

Culture Change: What actually makes it stick?



Simply Wright

Why stated values are not enough.

Culture does not change because we say the right things.

It changes when people experience something different in everyday decisions, conversations and behaviours

The issue

Many organisations invest time in defining values, launching culture programmes or communicating a new vision.

These things can help create direction, but they do not automatically change how people behave.

Culture is shaped by what is repeated, rewarded, challenged and tolerated

Schein's culture model reminds us that culture is more than what we can see on the surface. Visible behaviours and stated values often sit on top of deeper assumptions about what is safe, valued and expected.

The Cultural Web helps us explore the everyday signals that shape culture, including stories, routines, symbols, power, structures and controls.

Together, they show why culture change needs to focus on lived experience, not just stated values.

Key Question

Before asking “**How do we communicate our values?**”, ask:

“What do people experience here that tells them what really matters?”

What Really Shapes Culture?

Culture is often learned through experience, not instruction.



People learn the culture of an organisation by noticing patterns.

They notice what gets attention, what gets ignored, who has influence, how decisions are made, what is celebrated, what is avoided and what happens when things go wrong.

This is why culture work needs to look at the whole system, not just the words used to describe it.

What to look at	What it can reveal
Stories	What people believe really matters, based on what gets repeated and remembered
Rituals and routines	The habits, meetings and practices that shape everyday working life
Symbols	What status, power and priorities look like in visible form
Power structures	Who really influences decisions and whose voice carries weight
Control systems	What gets measured, rewarded, monitored or challenged
Organisational structures	How roles, hierarchy and processes shape behaviour
Leadership behaviour	What people copy, avoid or protect themselves from
Informal norms	The unwritten rules people quickly learn to follow

The Cultural Web highlights the everyday features that shape culture, including stories, routines, symbols, structures, controls and power.

If your values say one thing but your systems, decisions and leadership behaviours say another, people will believe the experience.

The Leadership Test

Culture is reinforced by what leaders say, do, reward and tolerate



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Leaders play a significant role in shaping culture, but not only by formal communication.

People watch what leaders do when pressure increases, when mistakes happen, when performance drops, when conflict appears and when difficult decisions need to be made.

These moments often teach people more about the real culture than any values statement.

What leaders say

Ask:

- Are expectations clear and consistent?
- Do leaders explain why the values matter in real situations?
- Is the language simple enough for people to use?

What leaders do

Ask:

- Do leaders role-model the behaviour they ask of others?
- What changes when the pressure increases?
- Are decisions aligned with the stated values?

What leaders reward

Ask:

- What gets noticed, praised or promoted?
- Are results valued more than behaviours?
- Do people see examples of the desired culture recognised?

What leaders tolerate

Ask:

- What poor behaviour continues without challenge?
- Where are standards applied inconsistently?
- What do people learn that they can 'get away with'?

People learn the culture less from what is written down and more from what happens when things are difficult.

Making Culture Change Stick

Moving from stated values to lived experience



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Define the behaviour, not just the value

If a value is 'respect', 'collaboration', or 'accountability', describe what that looks like in real conversations, meetings, decisions and moments of pressure.

Align systems and processes

Recruitment, induction, performance, reward, recognition, communication and decision-making should all support the culture you are trying to create.

Support managers to translate culture locally

Middle managers often turn culture into daily experience. They need clarity, confidence, time and support to lead the culture in practice.

Create honest feedback loops

Listen for the gap between intended culture and lived experience. Use surveys, conversations and team sessions to understand what people are really experiencing.

Challenge what undermines culture

If poor behaviour is tolerated, values lose credibility. Culture change needs fair, consistent follow-up when behaviour does not match expectations.

The next time the conversation turns to culture change, pause and ask:

What are people experiencing every day that either supports or undermines the culture we say we want?

If the answer is uncomfortable, that may be where the real work begins.

Evidence base

Edgar Schein — Organisational Culture

Culture can be understood at different levels: visible artefacts, espoused values and deeper underlying assumptions.

<https://psychsafety.com/psychological-safety-edgar-scheins-three-layers-of-organisational-culture/>

Johnson and Scholes — Cultural Web

A practical framework for exploring how stories, rituals, symbols, structures, controls and power shape culture.

<https://www.personio.com/hr-lexicon/cultural-web-model/>

CIPD — Organisational climate and culture

Highlights why culture is influential but can be difficult to define and change, and why climate/lived experience matters.

<https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/factsheets/organisation-culture-change-factsheet/>

Kotter — Leading change

Useful for thinking about how change gains momentum and why communication alone is not enough.

<https://www.kotterinc.com/methodology/8-steps/>