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## Facing the Truth About Where We Are

“Culture is like the wind. It is invisible; yet its effect can be seen and felt.”

—Bryan Walker and Sarah Soule (2017)

There is significant challenge within organizations that try to align people to company value sets or behaviors that don't feel true or representative of the whole. Our long-vaunted tools to shape culture, such as our history, values, and top leadership, are no longer enough to cope with the surge of change we are seeing happen to organizations. Culture is being buffeted so hard that we cannot keep up.

For example, take the rise of employee resource groups (ERGs). Most large organizations have a women's network. These help shine a light on the female experience of work. But in the last decade this trend has exploded, and, in some organizations, there can be as many as 15 or so networks that people can join and be part of, each with their own unique agenda and perspective on how the organization should change to meet its needs.

These groups of volunteer champions are often created through engagement commitments from people surveys identifying support required for gaps in the organization. Often these champions have then been relied on for cultural initiatives where internal specialists and expert resources have less investment, so we have developed an overreliance on unqualified change agents. They are given control and influence, yet often unskilled and unsupported at helping their organizations actively deliver what they want without creating challenges elsewhere. The extent to which their power and influence then tips into toxic activism in the workplace, where company expectations fall into a space that conflicts with any individual, is now commonplace.

A large organization in Amsterdam recently recognized that a new ERG had been set up for white men who felt marginalized in the organization, perfectly acceptable according to the organization's policies for ERGs. However, when word got back to leaders that there were conversations within the group supporting racism, white supremacy, and misogyny the private equity firm owners took the action to shut down all ERGs resolving the immediate issue, but leaving many people confused and other groups less supported. The presence and pull of ERGs show that the mainstay culture of the organization is not translating into the workplace nor working for everyone. With the diminishing support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives spreading across the globe, will we see less ERG groups searching for community and common values and people simply looking for this human connection elsewhere? It is unlikely that culture can be left in the hands of such groups without better development, investment, and support.

## **How Does Culture Live Online?**

We have seen an explosion of remote and hybrid working environments, a trend we were already seeing but was dramatically sped up thanks to the coronavirus pandemic. Organizations work in a much more distributed way than in the past, and digital workspaces are more common. This shift has occurred alongside the fact that in our everyday lives the average adult now spends 2 hours and 24 minutes on social media every day (Statista, 2025). We move from Microsoft teams to Slack to WhatsApp to Instagram, to LinkedIn, to email multiple times, every day. The virtual spaces in which community

and culture now live in organizations would be unrecognizable to a corporate leader of the 1980s or even 1990s. We don't yet know how closely connected organizational culture is to, or driven by, online trends. Does the size of online audience support and reinforce cultural norms? How do we see this happening with the reduction of monitoring on platforms and increasing free speech? Will global media influence reduce significantly with people preferring the thoughts/insights of their online community and where will we find truth? Alongside this, from our experience, most firms don't know how to shape their culture in this setting.

Organizations are experimenting with how to show up in online spaces without the tried and tested guardrails of the past. One example was the tragic 2020 George Floyd incident, which was the catalyst for a major surge of support for the Black Lives Matter movement that catapulted academic ideas around antiracism into the mainstream. According to Pew Research Report "Black Lives Matter stands as a model of a new generation of social movements intrinsically linked to social media" (Bestvater, 2023). The hashtag #blacklivesmatter was used by so many organizations, we thought we were seeing a cultural turning point moment, and in the first two months following the murder of Floyd, more than \$5 billion in corporate funding was pledged to organizations for racial equality (Sayed, 2022). Organizations scrambled to put out social media-driven responses and commitments, which by 2025 have been hugely rowed back from (Murray, 2025). The chaos we find ourselves in establishing what organizations stand for—our purpose—risks us continuously getting it wrong, polarizing our narrative from some group somewhere. This demonstrates that perhaps we are now devoid of a mainstay culture in its traditional form.

Cultural fit is no longer something that serves an increasingly diverse workforce or able to serve a diverse customer base. Maybe increasingly we need to accept that the diversity created in our workforce means that all perspectives are appreciated and valued, and that limits the commonality and homogeneity of what used to define culture within organizations.

