

# **Ava Health's Manifesto**

## **Part 3: The Culture**



(970) 822-0144 | [Together@HelloAvaHealth.com](mailto:Together@HelloAvaHealth.com)  
[www.HelloAvaHealth.com](http://www.HelloAvaHealth.com)

2784 Crossroads Blvd. Grand Junction, CO 81506



## **The Ava Health Manifesto, Part 3: The Culture**

The culture we build is the care we deliver. This is the blueprint for doing both without compromise.

*Published August 13th, 2025, by Christopher Bennett, Chief Executive Officer and co-Founder*

*“You can’t deliver trauma-informed care inside a traumatizing workplace.”*

In Part 1 of our Manifesto, we detailed out for you the vision, the North Star of Ava Health, where every decision, every action, compounded over time will ultimately lead us to -

To live in a world where adaptable, accountable and accessible behavioral healthcare is a universal right.

In Part 2, the Values, we specified the ‘how’ that underpins everything we do, the compass that guides every decision, every interaction, and every new direction we take. .

Agency, Service, Purpose

Now, in Part 3, we’re stepping directly into the heart of Ava Health:

### **The people. The culture. The soul of the organization.**

It’s a bold claim, I know, to write about culture before we’ve even opened our doors. There are no before-and-after metrics yet. No employee or client success stories.

But if we’re going to build something that lasts, something that truly shifts the culture in behavioral health, we have to lay down the blueprint now. Because culture isn’t what happens *after* the doors open. Culture is what determines whether they open at all and whether they stay open with integrity, clarity, and purpose.

And more than that?

### **Culture is the operating system.**

It determines how we hire, how we fire, how we grow, and how we respond when it’s hard. And trust me: it’s going to get hard.

### **The Antagonist: The Industry Itself**

Let’s stop pretending.

The real antagonist in this story isn’t addiction. It’s not depression. It’s not trauma.

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It's the system that claims to treat those things while quietly suffocating the people who are responsible to care for those in need.

I'm talking about the machine we've all worked in or been crushed by. A system where clinicians carry caseloads so high they forget what it feels like to take a full breath. Where people who signed up to impact lives end up filing paperwork until their own life feels like a blur of forms, audits, and half-finished sessions. Where great ideas go to die on deaf ears of those trusted to lead and care for the front-line workers.

A system where leadership sends memos instead of leading from the trenches. Where decisions are made in boardrooms by people who haven't sat in on a group in years, if ever. Where the people with the most insight are ignored because their titles don't start with "Chief."

You know what happens in that kind of culture? Good people quit. Or worse, they stay and go numb.

They show up, but they're not there. They go through the motions, but they're counting the hours. And who suffers? Everyone. Staff. Clients. Families. Communities. This is how generational trauma gets passed down inside the very systems meant to interrupt it.

And here's the part no one wants to say out loud:

**You can't deliver trauma-informed care inside a traumatizing workplace.**

You can't help someone heal while you're drowning in your own helplessness. You can't build trust with a client when your own organization breaks it with you daily. You can't say "we care" when your salary says otherwise.

And yet, this is the **standard**.

This is what most behavioral healthcare workers have come to expect:

- That their voice won't matter.
- That their pay will be an afterthought.
- That their passion will be exploited until it runs dry.
- That no matter how much they give, it'll never be enough.

We talk about burnout like it's a personal failing. But the real diagnosis is **systemic betrayal**.



When companies prioritize margins over mission, when HR becomes a weapon instead of a support system, when leaders hide behind metrics and ignore the human cost - you don't get excellence. You get mediocrity propped up by marketing.

This is the bullshit we're here to dismantle.

Because if we don't build for the people who treat the people then we're just building a prettier version of the same broken system.

I've done that before. I've built something that looked good from the outside but was quietly eroding from within. I've ignored red flags. I've let urgency justify dysfunction. I've allowed culture to become a cancer. And I've paid the price for it.

### **Not this time.**

Ava Health isn't an escape from the system. It's a declaration of war against it.

