

*Character* LAB

# CULTURE BOOK



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4	Our Vision
7	Our History
11	Our Values
19	What We Do
24	Lab Lexicon
28	FAQ

# 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 a scientist and two educators: Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* and Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania; Dave Levin, co-founder of KIPP public charter schools; and Dominic Randolph, Head of School at Riverdale Country School.

Dave and Dominic met Angela on a field trip. The two educators were visiting leading researchers around the world, eager to find scientific insights that might help young people lead lives that were good for others as well as themselves. These conversations revealed a problem: because research involving kids and educators was so much more time-consuming and expensive than research with adults, the pace of scientific discovery was frustratingly slow. What's more, insights that had been uncovered by scientists remained hidden from educators and parents, buried in academic articles filled with technical jargon.

Together, Dave, Dominic, and Angela agreed that a bridge was needed to connect educators and research scientists. That bridge is Character Lab.



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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



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 website is launched



January 2019

Launch of TOTW



July 2019

First insight generated by Research Network is published in *PNAS*



July 2019

Educator Summit reaches 800 attendees



October 2019

Number of students participating in Research Network activities reaches 60,000



December 2019

Sean Talamas promoted to Executive Director

# 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

We promote student voice and protect their privacy at every opportunity. Our research insights seek to help kids thrive.

*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, our student interns said they didn’t understand the survey. Let’s work with them on how to provide this feedback to the researcher.”

# 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

Our mission requires passion and perseverance for long-term goals whose outcomes are years away. Failures don't stop us: They make us better.

*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?”



# 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 for repeated tasks, like analyzing data and onboarding new team members
- Finishing an imperfect draft, sharing it, and iterating fast

*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!”

# CANDOR

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
- Presenting a new idea to the team and welcoming honest feedback

*What this sounds like:*

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

# SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY

We believe in research that is transparent, relevant, collaborative, equitable, and rigorous.

*What this looks like:*

- Every Tip of the Week is fact-checked by scientists
- Our research studies are matched with the students and schools that need them the most.
- Our research partners make their work transparent and openly available.

*What this sounds like:*

- “Can you help me with a question for the researcher-school matching algorithm?”
- “What did our Scientific Advisory Council think?”

“

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 MISSION

Our mission is to advance scientific insights that help kids thrive. By connecting researchers with educators, we seek to create greater knowledge about the conditions that lead to social, emotional, academic, and physical well-being for young people throughout the country.

1. We make school-based research *fast, frictionless, and fruitful*.
2. We translate scientific insights in order to make them *accessible*.
3. We *disseminate* those insights widely to educators, parents, media and application partners.

## SCIENCE

The Character Lab Research Network is a consortium of schools and scientists working collaboratively to make school-based research fast, frictionless, and fruitful.

## TRANSLATION

We create 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.

Tip of the Week is 60 seconds of actionable advice in the form of a personal letter. It is published weekly on the website and sent out via email.

## DISSEMINATION

We forge strategic partnerships to integrate scientific insights into existing educational media, products, and services.

Each summer, we co-host Educator Summit with the Relay Graduate School of Education. Featuring keynote speeches and hands-on workshops with scientists and thought leaders, this in-person event draws hundreds of educators from across the country and around the world.

# 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.

**capture tool:** An instrument for recording an idea, sketch, or next action (e.g. Google Doc, notebook, Asana)

**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.”

**check-in:** Weekly meeting with your supervisor to review OKRs, open loops, and other topics

**CiC:** Cambridge Innovation Center. It's the building we work in.

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

**CLIPster:** A student participating in CLIP

**CLRN:** The Character Lab Research Network

**design spine:** A framework for user-centered innovation that synthesizes user stories into hypotheses, opportunities, and prototypes.

**Duckworth Lab:** Angela Duckworth's team of in-house scientists

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

**flag:** To "flag" an idea or topic is to draw attention to a potential problem with its implementation, sometimes using an actual flag.

**fully powered study:** A research project with sufficiently large sample size (i.e. statistical power) to distinguish an effect from chance

**GROWF:** Coaching framework that we use to identify a Goal, analyze the Reality, review Options, and agree on the Way Forward.

**H2O:** The “hypothesis-to-opportunity” pipeline that we use when turning user pain points into solutions

**help me understand:** A phrase that helps us solicit understanding from our fellow team members

**insight:** A high-impact, peer-reviewed research publication

**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.

**JQJ:** Jamie Q. Johnson is the name of our robo-assistant, as well as our radically democratic process of naming things

**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.

**lessons learned:** Key takeaways created during a postmortem review

**next action:** An assigned task that needs to be completed as a result of discussion

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

**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.

**pilot:** An early-stage research project intended to test an idea with a small sample size

**prank:** A light-hearted practical joke targeting who's ever been out of office for 3 days or more

**process doc:** Documentation that outlines a way of doing things. Think checklists or user guides.

**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.

**pushback:** Challenging an idea or a working hypothesis

**Qualtrics:** We partner with the leader in experience management software in K-12 education.

**SRL:** School Research Lead. A teacher or administrator who facilitates research activities on-site

**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:** Decentralized approach to collaboration and decision-making

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

**thunderdome:** Period of time when schools actively plan for and participate in research activities

**Thunderstruck:** Our daily meeting for supporting Thunderdome

**two claps:** Our ritual to publicly celebrate wins by other team members. After describing the win, we ask everyone to clap together: “Two claps for Colleen on two: One, Two.”

**we did it:** A celebratory exclamation used when we’ve completed a meeting

**weekly review:** Our Monday morning team meeting where we share weekend highlights, and what we're excited to work on that week

**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. Near the end of each day, we have a BTW meeting.

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

Yes. Retreats give us a chance to build trust and clarity. We are constantly iterating on different formats and cadences.

## **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.

### *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, set up a call. 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 and tea breaks are frequent and important.

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.

**Q: What are the hours?**

We value working together, so our center of gravity is 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. 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