

DIY IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

# The Pickle Challenge



For a More Positive  
Workplace Culture

A Positive Way to Eliminate  
Negative Behaviors and  
Build a Stronger  
Culture of Ownership


**Silly Name – Serious Results**  
**It's Fun – It's Free**

# The Pickle Challenge

**The Pickle Challenge replaces killjoy with make joy!**

Toxic emotional negativity (TEN) hurts every dimension of your organization, including employee morale and engagement, quality and safety, patient satisfaction, productivity and financial performance. TEN is also a major cause of depression and learned helplessness.

Join The Pickle Challenge 2.0 for a clear-eyed assessment of where you stand now and a proven intervention to eradicate TEN by raising awareness of and intolerance for bullying, disrespect and incivility, gossip and rumor-mongering, and chronic whining and complaining.



**The Pickle Challenge  
makes it fun to be  
positive and easy to  
confront negativity!**

**TEN is the Ultimate Killjoy!**

“Joy in work – or the lack there of – not only impacts individual staff engagement and satisfaction, but also patient experience, quality of care, patient safety, and organizational performance.”

Perlo J, Balik B, Swensen S, Kabcenell A, Landsman J, Feeley D.  
*IHI Framework for Improving Joy in Work*. IHI White Paper.  
Cambridge, Massachusetts: Institute for  
Healthcare Improvement; 2017.

# 8 Reasons Why Your Organization Should Take The Pickle Challenge for Charity

1. You will engage your team in a **dialog about mutual expectations** regarding acceptable attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.
2. You will help your people **become more aware of**, and more intolerant of, toxic emotional negativity in themselves and in others.
3. You will give your people the tools and the words to **confront toxic emotional negativity** in a way that is fun, lighthearted, and effective.
4. You will **redirect thousands of hours of paid time** currently wasted on complaining, gossiping, and other anti-productive behaviors into caring for patients and investing in personal growth and education.
5. You will spark a friendly competition that will inspire creative approaches to **foster a more positive culture**, including the amazing pickle jar decorating contest.
6. You will stage a media-worthy series of events and activities that will **give visibility to your organization** and also help to raise public awareness of the personal health impact of attitudes.
7. You will **raise money for a worthy cause** – one that pulls on the heartstrings of your people.
8. You will be part of launching a national movement to **help people take greater personal responsibility for their attitudes and emotions**, making an important contribution to reducing compassion fatigue, burnout, and dropout.





# Blow Away TEN!

**Bullying**

**Whining**

**Rumor-  
mongering**

**Burnout**

**Boredom**

**Learned  
Helplessness**

**Self-Pity**

**Commiseration**

**Micro-Aggression**



“Prying into one another’s concerns, acting behind another’s back, backbiting, misrepresentation, bad temper, bad thoughts, murmuring, complaining. Do we ever think of how we bear the responsibility for all the harm that we cause in this way?”

Florence Nightingale in a letter to her students

# I've Taken The Pickle Pledge

**"I will turn every complaint  
into either a blessing or  
constructive suggestion."**



By taking **The Pickle Pledge**, I am promising myself that I will no longer waste my time and energy on blaming, complaining, and gossiping, nor will I commiserate with those who steal my energy with their blaming, complaining, and gossiping.

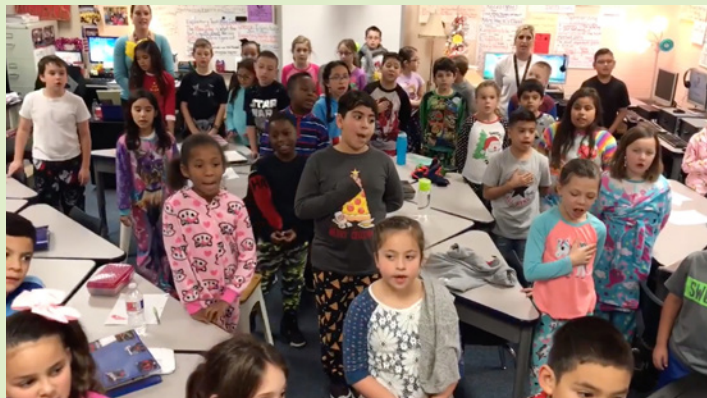
\* So-called because chronic complainers look like they were born with a dill pickle stuck in their mouths.

