actually, kids in our focus groups said that they didn't want to receive texts. Let's ask them what they would prefer.”

# EXCESSIVE GENEROSITY

We give without asking.

We assume the best of others.

*What this looks like:*

- Cleaning up messes—big, small, and metaphorical
- Receiving generously, too

*What this sounds like:*

- “Of course, I’d be happy to help you with this project!”
- “Hey, I know you have back-to-back meetings today, so let me grab you some lunch.”

# GRIT

We work with passion and with perseverance. Failures don't stop us: They make us better. Our work is our calling.

*What this looks like:*

- Coming to work early or staying at work late—not because we should but because we're so excited about the potential of our project

*What this sounds like:*

- “This project really didn't work. Let's reflect, talk to users, modify, and try again.”
- “What is giving you energy at work this week?”
- “Last weekend I saw this movie, and it made me think of our Playbooks.”

# KAIZEN

Whenever we reach one goal, we aim higher.  
We are committed to continuous improvement.  
We celebrate failure as a learning opportunity.

*What this looks like:*

- Standard work checklists for repeated tasks, like analyzing data and onboarding new team members
- Finishing an imperfect draft, sharing it, and iterating fast
- Presenting a new idea to the Lab and welcoming honest feedback

*What this sounds like:*

- “What’s my ‘next time try’? What’s my ‘it was effective when’?”
- “Great idea. So much better than last time. Let’s make that standard work!”

# UNCOMPROMISING HONESTY

We speak with conviction and listen with humility. We take strong positions but hold them weakly, privileging evidence and reason over ego. We seek truth rather than a hollow harmony.

*What this looks like:*

- Interrupting wisely and listening actively

*What this sounds like:*

- “I disagree, but I commit completely”
- “What I hear you saying is ...”

“

Courage. Kindness.  
Friendship. Character.  
These are the qualities  
that define us as  
human beings and  
propel us, on occasion,  
to greatness.

R. J. Palacio, author of *Wonder*

”

# WHAT WE DO



# OUR BIG BETS

To prioritize everything is to prioritize nothing.

1. We create **scientific insights** about character development
2. We deliver **actionable advice** for parents and teachers, based on science

# ACTIONABLE ADVICE

We create online Playbooks that explain what character strengths like grit and curiosity are, why they're important, and how to build them in ourselves and in the young people we care about.

Thought of the Week is a personal essay that connects recent scientific discoveries to everyday life. It is published weekly on the website and sent out as an email newsletter.

Finally, we're developing a podcast hosted by Angela Duckworth.

# SCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS

It can take years for a scientist to collect data for a single school-based research study. How many more students could we help if ideas were tested faster?

We have a solution: the Character Lab Research Network.

The Research Network is an online platform connecting scientists with students, the first such platform in the field. Our network includes district, charter, parochial, and independent partner schools. Our goal is to reduce by an order of magnitude both the time and cost of character development research.

# LAB LEXICON

# LEARN THE LINGO

**bracket:** When we bracket an issue, we set it aside for discussion later.

**BTW:** By the Way. A daily meeting where we share the highlights of our day, solve cross-team issues, and just unwind as a team.

**C-Lab:** C-Lab, with the hyphen, is our shorthand for Character Lab.

**character:** Intentions and actions that benefit both the individual and others. We use the term “character” but honor synonymous terms like “social and emotional competencies” and “non-cognitive skills.”

**characters:** The folks who work at Character Lab.

**CLIP:** The Character Lab Intern Program is a year-round remote internship for highly motivated adolescents who provide feedback

on interventions.

**CLIPster:** A student participating in CLIP.

**CLRN:** The Character Lab Research Network

**double click:** By double clicking on an issue or topic, we are drilling down deeper for more detail.

**escalate:** In many cases, we need to escalate an issue to a manager for help troubleshooting an issue, to get early feedback and foster buy-in, or to get thought partnership (see thought partnership).

**IWEW:** “It was effective when ....” This, along with NTT, is a script for kaizen.

**kaizen:** Continuous improvement. An example is always asking, “What’s my NTT?” It also refers to our monthly and quarterly reflection meetings between supervisors and their direct reports.