We used to say don't talk about religion or politics at dinner parties, but that list grows ever longer in the poly-crisis world we live in—don't talk about gender equality, climate change, abortion rights, immigration, on and on. Both the range and the sensitivity of topics seem to be growing, and it's increasingly felt in the workplace.

### ***So How Can We Influence and Evolve Culture with Eggshells Under Foot?***

It's vital we step back and make peace with the fact that things have changed. We must see things for how they are now, rather than as we would like them to be.

Nostalgic notions of feeling part of something bigger than ourselves, feeling purposeful through connectedness and interdependence, kept the culture alive yet now we find ourselves more dispersed with many people moving roles post pandemic and shredding what we clung to in terms of organizational culture across all industries. The global pandemic shift to dispersed ways of working has created greater isolation along with the increasingly digital workplace environment.

There is a risk we just give up and ask ourselves questions like these: Have we lost culture altogether? Are we looking for leaders to re-create the cultural norms in this new world of work in a way in which they are incapable? People may be back in the office through return-to-office mandates but how much culture has already been lost during recent times? Is it rebuildable? Or do we need to radically rethink what culture means now for the modern world and how it is created and brought about?

We must face the issues and start to look anew at how we move forward.

### **What Is Causing Old Corporate Culture to Diminish?**

These new and difficult questions for leaders make culture a highly strategic area of business to grapple with. In this new world, the skills and mindsets required for success have changed dramatically. And yet, most of the global workforce and many leadership teams are unprepared for the demands ahead. Perhaps corporate culture feels to some like it is diminishing, but it is simply evolving. Stepping back, organizations can see that both how we define and experience culture has shifted over the past few years and its largely because of a few key factors.

### ***Hybrid and Remote Work***

The shift to remote and hybrid work has made culture less about office spaces, and how things are done in the visible sense, and more about the quality of connection and intentional leadership (Clark, 2025). The sudden

shift, driven by the rules of the coronavirus pandemic, to remote and hybrid work was a shock to most organizations and individuals. It created a range of complex emotions such as relief of being close to immediate family to deep anxiety and loneliness as jobs were paused or lost. It both brought people together and pulled people very far apart.

We know of one CEO who joined an organization a week before the UK lockdowns began, meaning they had barely met anyone as they started. Traditional culture markers (like office perks and in-person rituals such as birthday cake celebrations) have faded or become complex with the need to ensure everyone can be included wherever they work from, but new forms of engagement, like virtual team building, asynchronous collaboration, and flexible work models are emerging.

What hasn't been addressed is how effective these are in comparison for meaningful human connection? The key aspects of culture that build trust, belonging, and spontaneous collaboration are not easily replicated so people tend to accept a different feel of culture in remote teams on the basis it fits their personal work/life integration needs. Deep questions remain on whether it is good enough for the organization's needs. Some would argue organizations need culture built on those foundations.

Peter Cappelli and Ranya Nehmeh (2025), writing for the *Harvard Business Review*, state that some of the dampening effects of remote and hybrid working on performance "have taken some time to show up." Issues they found in their research range from not helping new people who are struggling early enough, colleagues giving less to support their coworkers with their work and goals, collaboration across teams being almost impossible, virtual meetings are full of people multitasking and not paying full attention, promotions being linked to achievement of individual work as managers can't tell if colleagues get on with others or not, and, most pernicious of all, deep social isolation being bred and culture being eroded.

And yet this is a trend that is here to stay.

### ***Focus on Purpose and Well-Being***

Employees today expect more than just a paycheck; they want meaning and belonging in their work with some choosing this over greater financial reward. According to the Deloitte 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, a staggering 89% of Gen Zs and 92% of millennials say a sense of purpose is

key to job satisfaction and well-being (Deloitte, 2025). Many companies are actively prioritizing well-being, mental health, and a sense of purpose. Those that fail to do so risk losing talent to organizations that genuinely invest in their people. But how these are seen as a product of, or core tenet of, culture remains to be researched. Since large datasets in the past 10 years show that well-being is critical to organizational performance, it is more likely to be strategically resourced and invested in. There needs to be more studies examining how a focus on well-being and mental health has affected the collective experience and culture, not just how it has had a greater impact on individual experience at work. This might help us understand newer insights that show an intriguing correlation between higher personal resilience and well-being and higher disengagement with the organization.