VALUESCOACH.COM • THEFLORENCECHALLENGE.COM

The Pickle Pledge can change your life.

The Pickle Challenge can  
transform your organization.

[Even 3rd Graders  
can Learn it!](#)



# Conversations that Matter



I have seen many hundreds of beautifully decorated pickle jars. This is my all-time favorite. Not because it is beautifully decorated but because the message is so profoundly on-point.

No one ever solved a problem by complaining about it. It takes courage to stop complaining and actually do something to help fix that problem.

No one ever helped another person improve by talking about that person behind their back. It takes courage to stop talking about someone and to actually go talk to that person.

The Pickle Challenge will encourage your coworkers to have more meaningful conversations and to stop wasting their time, and the time of others, on conversations that really don't matter.



# The Pickle Challenge

Positive or negative? One of the most important choices we all make – and we make it every day, many times a day – is our choice of attitude. What side of the board will you fall on: sweet or dill? What side of the board do you want other people to think you fall on?

How will you respond when something happens to you? How will you respond when someone says something to you?

The Pickle Challenge for Charity is a fun, simple, and no-cost activity that can help any organization, or unit within an organization, transform a culture that tolerates Toxic Emotional Negativity (TEN) to one that assures employee emotional safety.



# Implementing The Pickle Challenge

There is not a one-size-fits-all cookie-cutter formula for The Pickle Challenge. You choose your own charity, select your own Pickle Squad, create your own activities, and let the creativity of your people blossom.

The steps outlined on the following pages are suggestions more than they are directions. I've organized them by steps, but it's really more of an iterative process. You might, for example, want to engage

your leadership team before conducting the recommended culture assessment survey.

Above all, it should be fun. And it should be authentically yours. Every picture on this page – indeed every picture in this Implementation Guide – was the idea of a hospital staff person who took ownership for The Pickle Challenge. It's often the first step toward building a more positive Culture of Ownership.





## Step 1: Assess Don't Assume

Research has shown (and you yourself have seen) that the higher one's position on the organization chart, and the farther that position is from the front lines of care, the rosier the glasses they wear when assessing their culture. Beyond putting a finger on the pulse of your culture, it's important to start with a simple assessment for two reasons: 1) it will give you data to show the skeptics and cynics why this is important; 2) it will give you a baseline against which to gauge your progress.

There are multiple different services you can use for culture assessment. Two that I have developed are the Culture-IQ snapshot assessment and the more extensive VCI-17 Culture Assessment Survey. Both can be used at no charge for your Pickle Challenge.

### *The Culture-IQ Snapshot Survey*

The 8-question survey at [Culture-IQ.com](https://www.culture-iq.com) is a quick and easy tool to assess how your people perceive your culture. You will get a score ranging from 8 (the worst) to 24 (the best). When you get your score, it will include my assessment of what that score should tell you.

You will want to look not just at the average score but also the range of responses; a wide variance indicates that there is not a consistent perspective on what your culture is.

