

CULTURE · BEHAVIOUR · CHANGE

Stop measuring culture. Start building it.

The survey on your desk hasn't changed a thing. Here's why measurement was never going to — and what does instead.

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ORGANISATIONS DON'T HAVE culture problems. They have behaviour problems that culture language has made harder to solve. Once culture became a noun, it became a thing to measure. Consultants arrive with surveys. Reports get produced. Workshops get held. Values get articulated, printed, and framed in reception. And the behaviour that prompted the concern in the first place carries on, largely unchanged.

This is not a failure of effort. It is a failure of level.

The measurement trap

Most culture work operates where culture language is most comfortable — at the level of attitude, value and belief. But behaviour doesn't take its orders from the poster in reception. It takes them from the environment: what gets noticed, what gets rewarded, and what the person at the next desk actually does. Decades of behavioural science make the point plainly — our internal states are weak predictors of what we do (Kahneman, 2011; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Tell people what the culture should be, ask them to rate how aligned they feel, and you change exactly one thing: the language they use to describe what they already do.

That is how you get the aspiration gap — the daylight between the values an organisation states and the behaviours it actually rewards. Every workforce can feel it. Most surveys are structurally incapable of closing it, because a survey asks people to *report* on a culture. It never asks them to *build* one.

You cannot survey your way to a culture. You can only build one.

The inversion

The fix isn't a better instrument. It's a reversal of the assumption underneath the entire field. The dominant model says: change what people believe, and behaviour will follow. In practice it runs the other way. Change what people do — and what they have agreed, out loud, to do for one another — and belief follows the behaviour. **Behaviour-first, not values-first.**

That single inversion changes what an intervention is *for*. The job is no longer to diagnose the culture and prescribe a fix. It is to create the conditions in which a team defines, in its own words, the behaviours it needs to be at its best — and commits to them.

What building actually looks like

It starts with one question, asked of the team rather than the organisation: *what behaviours do we need here for each other to be at our best?* The team then works with a deck of behaviours — not good ones and bad ones, but behaviours judged by frequency. The useful question is never whether a behaviour is good or bad in the abstract, but what happens when it becomes normal. Card by card, the team sorts: above the line for what we want more of, below for what we want less. Two questions anchor every decision — what value might this behaviour bring, and what constraint might it introduce? There are no correct answers, and the facilitator supplies none. The group is the authority. Nothing stays on the line: by the end, every behaviour has been placed, by agreement.

01

Envision

the behaviours we need

02

Diagnose

the gap we live

03

Design

what we change

EXHIBIT Left to their own conversation, teams don't stop at naming what they need — they move, on their own, from vision to gap to change.

What we have seen across more than fifty organisations and two thousand participants is that this does not stay an abstract exercise. Given a precise behavioural vocabulary and no script, groups move through three phases without being led. They **envision** — naming the behaviours they need. They **diagnose** — naming the gap between that and what they live. And they **design** — deciding what to change. Nobody sequences it for them. It emerges.

Why it sticks: the IKEA effect

Here is the mechanism a report cannot buy. It has a name: the **IKEA effect**. Norton, Mochon and Ariely (2012) found that when people build something themselves — even badly, even flat-pack furniture — they value it far beyond what it is objectively worth. Labour leads to love.

Run that in a room and it compounds. A team that has built its own culture map commits to it in a way that no team handed someone else's diagnosis ever will. People tolerate decisions made by others. They commit to what they help create. That gap — tolerate versus commit — is the entire difference between a culture initiative that fades and one that holds.

IN THE ROOM

A frontline team puts “tell it like it is” above the line — a behaviour they say they need more of. In the same session, their leaders realise the last few people who did exactly that were quietly managed out. Nobody had to present that finding on a slide. The team surfaced it, named it, and started designing around it. That conversation does not come from a survey result. It comes from a conversation the team owns.

What this means for you

FOUR MOVES FOR LEADERS

- **Stop opening with the survey.** It measures the problem; it does not move it.
- **Convene the conversation instead.** Put the behaviours in the room and let the team define, in its own words, what “at our best” requires.
- **Make them build the map.** Ownership is the mechanism — not the data.
- **If you must measure, measure the gap** between what your senior team sees and what your frontline lives. That distance is usually where the work is.

Culture change has never wanted for measurement. It has wanted for conversation — honest, specific, and owned. And unlike a number on a dashboard, that conversation can be deliberately designed. **Stop measuring the culture you have. Start building the one you need.**

Draws on Kahneman (2011); Thaler & Sunstein (2008); Norton, Mochon & Ariely (2012), The IKEA Effect: When Labor Leads to Love. Full argument in McGregor (2025), Envision, Diagnose, Design and Not Good or Bad, But How Often.