And if you've ever looked around your workplace and thought, *"This could be so much better if they actually listened,"* then you're not crazy.

You're exactly who we're building this with.

### **Why This Matters to Me**

I used to think leadership was about being the one with the answers. About having the vision, the strategy, the plan. But soul-wrenching failures have taught me something deeper:

Leadership is about creating the conditions where other people can lead. It's about telling the truth when it's hard. It's about standing in the fire and saying, "We're not leaving until this gets better."

I've lost people I care about to broken systems. I've watched brilliant professionals walk away from this work because the culture around them was suffocating. I've built a company that was successful on the outside but grossly fractured internally and I've promised myself I would never do that again. Because I've lived it.

Encore Recovery was a beautiful place. Built with the best of intentions, strong values (in theory), and a mission that truly meant something. But beneath that beauty was a culture I couldn't see clearly at the time because I was the one shaping it through fear, ego, and a deep need to prove something to the world and to myself. To fill a wound that could never be filled with success or external validation.



I was the CEO, but I led like a dictator disguised as a visionary. I had ideas that sounded powerful, meaningful, even transformative. And then I forced those ideas down the pipeline without listening. Without trusting. Without allowing space for the team around me, people who were wiser, more grounded, and more qualified, to shape the direction of the company.

We had a beautiful vision, but I had an inferiority complex that disguised itself as certainty. We had brilliant staff, but I made them feel small through micromanagement masked as oversight. I placed unrealistic expectations on others, while refusing to take a hard look at my own behavior. I clung to the illusion of control, when I should've let go. I gave commands, when I should've asked questions. I protected my ego instead of protecting our team.

Eventually, the toxicity caught up with us. With me.

People burned out. Trust eroded. Frustrations mounted. The whisper network started, people questioning decisions, questioning leadership, questioning whether they still wanted to be there. The cancer had spread through what was once a beautifully intentioned organization.

It wasn't "the culture" that failed. It was *me*. I had to step away from the company to give it a chance to survive, to save the soul of what was left. That decision broke me. But it also saved me. It forced me to rebuild, not just a company, but *myself*.

The culture Ava Health is the one I wish I'd created when I still had time to fix it. But now, with the gift of hindsight, the wisdom borne out of suffering, and a team of humans who challenge and support me daily, we're doing it the right way.

This time, I'm not pretending to have all the answers. We're building a company where the best ideas win. Where leadership is shared. Where values aren't aspirational, they're enforceable. And where people are trusted to lead from day one.

So this is it. Our line in the sand. Our public promise.

**So what does culture look like at Ava Health?**

**Psychological Safety Is the Foundation. Period.**

You can't build anything lasting, anything real, without psychological safety.

We say hard things here. We push each other. We move fast, change often, and expect a lot. But none of that means anything if people don't feel safe. Not just "not yelled at" safe.



**Deep-in-your-nervous-system safety.** The kind that lets you exhale. The kind that tells your body, *you're not in danger here.*

Because when people don't feel safe, they shut down. They stop speaking up. They hide their mistakes. They nod along when they disagree. They say they're fine when they're not. And the culture starts dying in silence.

So we don't wait for safety to "happen." We **build** it on purpose, every day. We check in, not just on performance but on well-being. We train leaders to listen. We reward vulnerability. We slow down when someone's struggling. And when trust breaks, which it will, we clean it up immediately. No defensiveness. No delay.

Psychological safety is not "being nice." It's being honest **and** kind. It's being able to say, "I'm not okay," or "I messed this up," or "I have an idea, and I'm not sure how it'll land," without fearing backlash or shame.

Without it, nothing else we build matters. Not the model. Not the metrics. Not the mission. Because people can't grow, contribute, or lead if they don't feel safe to show up as their full selves.