**This is an excellent live activity to do with a group – including the kickoff to your Pickle Challenge.**



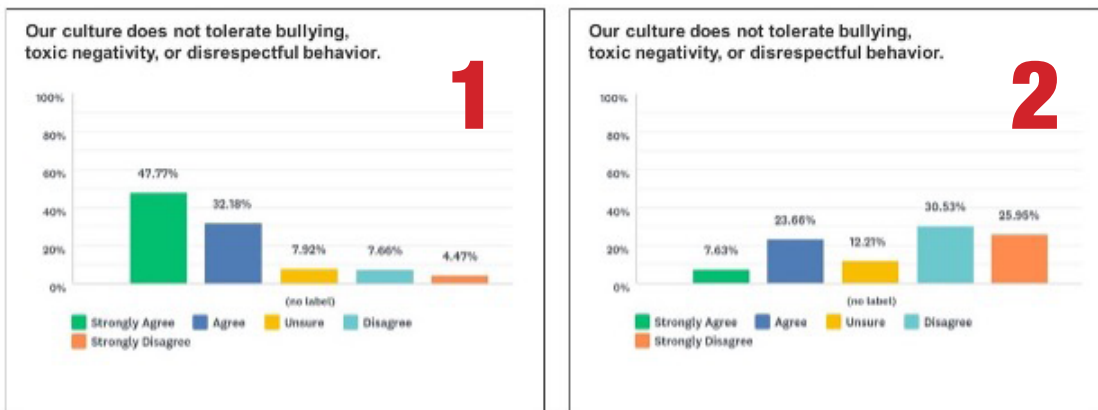
[Culture-IQ.com](https://www.culture-iq.com)

# The VCI-17 Culture Assessment Survey

Research This survey provides a more comprehensive window into how your people perceive your culture. The survey, including all 17 questions, are included in Chapter 1 of [Building a Culture of Ownership in Healthcare](#). For purposes of The Pickle Challenge for Charity the most important questions are #6 and #17.

This illustration, from a slide I use in presentations, contrasts responses to Question #6 from people at two large hospitals that are in the same metropolitan area and thus compete for the same staff, patients, donors, and media coverage. When I ask those questions, everyone knows the answer: **the way staff respond to this question substantially predicts that hospital's performance on every other outcome measure.**

Question #17 asks people to estimate the percentage of all paid hours wasted on toxic emotional negativity. The best average I've ever seen is 8%, the worst is 26%. Applying a weighted average to the hospital's annual wage, salary, and benefit budget is an indicator of how much the hospital is paying people to engage in TEN. **CAUTION:** Before showing this dollar figure to your CFO, be sure that there is a portable external defibrillator nearby!



- Which hospital has higher patient satisfaction? ..... 1
- Which hospital has greater employee loyalty? ..... 1
- Which hospital has higher nursing turnover? ..... 2
- Which hospital has healthier financials? ..... 1
- Which hospital has had the most bad press? ..... 2

## Step 2: Engage Your Leadership Team

The enthusiasm, or lack thereof, of your leadership team is the single most important determinant of how successful your Pickle Challenge will be. You should make it an expectation that your leaders will be supportive; there is a 100% certainty that at least one person in their area of responsibility really needs to take The Pickle Pledge to heart.

The Pickle Challenge should be launched with a live event – not with an email or a Zoom call. This meeting is a great place to ask everyone to complete the Culture-IQ survey and discuss the results.

**Important:** Emphasize that this is NOT a disciplinary or accountability tool. It is intended to be fun and to be voluntary.



Launching The Pickle Challenge for Charity at Methodist Hospital and Methodist Children's in San Antonio – they raised over \$7,000 for the HCA Hope Fund!



The Pickle Challenge Leader Toolkit created by Methodist Hospital in San Antonio, Texas

### PICKLE CHALLENGE LEADER TOOLKIT

Be the one who shakes a hand when others are shaking a fist; be the one who inspires courage when others are inciting fear; be the one who encourages when others are demoralizing; be the one who brings together when others are tearing apart; be the one who smiles when others are scowling; be the one who practices love when others are promoting hate; be the one who walks the walk when others only talk the talk; be the one you are meant to be and not what you think others expect you to be.





## Step 3: Recruit Your Pickle Squad

These are your Spark Plugs – the people who generate passion and enthusiasm for the challenge, both through the activities they create and through their own example.

