

FACILITATOR GUIDE

Running the room. And staying out of it.

Everything from the first client conversation to the follow-up session. What to do, what to say, and — mostly — what not to.

THE PREMISE

Your job is the conditions.

Everything in this guide follows from a single idea: the group is the authority on its own culture, and you are not. You are there to hold a structure that makes honest conversation possible — not to interpret, correct, summarise, or improve what the group produces.

This is harder than it sounds. Most facilitation training rewards presence, insight and the well-timed intervention. This method rewards restraint. The most common way a Culture Science session goes wrong is a good facilitator being too helpful.

THE ONE RULE

Do not share your own view of where a card belongs. Not once, not even when asked directly. The moment the group believes you have an answer, they stop looking for their own — and the ownership that makes this method work disappears with it.

What you are actually doing

- **Holding the structure.** The deal, the turn-taking, the two questions, the line. These do the facilitation.
- **Listening at the meta level.** Not to the content of each placement, but to what the group reveals about itself while placing it.
- **Protecting the conditions.** Equal airtime, no evaluation, no rescue. Especially not rescuing silence.
- **Recording what surfaced.** Card numbers, not paraphrases. They are how progress becomes visible later.

BEFORE THE SESSION

The conversation with the client.

How you describe this to a client determines who turns up and what they expect. The language matters more than it should.

Language that closes doors

Culture workshop · Values alignment · Team building · Soft skills development · Culture programme

Language that opens them

Behavioural standards framework · Team operating agreement · Ways of working definition · Performance alignment tool · Facilitated behaviour design

THE ONE-MINUTE EXPLANATION

"Most culture initiatives fail because they tell teams what the culture should be — and people comply without committing. Culture Science Cards flips that. Teams define their own behavioural standards. Because they decide, they own it. Ownership produces commitment that instruction never does. The process takes 90 minutes. The outcome lasts."

What to establish before you agree a date

- **Who is in the room, and who isn't.** A team with their leader present is a different session from the same team without. Neither is wrong — but you need to know which one you're running.
- **Whether people chose to be there.** Mandated attendance is workable, but it changes your opening.
- **What the client thinks the problem is.** Not so you can solve it — so you can choose the opening question, and notice if the group disagrees with the diagnosis.
- **Group size.** Maximum six per deck. Beyond that, split into tables and compare afterwards.
- **Whether this is one session or the first of several.** It changes what you do with the last thirty minutes.

Choosing the opening question

The question frames everything that follows. Pick the one that matches what the team is actually wrestling with, not the one that sounds most impressive. If the team is in conflict, a question about team effectiveness will surface it. If they are under delivery pressure, ask about performance and results.

The eight standard variants are in the in-session slide deck. You can write your own — keep it near-transfer: personal, team-level, and about performance. Not abstract, not organisational, not aspirational.

SETUP

The ten minutes that decide the session.

The quality of a culture conversation is largely determined before anyone speaks. Get the setup right and the rest is mostly restraint. Get it wrong and you spend the session recovering ground you should never have conceded.

- Everyone on equal physical footing. No head of the table.
- Opening question on a slide or a wall, visible for the entire session.

- Participants remove the theme cards themselves. You do not prepare the deck.
- Participants shuffle and deal — one card at a time, around the table, until all eighty are out.
- With six people, each person holds about thirteen cards.

THEN STOP TALKING

Say nothing else. If someone asks what they are supposed to do, do not explain — redirect: *“What does that card mean to you?”* If they start dealing several cards at once because they are impatient, leave it. Once the session begins, the process belongs to the group.

THE SORT

Forty-five minutes of not intervening.

Taking turns, each person turns one card face up. The group discusses it against both anchor questions, then places it above or below the line. Nothing stays in the middle permanently.

Light prompts — use sparingly

- *“If we were at our best, what would we see more of?”*
- *“What would we see less of?”*
- *“Where do we agree? Where do we differ?”*
- *“Take your time with this one — what’s the value in this behaviour, even if we end up placing it below?”*

What to observe

- **Which cards slow the group down.** These usually hold the most valuable debrief content.
- **Which cards pass quickly.** Fast agreement tells you something too — sometimes shared values, sometimes suppressed disagreement.
- **Where energy rises or tension surfaces.** Note the card number.
- **Cards the group can’t place.** These anchor the fence-sitting reflection in the debrief.
- **Who speaks early, who holds back, who defers, who pushes.**

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The comments that matter most are not the analytical observations. They are the asides — *“yeah but we don’t actually do that here,” “we do too much of this,” “this is exactly what happened in last Tuesday’s meeting.”* That is the culture speaking about itself: unguarded, specific, and actionable. A facilitator engaged in the content discussion misses them entirely.

