

88%

OF COMPANIES DON'T
UNDERSTAND WHAT
WORKPLACE CULTURE
MEANS



"CULTURE EATS
STRATEGY FOR
BREAKFAST"

Peter Drucker

What is this thing we call culture?

written by Tubi Oyston and Kate Erickson

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How often have you heard the term 'workplace culture' in your professional conversations but have no idea what it actually means? It's not just you. The term is inconsistently defined and is largely conceptual, with just 12% of companies believing that they understand what workplace culture is [1].

If this sounds like you, you are not alone. We end up discussing 'culture' in just about every managerial workshop we run. In fact, Kate's favourite quote is 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' (thank you Peter Drucker).

We talk about creating a culture that we want to be a part of, a culture that creates the right environment to build trust, to allow diversity of opinion and to allow people to thrive, one that is going to supportively develop people and build up the organisation.

Interestingly, the culture we end up talking about is the cognitive culture. That is, the written, verbalised and oft-times repeated sentiments that are emblazoned on the walls. These are the organisation's values, which can sometimes be a combination of what is aspirational and what they want the clients to see on their website. This does not mean that organisational values are not genuine or should be ignored. To the contrary, we feel that it is important for everyone to be able to look to and align themselves with something bigger than themselves. In fact, we often challenge managers to bring the notion of values down to their team level and think about what they want to be known for, even if it is just within the organisation. Having local team values is even more important when they represent the organisation externally or have some form of interface with the client.

While a valuable activity, this is still at the cognitive culture level and does not necessarily get to the heart of what contributes to making a team, or by extension, an organisation successful.



So what else is there?

Beyond the cognitive culture is the emotional culture. The emotional culture is more about the unspoken behaviours, attitudes, and non-verbal cues. It is about how people react to and treat each other and manage relationships in the workplace. Why is this not spoken? And how can this conversation be had, safely and productively.

Now, we can hear you saying, “who cares how people feel, it’s work”. Well, let us return to Mr Drucker and ‘culture eating strategy for breakfast’. We are sure you have been in teams or organisations who have glossy values on the wall about respect, yet the prevailing culture, the unwritten culture, or the emotional culture reflects fear instead. This is the culture that drives the undercurrent, sets the tone and has proven to be a more pervasive and powerful influence on staff productivity, engagement and wellbeing than the glossy values on the wall.

We know from the research on emotional contagion done by Elaine Hatfield and Erich Fromm that experiences do spread – Kate has always said that ‘enthusiasm begets enthusiasm’ and the opposite is of course true. In fact, intense negative emotions expressed more emphatically are actually more contagious [2].

For the success of the organisation and people within it, doesn’t it make sense to deliberately attend to the emotional culture as well as the cognitive one?

How does a team or organisation even start to look at the workplace emotional culture, let alone lead conversations about it?

Emotional culture: how people react to, and treat, each other and manage relationships in the workplace

Mapping the emotional culture of your workplace isn’t about sitting round a campfire and sharing your deepest darkest secrets. Nor is it the ‘brutal honesty’ about the past that often leaves people more damaged than when you began.

Emotional culture is thinking about what emotion or feeling you might need to feel to be the best version of yourself at work. Put simply – we initially ask, how do I need to feel to be awesome at work?

For some people this is pretty easy, but for others, it is easier to ask the reverse question – How do I **not** want to feel at work?

Now we realise that this feels like the worst question to ask, because for some people, when you ask them how they do **not** want to feel, many fear the conversation and would rather not go there. But having people identify these important feelings can open a conversation and the beginning of a considered strategy to support employees to be successful in a deliberate and personalised way.

We also know that life is not peace, love and pixie dust all the time, nor are we all enjoying an ever upward trajectory of success at work. From time to time we experience feelings that we don't want to feel. What we do next is what matters.

Identifying behaviours, rituals or routines that can be used to talk about emotions and manage when a team member is feeling an undesirable feeling, helps to transform their experience at work, and minimise the contagion for those around them. Alternatively, having these conversations with your team as a development strategy means all members have the tools to manage themselves and support each other for success through effective communication.

Sounds like it is easier said than done?

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Mapping your emotional culture using the Emotional Culture Deck from New Zealand designer Jeremy Dean is an elegant and pragmatic solution to what can be an intimidating prospect.

Undertaking this process means your team can work out what they want to feel to be successful and how they can make that happen more consistently. It also helps to identify how they don't want to feel, but might from time to time, and how to best manage that.

Given that a decade of research shows that emotional culture influence employee satisfaction, burnout, teamwork, financial measures and absenteeism [3], it seems worth finding out more about how to make it happen for your team, doesn't it?

Some of the companies using The Emotional Culture Deck to improve productivity and performance.



Contact us if you want more information

Kate has added Elephant Rider status to her extensive expertise in wellbeing, facilitation, coaching and consulting. She is passionate about reducing unnecessary drama through clear communication that lets us all be the best possible versions of ourselves.

Do you want to learn more about The Emotional Culture Deck?

Contact us on 02 6282 9111 or email icg@interactionconsulting.com.au

[1] What Is Workplace Culture Really? 30th Jun, 2020 <https://sidekicker.com/au/blog/workplace-culture-really/>

[2] Protect Yourself From Emotional Contagion July 2019 Psychology Today
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201906/protect-yourself-emotional-contagion>

[3] Manage Your Emotional Culture Jan-Feb 2016 HBR <https://hbr.org/2016/01/manage-your-emotional-culture>