Assemble a team of volunteers that is representative of the organization as a whole. Give them a budget and free reign to be creative. Let them create their own t-shirts and decide the activities they want to conduct: pickle parades, pickle bake-offs, pickle art displays – there is no limit to the creativity you will see once they get on a roll.

Especially when you first get started, members of your Pickle Squad can lead staff huddles on each unit by starting with The Pickle Pledge and that day's promise from The Self Empowerment Pledge (described below).



Watch the EVS team at Children's Hospital New Orleans "crash" a department head meeting with The Pickle Pledge. When's the last time your EVS staff got an ovation like this from the suits?

[Watch Now](#)



## Step 4: Choose Your Charity

The Pickle Challenge for Charity is a triple win. Anyone who personally takes The Pickle Pledge to heart will be happier and more productive in their own lives and careers. An organization that weaves The Pickle Challenge into their cultural DNA will enhance the workplace experience and their ability to recruit and retain great people. And the charity or charities selected benefit from donations as complaints are turned into contributions.

In my experience, the challenge works best when: 1) staff are engaged in the question of which charity they want to see supported; 2) the charity is small

enough that the contribution will have an impact; 3) the charity is local directly benefitting employees and community; and 4) most important – the cause pulls at heartstrings.

Seek participating contributions from your medical staff, board of directors, volunteers, and other groups as appropriate.

Share the story with local media as well as on social media. Include pictures of the decorated pickle jars and other creations from your team.



One week's haul from a hospital's decorated pickle jars – that's a lot of complaints that have been turned into contributions!



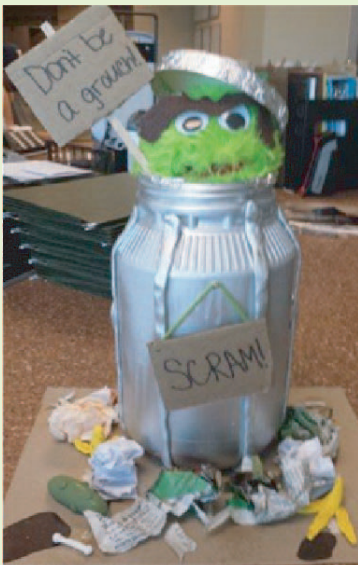
**Make a BIG DEAL of your charity check presentation!**



# Step 5: Pickle Jar Decorating Contest

One of the highlights of any Pickle Challenge for Charity is the pickle jar decorating contest. Ask every department and unit to create their own then bring them all down to the main lobby or cafeteria and let people vote for their favorites. This brings out the creative best and competitive drive and helps keep the challenge in the positive and fun spirit it's meant to have.

## Several of my favorite pickle jar creations



Isn't this what it feels like when an emotional vampire starts whining?



Don't you want to tell them to suit up, put a smile on their face, and get to work?



And if they keep whining, don't you just want to stick a pacifier in their mouth?



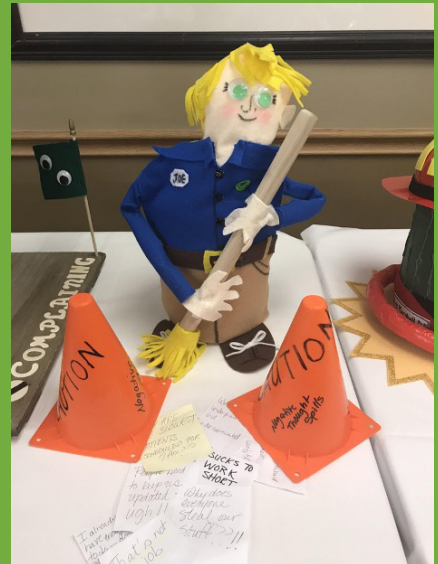
Make sure you have someone accounting for the deposits being made in those gorgeous pickle jars.



Show off the winning pickle jar contest entries in your lobby or cafeteria!