People with high personal resilience and well-being may sometimes appear more disengaged from their organization—not because they care less, but because they’re better at protecting their own boundaries when the culture isn’t aligned with their values.

But what’s going on beneath the surface? Resilience enables detachment, when needed.

Highly resilient individuals are often self-aware, emotionally intelligent, and able to maintain perspective. When an organization is experiencing dysfunction, unclear values, poor leadership, lack of psychological safety, they may choose to disengage as a protective strategy.

They don’t spiral into burnout trying to “fix” a broken system. Instead, they step back, focus on their controllables, and maintain their well-being. After all these are skills we have been promoting in organizations and developing in workforces consistently for the past 5–10 years.

This can look like disengagement, but maybe it’s a healthy act of self-preservation.

Well-being supports autonomy. People with high well-being often have a strong sense of purpose and are more likely to be intrinsically motivated. If the organization doesn’t align with that purpose, or feels extractive or inauthentic, they may stop trying to “fit in” and instead focus their energy elsewhere (side projects, family, future plans). They’re not disengaged from work; they’re disengaged from the organization when it’s not adding value to their broader sense of meaning.

They may see through performative cultures. People with strong internal grounding can more easily spot when values are performative, when leadership lacks integrity, or when DEI and well-being are used as branding rather than substance. They don't get swept up in surface-level initiatives and may opt out of things that feel hollow.

Again, this can look like cynicism or withdrawal, but it's actually discernment.

Is this a "problem" or an insight? It's an insight and a warning.

When the most grounded, resilient, values-driven people are the ones quietly stepping back, opting out, or mentally checking out, it says more about the organization than the individual.

Potentially it means pushing hard in these areas without substance behind it might exacerbate these issues:

- A lack of meaningful alignment between personal and organizational purpose
- Cultural fatigue, when people are tired of inauthentic messaging
- A gap between what's said and what's experienced

When well-being and purpose lack depth, the most self-aware employees don't disengage from work, they disengage from cultures that no longer deserve their energy.

### ***Generational and Technological Shifts***

Younger generations entering the workforce expect transparency, inclusion, and authenticity. At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI), agentic AI, and automation are at pace redefining roles, requiring companies to reinforce the human aspects of work that cannot be replicated by any computer and developing confidence in those such as creativity, social imagination, and collaboration. If a corporate culture has been built over decades on in-depth personal relationships in person in the office, the disruption of recent dispersed ways of working since the pandemic shift means that new generations who have no experience of the past corporate culture have minimal expectations or understanding of it. The "way we do things 'round here" definition is no longer helpful for new starters who work remotely to

understand how the culture may support them and without experience of seeing, hearing, feeling leaders role-model organizational values daily.

Dr. Gillian Tett, academic and journalist, speaks to a new phenomenon that has emerged called *Generation P*. This is a cohort of people defined by “its preference for personalization and optionality” (Bottomley, 2025). This growing shift toward hyper-personalization in workplaces is causing organizations to have to offer a complex array of policies, perks, and days off to be able to satisfy the wide range of needs under its roof. Companies are under pressure to offer things like “paw-ternity” leave (time off for new pets), time off for extended travel, and so on. Likewise, managers must be able to make sense of these plus balance the perceptions of fairness and business delivery causing some to back off the job of management altogether. Indeed, according to a report by recruitment agency Robert Walters 52% of Gen Z professionals don’t want to be middle managers and 69% of Gen Z say middle management is too high stress and low reward (Robert Walters, 2024).

