

Culture by Choice or Chance?

3 tools to help you describe and shape your culture



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How effective and aligned is your culture?

This report contains insights and practical tools to help you facilitate the critical conversations to define the culture you have and make conscious choices around the culture you need to support your strategy.

Company culture is the unique blend of values, behaviours and working practices that shape the way that employees work together within a company. The way in which leaders operate is particularly key to shaping the culture. Cultures are unique to organisations and effective cultures are those intentionally “chosen” to align with purpose and strategy to enable high performance and create successful organisations.

A purposefully developed and aligned culture will actively support the accelerated delivery of your strategy. When culture is ignored and difficult to describe it can mean the downfall of strategy and poor performance.



Taylor Clarke partnered with us around transformational work streams to help us identify cultural issues to address, and to develop robust interventions to drive the required cultural improvement. Their involvement and support have made an important contribution to the turnaround of our business.

Group HR Director, Coveris UK



6 key alignment questions

The pandemic on top of Brexit, digital momentum, equality and climate change has led many organisations to embrace exceptional transformational organisational change.

For many it is the only option for survival, recovery, and future growth. Where, when, and how people work is changing rapidly... habits, behaviours and working practices need to change for new initiatives to gain traction and deliver benefit. How people lead, communicate, engage and transition is changing too. Key questions being considered include:

- 1 Is your prevailing culture helping or hindering you and how do you know?
- 2 How would you describe the culture you have?
- 3 What is the impact on your organisation and performance?
- 4 What culture do you need to support your strategy?
- 5 Are your recruitment, development, reward and other HR policies reinforcing the culture you need?
- 6 What do you need to do to develop your culture so that it supports and encourages leaders to lead change effectively and teams to deliver?

Reflecting on the effectiveness of your culture and identifying what needs to change, and how to achieve the change is not for the faint hearted. It requires clear vision, enlightened leadership, determination, and commitment.

There has been considerable research into factors that enable successful organisations, across private, public and third sectors, and across industries, and having a culture that is aligned to an organisation's purpose and strategy is key.



What do we mean by organisational culture?

We find it helpful to see culture as the environment your strategy lives in... with both supporting and unhelpful characteristics. It is something you get, not something you do... it is an outcome not an activity. It is a powerful, evolving force that we can shape and influence, rather than prescribe and control.

It is something we and our leadership teams are influencing every day, but often unconsciously or without clear and consistent intent. Culture is often shaped by hidden beliefs and assumptions about the “Way things are done around here”.

We believe culture is something to be ‘chosen’ not ‘lived with’ and that it has the greatest positive impact when it is aligned to support your strategy and impact on organisational performance. Culture is visibly reflected in the habits, behaviours and working practices; yours, and those of your leadership team and employees. While all organisations have different purposes, strategies and cultures, the key to success is often the alignment of all three.



We believe successful culture change is shaped from the top and built from bottom and needs to be collectively owned by the senior team. They need to lead as role models and senior team conversations need a common language and shared vision that ties culture to performance. Buy in and commitment from the senior team is essential. You get the behaviour you model and accept in others. Overcoming limiting beliefs that culture is too subjective, too hard to measure and too complex to manage is a critical start point. Culture and strategy should be part of the same conversation.



3 Tools to help you describe and shape your culture

Taking “1st steps” by examining Habits, Alignment, Strengths and Challenges

A rigorous discovery phase is critical. One in which the senior team have honest and open conversations and listen to employees at all levels to enable them to collectively describe the culture you have and identify the culture you aspire to create. Finding a meaningful way to describe this in an inclusive way helps to create ownership for change. “Your world... in your words”.

It is often challenging to do this without the insight of an external facilitator to help you manage the process and more easily (and honestly) observe ways of doing things, group and team dynamics, and behaviours ... and their impact. In the same way culture is often most visible to you when you first join an organisation and make comparisons with previous companies. We find it helpful to ask managers to do this individually first before joining a facilitated team discussion to explore all viewpoints and agree the most important three aspects.

Depending on your context and purpose you can use the following as standalone tools to gain insight and narrow down priorities... or for maximum effectiveness use all three in sequence. For all three discussions, particularly if you are working virtually on Teams or Zoom, we find it helpful to ask managers to do this individually first before joining a facilitated team discussion to explore all viewpoints and agree the most important three aspects for each quadrant.



Tool 1

Habits, Behaviours and Working practices

Discussion, Feedback and Reflection Tool

Used with thanks to Denison Consulting USA



Knowing where to start can be challenging... we find exploring habits a useful way to start by surfacing the bigger issues and opportunities

Observing 'above the waterline' behaviours, and describing what people see and do regularly, their "habits", are a great way to describe the existing culture and the stated values are only a starting point, but only by getting

beneath the waterline can you understand the real 'as is' and the "drivers" and "why" of culture. What are the organisational actual lived values and beliefs? What are the individuals' values and beliefs?...and to what extent are they aligned? (143)

Here is a simple tool we use to help people articulate some of the habits, behaviours and working practices that characterize the culture they have and describe the culture they need to transition to over time. The 4 boxes help capture the focus for change and you can use various lenses for these discussions, e.g. My Organisation, My team, A change project or Me as an individual leader.