# More of my favorite pickle jar creations



[Pickle Jar Video](#)  
[Watch Now](#)

# Step 6: Incorporate promises into huddles

Expand daily huddles to include personal promises such as The Pickle Pledge and each day's promise of The Self-Empowerment Pledge. At first people are just saying the words, sometimes while rolling their eyes, but eventually the words start to sink in, and they notice changes in how they perceive and react to their problems and challenges.



The first huddle at  
Tri-County Health Care  
(now Astera Health)

[Watch Now](#)



## The Self Empowerment Pledge and PledgePower

**THE SELF EMPOWERMENT PLEDGE**  
Seven Simple Promises That Will Change Your Life

<b>Monday's Promise: Responsibility</b> I will take complete responsibility for my health, my happiness, my success, and my life, and will not blame others for my problems or predicaments.	<b>Tuesday's Promise: Accountability</b> I will not allow low self-esteem, self-limiting beliefs, or the negativity of others to prevent me from achieving my authentic goals and from becoming the person I am meant to be.	<b>Wednesday's Promise: Determination</b> I will do the things I'm afraid to do, but which I know should be done. Sometimes this will mean asking for help to do that which I cannot do by myself.
<b>Thursday's Promise: Contribution</b> I will earn the help I need in advance by helping other people now, and repay the help I receive by serving others later.	<b>Friday's Promise: Resilience</b> I will face rejection and failure with courage, awareness, and perseverance, making these experiences the platform for future acceptance and success.	<b>Saturday's Promise: Perspective</b> Though I might not understand why adversity happens, by my conscious choice I will find strength, compassion, and grace through my trials.
<b>Sunday's Promise: Faith</b> My faith and my gratitude for all that I have been blessed with will shine through in my attitudes and in my actions.		

[www.valuescoachinc.com](http://www.valuescoachinc.com)

The daily promises in The Self Empowerment Pledge are an excellent complement to The Pickle Pledge, as you'll see in the huddle video on this page.

The PledgePower course features 21 short video lessons, 3 for each of the 7 promises. It's ideal for team meetings and huddles. **And it's free!**

[PledgePower.com](http://PledgePower.com)

[Stream or Download  
All 21 Videos](#)



# Step 7A: Keep It Visible

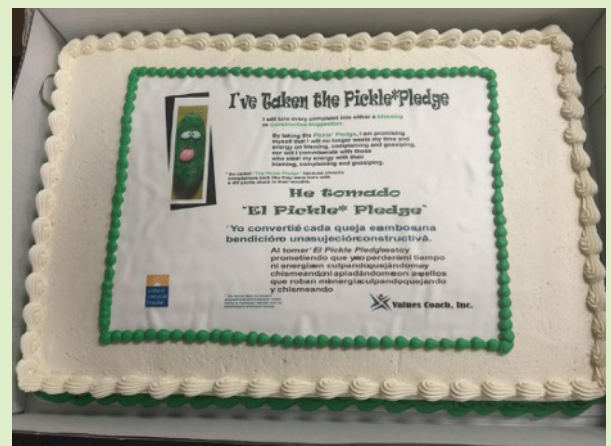
Once you give people permission to Proceed Until Apprehended, you will be astonished at the creative talent in your organization!





# Step 7B: Make it edible

There are endless possibilities to make food a part of your Pickle Challenge. We've seen cake and cookie bakeoffs, pickle-flavored jello and ice cream, pickle-themed buffets, and of course pickle eating contests.



## A personal story

A while back I was hospitalized for ten days at the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics (UIHC) with acute diverticulitis. On the third or fourth day, the senior surgery resident came into my room and told me the medical treatment was not working. She said they would need to remove part of my colon and that I'd be placed on a colostomy bag. If it went well, she continued, it would only be for a year or so. But, she continued, there was a possibility I'd have it for the rest of my life.

I told her I'd rather die. She replied that would be another option and told me to think about it.