At Ava, **psychological safety is the prerequisite.**

**We create a culture of belonging on purpose.**

Belonging isn't something we hope happens. It's something we *engineer*. We don't just want people in the room, we want them in the room as their full, unfiltered selves. No chameleon personalities to survive. No shrinking to fit in. No pretending to be okay just to keep the peace. We don't ask people to conform, we build a culture wide enough to *hold who they really are.*

Race. Identity. Background. Neurodiversity. Lived experience. It all matters. It all shapes how we show up and how we care. And here's the thing: inclusion isn't soft. It's strategic. Because sameness doesn't build excellence. *Difference does.* And when people feel like they actually belong, they speak up. They lead. They bring ideas no one else saw coming. They build shit that matters.

If someone walks into Ava and still feels like they're "the only" - the only BIPOC voice, the only LGBTQIA+ or gender non-conforming presence, the only one who came from limited access or opportunity, then we haven't done our job yet. Belonging is the real KPI. And we're here to make it real for everyone.

**We hire for character. Period.**



We can teach clinical models. We can train systems. We can build skills. What we can't build is values, hunger, or heart. That has to walk in the door on day one. So that's what we hire for. We look for people who take ownership, who ask better questions, who give a damn when no one's watching. Credentials matter, but character matters more. Because in this work, the stakes are too high to bet on resumes over readiness. We hire people we trust to lead, to grow, to challenge, to care. Everything else, we'll teach it.

Ava Health was never designed to be another treatment program. We're not following the blueprint of what's already been done. We are creating a system from scratch - one that delivers a private-pay quality experience to underserved communities. Medicaid-funded, outcomes-measured, culturally humble, clinically sound.

But all of that, the continuum of care, the technology stack, the partnerships, the model itself, is only possible because of the culture we're building beneath it.

And that culture is the people.

People who take ownership before being asked. People who care so deeply it hurts sometimes. People who are willing to have hard conversations, stay in the discomfort, and come out the other side better - stronger, sharper, more connected.

We're not here to chase comfort. We're here to chase alignment.

### **We believe in a culture of curiosity.**

Curiosity is required here. This isn't a place where innovation happens in quarterly meetings. It happens on Tuesday morning when a Case Manager notices a process that's broken and says, "Why are we doing it this way?" and instead of getting shut down, they're handed the whiteboard marker.

We reward the questioners. The challengers. The ones who can't help but tinker and poke holes in the system because they give a damn enough to try. This is the house for people who instinctively spot the gaps and want to fill them. And we don't punish that instinct, we celebrate it.

We've rewritten entire workflows because someone asked a better question in a hallway conversation. We've paused meetings, redrafted protocols, restructured documentation, all because someone had the courage to say, "This doesn't make sense," and we had the humility to say, "You're right."

We don't build off legacy systems and outdated assumptions. We don't recreate the past. We reimagine the future. And that only happens when curiosity is part of our bloodstream.



If your reflex is to defend the status quo, you won't last here. If your instinct is to investigate, disrupt, and rebuild, we're already saving you a seat.

**We believe that conflict is the search for truth.**

If your version of leadership is to avoid hard conversations, you're going to hate it here.

We don't sugarcoat. We don't sidestep. And we don't pretend things are okay when they're not.

We believe conflict is not something to survive, it's something to engage. Not to wound, but to reveal. Because the truth doesn't live in comfort zones. It lives in the tension, the friction, the uncomfortable middle ground between what is and what could be.

We've had hard conversations that turned into breakthroughs. We've had parking lot arguments that ended in hugs. We've had tear-filled team huddles where someone finally said what needed to be said and everything shifted. And we protect that. Not because it's dramatic, but because it's *real*.

This isn't a team of people who pretend to agree for the sake of harmony. This is a team that sharpens each other with respect, with compassion, and with the shared understanding that we're here to get it right, not be right.

We don't weaponize truth. But we don't water it down either.

We speak it, clean up afterward, and keep moving. Together.

**We care enough about people to tell them the truth.**

That's our daily practice. We don't believe in protecting people from discomfort, we believe in calling them into greatness. Not with shame. Not with ego. But with the kind of direct, loving, truth-telling that sharpens potential into performance.

We create an environment that brings out the best in people because we refuse to build a culture where people coast. That's not kindness, that's neglect. And we don't do neglect here.

