

*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 a scientist and two educators: Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* and Rosa Lee and Egbert Chang 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.



# MILESTONES

## INFRASTRUCTURE

*January 2012*

Angela, Dave, and Dominic conceive of Character Lab on a Manhattan street corner

*January 2016*

Angela is named CEO and moves Character Lab from New York City to Philadelphia

*December 2019*

Sean Talamas becomes Executive Director

*June 2019*

User Experience team created

*March 2020*

PeopleOps team created

*April 2020*

Strategic Partnerships team created

*July 2020*

Fellowship program launched

*September 2020*

Character Lab shifts to a fully distributed workplace

## SCIENCE

*March 2014*

Character Lab funds studies on character development in adolescents

*January 2018*

Character Lab Research Network launches with 16,000 students

*July 2018*

CLIP student program launches with 15 participants

*July 2019*

First Research Network study is published by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)

*May 2020*

Number of Research Network schools reaches 90

*July 2020*

CLIP cohort grows to 81 participants

*January 2021*

83 researchers apply to join Research Network

*April 2021*

Total of 179 studies run within the school year

## PRACTICE

*April 2014*

Character Lab website launched

*September 2017*

First Playbook launched

*January 2019*

Tip of the Week launched

*February 2020*

Founding Director of Strategic Partnerships hired

*September 2020*

100<sup>th</sup> Tip of the Week published

*November 2020*

Character Lab reaches 10 strategic partners

*April 2021*

Tip of the Week subscriber audience reaches 30,000

*June 2021*

15<sup>th</sup> Playbook 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 additional core values express strengths of will: grit and kaizen. Our two final core values are strengths of mind: uncompromising honesty and scientific integrity.

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:*

- Prioritizing those projects that help kids the most
- Gathering feedback from students to ensure the primacy and relevance of all studies

*What this sounds like:*

- “Actually, our CLIPsters 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:*

- Working hard, not because we should be 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:*

- Collecting feedback from school partners and research partners to improve their experience
- 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:*

- Fact-checking every Tip of the Week by scientists
- Matching research studies to students and schools that need them the most
- Making research studies 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*

”

# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

At Character Lab we define diversity, equity, and inclusion as the following:

Diversity means intentionally seeking out ongoing input from people whose voices have historically been oppressed. This includes, but is not limited to, underrepresented people based on race, class, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation.

A few of the ways this shows up in our work:

- Recruitment and retention of a diverse staff
- Fellowship Program designed to increase diversity at Character Lab and in the education field
- Ongoing engagement with Cultured ENUF to support our team in continuous learning and development

Equity means creating and maintaining systems that provide people with the resources they need to thrive. We do this by acknowledging the historical oppression that may inform a life experience.

A few of the ways this shows up in our work:

- Interviews for job applicants are led by at least two staff members
- Rubric system to evaluate all candidates
- Rubric system to determine all employee salaries
- Individualized professional development
- Flexible and individualized staff support, particularly regarding issues that more deeply affect BIPOC staff members

Inclusion means creating intentional systems and a culture where all are welcome and experience a sense of belonging. We solicit, listen to, and consider the opinions of diverse voices from throughout the organization. Processes and reasoning are transparent, and everyone's perspective is valued.

A few of the ways this shows up in our work:

- Daily meetings with a dedicated effort and structure to encourage everyone to bring their authentic selves to work
- Quarterly employee surveys
- Brief, weekly organization culture surveys
- Dedicated weekly process for Character Lab leadership to review and address survey results
- One week each quarter dedicated to all-staff meetings to share company goals, discuss organization-wide decisions, and build trust among staff
- Staff retreats

# 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 strategic partners.



# SCIENCE

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

# PRACTICE

Character Lab bridges science and practice by making scientific evidence actionable for parents and educators. Character Lab develops strategic partnerships with media, publishers, curriculum creators, and technology providers to raise awareness about how kids thrive and to create evidence-based resources.

Playbooks are research-based guides to cultivate strengths of heart, mind, and will. Each includes a curated set of resources, such as recommended curricula, videos, and books. [Read more about Playbooks.](#)

Tip of the Week is 60 seconds of actionable advice in the form of a personal letter written by leading scientists, including Angela Duckworth. [Read the latest Tip of the Week.](#)

# LAB LEXICON

# LEARN THE LINGO

**A very serious meeting:** A daily afternoon meeting where we connect to share the highlights of our day, make all-staff announcements, or 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.”

**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:** Character Lab Research Network

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

**Duckworth Lab:** Angela's research lab at the University of Pennsylvania

**flag:** To draw attention to a potential problem or an issue that may affect progress on a project

**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

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

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

**JQJ:** “Jamie Q. Johnson.” The name of a roboassistant that occasionally helps Sean with scheduling. More importantly, it describes 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.

**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 toward meeting our KPIs.

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

**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:** In the spirit of our core value of candor, 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

**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: Where do Character Lab employees work?**

Character Lab has a Distributed Work policy, which means that we fully support employees working remotely from any U.S. location. Employees decide whether to work remotely or on-site at our office headquarters in Philadelphia.

Character Lab strives to ensure our culture and operations support all staff equitably. We support effective office environments for all staff, whether in our headquarters, a local coworking space, or a home office.

## **Q: What are core hours?**

Core hours formally establish when the full organization is expected to be available for meetings and responsive online. Our core hours are 11 a.m. – 3 p.m. ET (8 a.m. – noon PT). This means you can think of a full day of work as core hours plus more flexible hours of your choosing. The time and effort is the same; the when is flexible.

**Q: Are there regular meetings?**

Yes. Near the end of each day, we have A very serious meeting.

**Q: How do meetings work?**

Come prepared. If you're in charge, begin with a pulse check before outlining the agenda and specific goals.

**Q: How do titles work?**

There are only four titles at Character Lab: Partner, CEO, Executive Director, and Fellow. Fellow describes a one-year position for early-career individuals. Most team members are designated *Partners* and given a modifying description that reflects their roles and responsibilities in the organization (e.g., Partner, Digital Platform Development). This structure emphasizes what each person contributes and de-emphasizes hierarchy and title inflation. As team members continue to develop and find new growth opportunities, the modifying description may also evolve.

## **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?**

### *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.

*Character* **LAB**

CHARACTERLAB.ORG