THE LINE

Never good or bad.

Cards are never categorised as good or bad. Every behaviour carries value in some context — that is what the first anchor question exists to surface. The real question is whether the team wants this behaviour as a regular feature of how they work.

THE RULE OF THUMB

A behaviour that is occasionally useful but generally problematic still belongs below the line. If we wouldn’t want to see this most of the time, it goes below — even if we can all imagine a situation where it would be exactly right.

Worked example. *Question decisions made by others* has genuine value in the right moment. But if a team normalises it, every decision gets relitigated. Trust erodes. Progress stalls. Below the line is the honest placement — not because the behaviour is wrong, but because it doesn’t serve the team as a norm.

The fence-sitting reflection — do not skip this

Almost every group will have cards they struggled to place. Once the sort is done, ask:

“What happens if a team agrees to a behaviour that really could go either way — sometimes valuable, sometimes damaging, depending on context?”

Let the group work toward the answer. What they usually arrive at: a behaviour that requires perfect timing and judgement to be useful is a high-risk behaviour to normalise. Most people, most of the time, will apply it without that judgement. The standard it sets is ambiguous — and an ambiguous standard is no standard at all.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Below the line doesn't mean wrong forever. It means: we don't want this as our norm. That is a different — and more honest — conversation than calling anything good or bad. This reflection is the bridge between *sorting cards* and *setting standards*, and it is one of the most important moments in any session.

BEHIND THE DECK

The two-axis model.

You will not teach this in a client session. You need it because it explains what you are watching, and because sooner or later someone will ask why the below-the-line behaviours feel so different from each other.

Top left — task, constructive

Goal Directed · Creative · Authentic · Confident

Getting things done effectively. Clear goals, honest thinking, confident action, creative problem-solving.

Top right — relationship, constructive

Empowering · Supportive · Collaborative · Empathetic

How people are treated. Developing others, sharing responsibility, working collectively, genuine care.

Bottom left — task, defensive

Controlling · Competitive · Critical · Demanding

Task-oriented behaviour driven by status and power rather than outcomes. Self-protection through dominance.

Bottom right — relationship, defensive

Dependent · Conventional · Seek Approval · Fearful

Relationship-oriented behaviour driven by the need to be accepted rather than genuine connection. Self-protection through compliance.

THE INSIGHT WORTH HAVING

Both below-the-line quadrants are driven by the same force: defensiveness. One expresses it through control, the other through the need to be accepted. Both are responses to threat. This is why below-the-line behaviour is never a moral judgement — it is an observation about what threat does to people, and what safety makes possible.

Personal before professional.

Before analysing anything — just notice. The goal is the felt experience: what the exercise did to the room, to individuals, to the conversation. Resist analysis, including your own.

- “What surprised you about that conversation?”
- “Was there a moment where something shifted — in yourself, or in the room? Describe it.”
- “Which cards slowed you down most?”
- “What did the cards make possible that a blank piece of paper wouldn’t have?”
- “Where did the conversation feel most honest?”
- “If you could shift just two or three behaviours, which would make the biggest difference?”

IF THEY INTELLECTUALISE

Bring them back: “I hear the analysis — what did you **feel** in that moment?” Analysis is a way of staying safe. The session is more useful on the other side of it.

DESIGN

Turning it into something that survives Monday.

Select three to five priority cards by number. Not the full list — the ones that matter most, right now. For each, work through three questions:

- **What does this look like when we’re doing it well?** Observable, specific, recognisable.
- **What currently gets in the way?** Not *who*. What. Systems, habits, meetings, incentives, pressure.
- **What one change would most move this forward?** Named owner. Named timeframe.

SPECIFICITY IS THE MECHANISM

“Be more collaborative” changes nothing. “At every project kickoff, we will spend the first ten minutes on what could go wrong, and the newest person speaks first” changes something. Gollwitzer’s implementation intentions research is unambiguous: *if situation X, then we will do Y* more than doubles follow-through over intention alone.