We don't hand out false praise. We don't sugarcoat tough conversations. We don't sit silently when someone's off-track. Because the moment we stop caring enough to say something is the moment we've lost our edge and our integrity.

We hold the line. We say the hard thing. We tell the truth even when it stings because we know what people are capable of when they're seen, challenged, and supported all at once.



We don't settle for less than our team's best. Not because we expect perfection but because we know what happens when people are placed in the right environment: they become spectacular.

And that's the point of culture. Not to make people comfortable. To make them unstoppable.

**We celebrate failure - loudly and often.**

You don't get to greatness without risk. And you don't take risks if you're afraid to fail. You're afraid of judgement. So at Ava, we remove the fear. We don't just tolerate failure, we expect it. We talk about it, share it, and learn from it, out loud, top to bottom.

When leadership screws up, we say so. When a plan falls apart, we unpack it. When something breaks, we don't point fingers, we figure it out and move. That's the culture: **fail and move**. Not hide and spin. Not pretend and perform.

If you're not failing at something, you're not stretching enough. And if you can't own it, you're not ready to lead. We don't shame mistakes here. We mine them. That's how we grow.

**We do not tolerate gossip and complaining.**

This is non-negotiable. Gossip is a cancer. Complaining without ownership is rot. And we cut both out quickly.

If you've got a problem, name it. If you're struggling, say something. If you see something off, call it forward. But if your instinct is to whisper instead of speak, to judge instead of ask, to build alliances in corners instead of community in the open, you're in the wrong place.

We go direct. We go honest. We go together.

Because what we're building here is too important to be undermined by side conversations and back-channel politics. Gossip destroys trust. Complaining without action breeds toxicity. And both will wreck a culture faster than any external threat ever could.

We don't shame vulnerability. We don't silence criticism. But we *require* accountability. If you've got something to say, say it to the person who can help you fix it. Otherwise, it's noise. And we don't have time for noise.

This is how we protect the culture. Not with empty slogans but with daily, deliberate action.

We call people in. We hold people close. We move through hard shit. And we never, ever weaponize each other's humanity.



## **We Lead With Fun, Play, and Self-Care**

Let's not sugarcoat it: this work is heavy. We're in the trenches with people navigating the darkest seasons of their lives. If we don't intentionally create space for joy, for laughter, for lightness, we won't make it. So... **fun, play, and self-care aren't afterthoughts. They're policy.** They're part of the architecture of our culture, embedded into the foundation from day one.

We're building a place where people actually *want* to show up. Not just because the mission matters, but because the energy is magnetic. Because the people are real. Because the environment gives you permission to exhale, to laugh, to dance it out in the hallway when a client gets their first job or someone crushes a tough week.

This is a workplace where we throw surprise celebrations, bring dogs to the office, take real breaks, and say yes when someone says, "I need a day." Where no one wears burnout like a badge. Where no one apologizes for protecting their peace. **Because your life outside of work matters and we treat it that way.**

If you're going to spend a third of your life somewhere, it better be a place you love. At Ava Health, we make joy non-negotiable. We work hard but we laugh harder. And that joy? That self-care? That balance? It isn't separate from the mission. **It's how we stay in the fight.**

## **The Standard We Protect**

Here's the line in the sand:

- We **promote** people who take ownership before being asked.
- We **coach** people who are struggling but stay accountable.
- We **release** people who blame, hide, or gossip, no matter how talented they are.

You will not last here if:

- You wait to be told what to do.
- You avoid being challenged to grow.
- You care more about status than service.

You will thrive here if:

- You are fiercely curious.
- You take feedback seriously.



- You want to work on something that could change lives, not just yours, but thousands of others.