I was devastated. After a few minutes of feeling sorry for myself I looked over at my portion of the patient whiteboard where I'd posted The Pickle Pledge. I said the words, silently at first and then out loud:

*I will turn every complaint (this really sucks) into a blessing (thank God for the caregivers at this hospital — and for morphine), and a constructive suggestion (get out of bed and walk).*

I grabbed my IV pole and started walking – very slowly. As I walked I repeated The Pickle Pledge and all 7 promises of The Self Empowerment Pledge, one after the other. As I walked I had a heart-to-heart conversation with my colon, telling it to shape up. I must have been talking out loud because as I walked past the nurses station I overheard someone say something about a psych consult (hopefully in jest).

Every day I walked a little farther and continued that internal conversation. A week later, I walked out of the hospital with my colon intact. It is still intact. As grateful as I am for the excellent care I received, I'm convinced that my attitude was an equally important determinant of my recovery.

As a side note, during my stay I nominated four different nurses for DAISY Awards. One very special nurse – my DAISY Nurse Shelly – was honored. That story is recounted on page 128 of *How The DAISY Foundation has Influenced the Global Healthcare Landscape*.

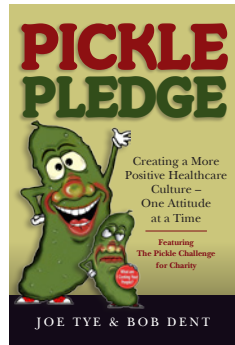
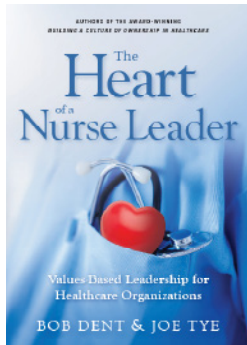
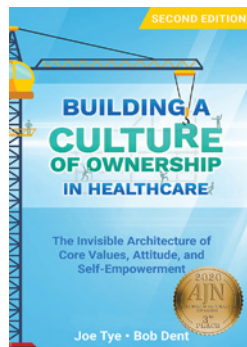
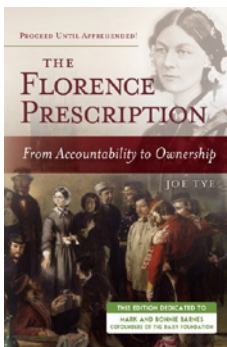
**Joe Tye,  
The Pickle Guy**





# Additional Resources

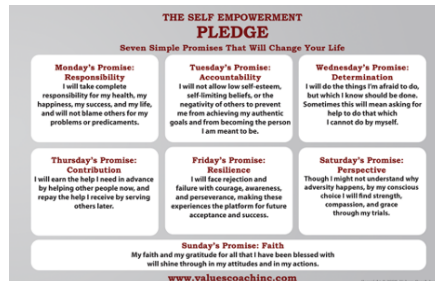
## Books – all are available on Amazon



## Journal articles you can download

- » [Courageous Leadership for a Culture of Emotional Safety](#), *Nursing Management*, November 2022
- » [Living Your Values in Challenging Times](#), *Nurse Leader*, April 2022
- » [Caring for Covid's Emotional Long Haulers](#), *Nursing Management*, March 2022 (APEX Award winner)
- » [Everyday Courage for Extraordinary Times](#), *Nursing Management*, January 2021 (APEX Award winner)
- » [Living Your Values](#), *Nurse Leader*, February 2020

## Poster downloads





# How Can I Help You?

The Pickle Challenge definitely can be a DIY project, but I can help you make it the beginning of a more intensive Culture of Ownership initiative.



I can record a custom introductory video and/or conduct virtual programs tailored for your organization.

[Watch Joe's video for WellSpan Health Pickle Challenge](#)



I can conduct half or full-day Culture of Ownership leadership workshops and all-staff sessions on my *How To Be the Lion in Your Mirror* presentation.



I can provide keynote and breakout sessions for your association event and help you incorporate The Pickle Challenge as a fun fund-raiser.

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