Record the card numbers before anyone leaves. They are how you will know, next time, whether anything actually moved.

DIFFICULT ROOMS

Five you will meet.

The dominant voice

One person setting the frame before others have formed a view.

- Slow the discussion *before* they respond: *“Before we hear from anyone else — take a moment. What’s your own first reaction?”*
- Ask quieter participants directly, by name.
- Redesign the conditions rather than judging the person.

Silence

Nobody speaking after a card is turned over.

- Count to fifteen before you consider intervening.
- The first person to speak after a genuine silence almost always says something worth hearing.
- Filling silence prematurely is the most costly mistake in this method.

The resistant team

Body language closed. Answers performative. Nobody chose to be here.

- *“I know some of you may not have chosen to be here. That’s okay. I’m not here to tell you what good looks like — I genuinely don’t know. That’s your job.”*
- Resistance drops fastest when people believe you have no agenda. Because you don’t.

The gap surfaces

Someone names the distance between what the team says and what it does.

- Do not fill it. Do not reassure. Sit in it.
- Then: *“That’s important. Can you say more about what you mean?”*
- The team resolving it themselves is the entire point.

It gets personal

Two people are no longer discussing a behaviour. They are discussing each other.

- Redirect to the card: *"I want to make sure we stay with the behaviour rather than specific situations."*
- If it escalates: *"There's something important here that may need a different conversation. Can we park this card?"*
- Know the boundary. You are not a mediator.

THE REPERTOIRE

Six exercises.

The Full Sort is always first with a new group. Everything else builds from what it surfaces.

1 · The Full Sort

60–90 min

FOUNDATION

All 80 cards, turn-based, two anchor questions each. Nothing permanently in the middle.

When to use: Always first. Every other exercise builds from it.

2 · The Theme Audit

30–45 min

PRECISION

Pull one theme pair, or a full quadrant. Sort left to right: "we do this well" → "we need more focus here."

When to use: After a Full Sort has identified priority themes. Strong for leadership coaching.

3 · The Pressure Test

60–70 min

HONEST DIAGNOSIS

Same priority cards, sorted twice. Round 1: a normal day. Round 2: under pressure. The gap is where the real culture lives.

When to use: Teams ready to move from aspiration to honest diagnosis. High-stakes environments.

4 · The Gap Map

90 min

LEADERSHIP BLIND SPOTS

Leaders and teams sort independently using the same cards. Compare by number. The highest-gap cards are the conversations worth having.

When to use: Leadership teams and their direct reports. Surfaces blind spots without blame.

5 · The Commitment Stack

45–60 min

BRIDGE TO CHANGE

Three to five priority cards by number. What does good look like? What gets in the way? What one change?

When to use: The end of any session where the goal is action. Always with multi-session clients.

6 · The Quadrant Sort

45–60 min

SYSTEMIC INSIGHT

After a completed above/below sort, re-sort the same cards using the quadrant model.

When to use: When an executive team needs to see that ignoring below-the-line behaviour undermines the above-the-line behaviour they want.

AFTER THE SESSION

What makes the second one work.

A single session produces a conversation. A sequence produces change. What you do in the week afterwards determines which one the client got.

Within 48 hours

- Send the card numbers. Above the line, below the line, and the priority set — by number, not paraphrase.
- Send what the group agreed, in the group's own words. Not your summary of what they meant.
- Name the date of the next session, if there is one. Momentum is easier to keep than to rebuild.

The five-stage cycle between sessions

1 Select

Three to five priority behaviours by card number. Not the full list.

2 Diagnose

How often does this show up? What triggers it? What systemic factors reinforce the opposite? This is where the leverage lives.

3 Design

Small interventions. Not training. Changes to systems, habits or conversations that make the priority behaviour more likely to happen on its own.

4 Practice

A specific, observable practice. Named owner, named timeframe. If situation X, we will do Y.

5 Return

Pull the exact priority cards by number. Re-sort. Progress is visible — or the gap is, which is equally useful.

YOUR OWN PRACTICE

Treat every session as data. Which card produced a conversation you didn't expect? Where did you intervene and wish you hadn't? What in your setup created the conditions for something that went wrong later? Bring it to the quarterly call — the method changes because practitioners notice things.