Start by listing the current habits, behaviours and working practices that you see in your organisation, and then expand it to those you don't see but know go on. Maybe they are things you have heard about (myths, stories), or maybe those that you imagine based on decisions you see. This is the left side of the matrix. You can then split those into good (top left-hand box) and weak (bottom right-hand box).

Now think about the culture that you would like to have, listing the 'hoped-for' habits, behaviours and working practices that you would like to see in your organisation. This is the right side of the matrix. You can then split those into good and new, need developing (top right-hand box) and weak - existing but need improving (bottom right-hand box).

Habits, behaviours and working routines/practices are the ones we use most frequently and this can be at a leadership, team or organisational level. Letting go of old habits that have helped you be successful in the past but are now holding you back can often be the hardest to change.



Tool 2

A strategic perspective - a tool to help you assess the effectiveness of your culture in supporting performance

Having explored 'habits' with Tool 1, you will have developed more of a common understanding of what your culture looks like... but how does this connect to performance?

This next tool enables a more strategic perspective to assess how effective your culture is in supporting performance. Using a scale of 1 – 10 consider how effectively your organisation performs in four key strategic areas:

- Strategic alignment
- Employee engagement
- Operational alignment
- Customer alignment

It can be very powerful to engage the senior team in this discussion to surface where they agree/disagree and reach a common understanding and collective view on where the organisation sits on this scale. Once again, we find it helpful to ask managers to do this individually first before joining a facilitated team discussion to explore all viewpoints and agree the most important three aspects for each quadrant.

Strategic Alignment

On a scale of 1-10

How aligned are our individual objectives with the organisational strategy?

Employee Engagement

On a scale of 1-10

How well do we really listen to our staff and change because of what they say?

Operational Alignment

On a scale of 1-10

How well do our processes (recruitment, budgeting, disciplinary) deliver our organisational objectives?

Customer Alignment

On a scale of 1-10

How well do we really listen to our customers and change because of what they say?



Excellent service and highly professional approach. We are pleased to partner with Taylor Clarke and look forward to continuing our relationship



Tool 3

Getting to Action - Agreeing strengths/challenges and critical 1st steps

The outcomes from a facilitated discussion using Tools 1 and 2 will help make it easier to reach consensus on the strengths and challenges of your existing culture and what you need to start and stop doing to strengthen your cultural alignment.

We find it helpful to ask managers to do this individually first before joining a facilitated team discussion to explore all viewpoints and agree the most important three aspects for each quadrant. You then have a very simple first steps plan.

You can choose your most appropriate lens to apply this tool, which might be one or all of these:

- How do we operate as an organisation?
- How does the executive team make decisions?
- How do we operate as a team?
- How do we operate as a project?

What are the strengths of your current culture?

- 1
- 2
- 3

What are the challenges of your current culture?

- 1
- 2
- 3

What 3 things should you START doing to strengthen your culture alignment?

- 1
- 2
- 3

What 3 things should you STOP doing to strengthen your culture alignment?

- 1
- 2
- 3



Working with Taylor Clarke on defining the culture “we had” and the culture “we needed” was a revelation. They helped us think differently and realise culture was a bigger problem and a more manageable opportunity to address to help accelerate and sustain the impact of some really important change initiatives.



Our consultant team is led by:



Laurence Clarke

Laurence has steered the helm at Taylor Clarke for thirty years. He has extensive experience of designing transformation programmes across a wide range of industries. He has specialist knowledge of transformation in higher education and the public sector.



Alistair Brown

Alistair worked in global organisations in leadership roles for over twenty years, including three CEO roles. Now helping senior leadership teams successfully align purpose, strategy and culture to deliver sustainable, values driven transformational change.



Mark Adderley

Mark has over thirty years' experience as a leader. He has been a Chief Executive, HR Director, Transformation Director and now Non-Executive Director across sectors and geographies. He is now a coach and consultant to organisations and leaders going through change.

If you would like an informal discussion with either Laurence, Alistair or Mark please contact Jade on jade@taylorclarke.co.uk to arrange a suitable time.



About Taylor Clarke

Taylor Clarke is a full-service organisation effectiveness and development consultancy.

We have extensive experience of working with organisations undergoing complex, transformational change and we are privileged to work with clients across both private and public sectors.

Our clients tell us that working with Taylor Clarke is a very different experience from working with other consultancy practices and they often ask us back to help with new challenges as they arise.

With a track record spanning more than three decades, we are proud to be values led, client focused, and employee owned.

Our vision is to work with organisations to help them build a sustainable, thriving organisation. We do this by collaborating to release the potential in their culture, leaders, teams and people.



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