**KPIs:** Key Performance Indicators. Quantifiable metrics used to evaluate our progress toward meeting our organizational goals.

**logic memo:** Logic memos analyze risk and benefits and provide rationale for why we pursue particular projects or initiatives. We create logic memos for major initiatives.

**NTT:** “Next time try ...” (See IWEW)

**NU:** Not urgent

**OKRs:** Objectives and Key Results. We use OKRs as the framework to identify and track our quarterly goals towards meeting our KPIs.

**open loop:** Any commitment or task that is unfulfilled or incomplete.

**pulse checks:** A quick check-in to determine the mood of the group. We use pulse checks to start all of our meetings. Pulse check questions are also part of all Playbooks.

**standard work:** This means that we learn the best way to do something, and then we codify it into a replicable format, usually checklists.

**team of teams:** We embrace Stanley McCrystal’s team of teams decentralized approach to decision-making.

**thought partnership:** A process we use to challenge assumptions and introduce new perspectives.

**two claps:** This is our ritual to publicly celebrate wins. At Lab meetings, people can thank other Characters for being world-class, visionary, and generous. After describing the win, the person asks everyone to clap together: “Two claps for Nora on two: One, Two.”

**Willypete:** Sean’s dog and C-Lab’s chief of staff. He sometimes joins us in the office

**working hypothesis:** A sharply defined recommendation, weakly held.

**yet:** With a nod to Carol Dweck, this word voices the growth mindset that we cherish. There are many things that we cannot do...yet.



# FAQ

# YOU MAY BE WONDERING....

## **Q: Are there regular lab meetings?**

Yes. On Monday mornings we have an all-team meeting to review individual priorities for the week. At the end of each day, we have a BTW meeting. And every other Friday, we have a strategy meeting to double click on a particular issue that requires all-team thought partnership.

## **Q: Are there retreats?**

Yes. Each summer, we take two days to meet as a group off-site. We do the same one day each winter. Retreats give us a chance to build trust and clarity.

## **Q: What are the email norms?**

*Talk in person*

A one-roof policy means we work in the same physical space. If you have a question, walk over and figure it out in person!

### *Answer within 24 hours*

If you're swamped, send the requester a quick reply to tell them when you can complete their request.

### *Close the loop*

Reply saying that you've completed the task.

### *48-hour rule*

If you send an email to anyone and haven't heard back in 48 hours, send a second email. Otherwise, your email will get lost at the bottom of a very deep inbox.

### *Weekends and evenings are free*

You can send emails whenever you'd like, but there's no expectation of a response on weekends and evenings. In the rare case when you need something urgently during these off times, text or call.

### *"My request is ..."*

Clarify what you're asking. Boldface your request and state it at the beginning of the email. Set clear deadlines. We call this committed language.

### *Two-email rule*

If a problem is not solved in two emails, pick up the phone. Three minutes on the phone can save three hours trying to decipher what someone means in their email. And conversation builds trust.

### **Q: Do Characters do anything for fun?**

We like to eat lunch together, either in the kitchen or outside when the weather's copacetic.

Coffee breaks are frequent and important, as are trips to Insomnia Cookies.

After the work day, we've been known to head to a happy hour, especially in the summer when the pop-up garden is open.

And if you like brunch, invite a few Characters! Brunch is a favorite time for informal get-togethers.

**Q: What are the hours?**

We value working together in person, so we keep somewhat standard hours (8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.) to encourage creative exchange. But you'll usually see at least one Character in the office before and after that window.

**Q: How do meetings work?**

As Seattle Seahawk coach and Character Lab Advisor Pete Carroll says: "Be early."

Come prepared. If you're in charge, begin with an agenda and specific goals. We have periodic time-checks throughout the meeting to ensure we're on track.

And finally, as psychologist Lev Vygotsky once said of children in play, it is good to act "a head taller." What this means is stepping up to responsibilities. As a rule, the more junior the Character, the more we expect you to be in charge of the meeting.

*Character* **LAB**

CHARACTERLAB.ORG