In addition, AI, and particularly agentic AI, is transforming the way organizations operate, requiring leaders to rethink how they shape culture in the workplace. If culture is the space between humans, where does AI fit in? As AI looks increasingly human-like, automates tasks, enhances decision-making, and reshapes roles, companies must foster an environment where adaptability, security, collaboration, and ethical considerations take center stage. With an estimated \$4.4 trillion in long-term productivity gains, AI is advancing at record speed (Kelly, 2025). A culture that embraces AI needs to prioritize continuous learning, ensuring employees develop skills that complement AI-driven processes rather than compete with them. AI is as significant in the workplace as electricity, the internet, and email; therefore, entry-level roles are changing as AI steps in to do what someone new in the workplace would have done for more experienced and senior members of staff. AI is also writing our emails, newsletters, and other content, so our expressions are changing, and with it comes harder to determine rules of the game. This shift is not just about integrating AI but about redefining the cultural blueprint to thrive in an AI-augmented world.

For Gen Z their relationship with technology and AI is different. Gen Z trust AI bots more than human doctors (Glick, 2023) and spend their time conversing with AI about their lives when they are not interacting on social media. Compared with 40% of other generations, 66% of Gen Z use

digital tools such as wellness apps and fitness trackers to monitor their health. Yet this extreme connectedness coexists with an epidemic of loneliness; 2025 Ipsos research revealed that 36% of Gen Zers feel lonely every week despite having many friends (Jones, 2025). This dynamic is in our workforce and shaping what happens there.

### ***Trust and Leadership Accountability***

With the pace and complexity of business today, command-and-control leadership is fading fast in high-performing organizations because it is too slow. Waiting for the CEO attention or a board meeting coming round in a few weeks can be the difference between winning and losing. We are seeing it being replaced by more human-centered leadership. Trust is the foundation on which this transformation is built. Rachel Botsman, a leading academic on the topic of trust, defines it as “confident relationship with the unknown” (Botsman, 2024).

Companies that embrace open communication and trust tend to move faster and sustain stronger cultures by retaining talent for long tenures, which allows for more time for people to build stronger bonds, while those resistant to change may struggle with engagement and retention. The disruption of recent years and continuous change and uncertainty have meant people are searching for leaders they trust and offer a way forward in a complex world. Research shows people have greater trust in organizational leaders than in politicians or the media, increasing the responsibility that business leaders have to help others make sense of what is going on in the world.

The job of leadership is therefore getting redefined. McKinsey (Maor, 2024) have recently changed their perspectives on leadership too as the “imperial CEO is no more.” They cite the need for inner work to be the mainstay of leadership and CEO development—this inner work focuses on resilience, empathy, humility, versatility, and authenticity, which leads to human leadership. This shift in leadership style will also affect the culture as top leaders still hold sway in the culture arena.

### ***Globalization and Cultural Diversity***

With teams spread across different countries and cultures, a one-size-fits-all corporate culture is no longer practical or indeed ethical/moral. We can’t expect everyone to share values and beliefs in the same way now that we

have greater diversity. Companies are learning to build inclusive cultures that celebrate diverse perspectives rather than impose rigid corporate identities. Leaders can no longer assume an alignment between individual and corporate values.

According to Ipsos (Ipsos Global Trends, 2024), large income and wealth disparities are widely recognized as detrimental to society, yet in many countries they have widened over the past decade. The intensity of this feeling has resulted in heightened societal stress and a splintering of traditional structures, with new ideologies and political allegiances emerging.

## **The World Has Changed Forever**

All these forces tell us we are just not experiencing a period of change; we are living through the collapse of an old era. The assumptions and structures that underpinned 20th-century organizations are eroding under the weight of unprecedented global forces. It is time to face the reality: The world we designed our organizations for no longer exists.

The gap between our current capability and future need in organizations is growing:

- From task execution to sensemaking
- From siloed expertise to interdisciplinary collaboration
- From compliance to creativity
- From static learning to continuous adaptability

Despite these future needs emerging steadily over the past years and plenty of resources and budget made available to focus on culture in organizations, we haven't seen large organizations able to keep up with the pace and scale of interventions required. There is a disquiet growing, with CEOs and executive teams now considerably more educated on cultural change than 20 years ago, demanding to know how leaders will get their culture intentionally "match fit" for the future. So with demand and resource available, what is getting in our way?