

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

April 2020

Strategic Partnerships team created

July 2020

Fellowship program launched

September 2020

Character Lab shifts to a fully distributed workplace

December 2022

Dave Hersh is named Character Lab CEO; Angela becomes Chief Scientist and Board Member

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

100th 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

15th 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 advisors 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 research with youth *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 makes research with adolescents 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

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.” Inspired by naming a roboassistant that once helped with scheduling, this 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.

Character Lab strives to ensure our culture and operations support all staff equitably and supports effective office environments for all staff.

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 three titles at Character Lab: Partner, CEO, 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