## **Here Are the People Building This**

Culture is the result of the values and vision we embody on a daily basis. And there's no better way to understand the soul of Ava Health than to meet the team that's shaping it. These are the people who are building this vision from the ground up, brick by brick, breath by breath. They are the reason we will succeed. They are Ava Health. **Here's the team bringing Ava Health to life. And here, in their words, the culture they are creating.**

### **Ani Noda, Director of Admissions**

*"I'm here because I feel supported and trusted, and that matters to me. So many behavioral health companies are broken in ways that trickle down to the people they're supposed to help. What's different here is the effort. The way this team shows up for each other affects how we show up for clients. There's transparency, a willingness to listen, and a real intention to do things better from the inside out. That kind of environment feels rare and worth being a part of."*

### **Carla Peter, MSN, RN – Director of Nursing**

*"As the Director of Nursing for Ava Health, I lead with a steady hand and a servant's heart. I work closely with our medical and leadership teams to align clinical operations with regulatory standards and the evolving needs of our patients. I am committed to fostering a nursing culture that is rooted in respect, accountability, and unwavering support for both staff and clients. I am excited to be able to join Ava as we work to reshape the current culture of care in behavioral health."*

### **Eric Rydzewski, MS, LPC – Clinical Director**

*"Mr. Fred Rogers once taught us that deep presence is a kind of love. That is the kind of leadership, and healing, I believe in. That's why I'm here. At Ava Health, I lead our clinical model, conduct staff training, and support cultural development, including rituals like our Pendant Program. I believe healing happens in the details, in how we greet each other, in the systems we design, and in the values we live daily. I work shoulder-to-shoulder with our team to create a space where people feel grounded, empowered, and seen."*

### **Erica Blunt-Goode, MSW – Chief of Staff**

*"A person becomes a person, through other people. This is about impact, heart, and the kind of connection with others that encourages trust, asking questions, and remaining intentionally curious. If we want to transform behavioral health, we have to start by*

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*transforming the way we lead, design, and connect. That's the work I'm here to do at Ava Health and beyond."*

**Roman Braly, CADC-II – Community Engagement Architect**

*"To be a bright light in a dark world. While the work we do is deeply serious, I believe in keeping things light-hearted and human. This field isn't just my career, it's my calling. I genuinely love what I do, and I'm grateful to be good at it. To me, there are no failures, only opportunities for growth."*

**Riley Gershman-Walch – Staff Accountant**

*"Gandhi once said, 'Be the change you wish to see in the world.' This quote has always resonated with me on a deep level and played a significant role in guiding me to Ava Health. It continues to serve as a daily reminder of why I choose to show up and contribute to the work we do here."*

**Giebeh Alcaraz – Executive Assistant to Christopher**

*"I've learned that being an EA is not just about handling calendars and emails, it's about showing up with heart, patience, and presence in moments that matter. I do this work because I care deeply about the people I support, and I find real purpose in helping them feel less overwhelmed, more grounded, and fully supported. This isn't just what I do, it's who I am."*

**Christopher Bennett – Chief Executive Officer**

*"To be a shining light in the darkness. To turn dreams into reality. To live a visionary life. My promise is simple: we will never build anything at Ava that sacrifices humanity for efficiency. Not now. Not ever."*

**Ian Gershman – Chief Operating Officer**

*"Two years ago, Christopher approached me and said, 'I don't know exactly what it will look like, but I want to build something together.' That moment opened a door. I show up ready to ask, 'Why not?' At Ava, we build cultures of curiosity. We honor the wisdom and experience of those we serve, not as case numbers or outcomes to be managed, but as fellow travelers in search of meaning and purpose. We are here both as guides and as pilgrims."*

**David Purinton – Chief Financial Officer**

*"Because everyone deserves care that sees their strength, not just their struggle, and I want to help build the kind of system that finally feels like it was made for them. I've been on the*



*other side of this work, and I know how rare it is to find a place that sees people as more than just their worst day.”*

**If you’ve read this Far...**

...and you’re thinking, “This is the kind of place I’ve been waiting for,” we want to hear from you.

And if you’re reading this and thinking, “This sounds intense” - you’re right. It is.

We’re not building for everyone. We’re building for the ones who are done waiting. The ones ready to roll up their sleeves. The ones who believe culture isn’t a perk, it’s the whole damn product.

Let’s go build something that lasts.

-Christopher

For more information, to connect, or learn more - reach out to us!

Or find us on social and see what we’re building – in public.

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