Turning talk into change: How to shape a high performance culture that sticks

Is your company all talk when it comes to culture change? Or, worse still, has the conversation stopped completely?

Putting culture change into action and making it stick is difficult. And when tangible benefits fail to emerge, momentum can stall.

Overcoming this is a business imperative. In short, culture drives performance, and employee engagement is put at risk if you have a disconnect between your stated culture and the reality that employees experience. According to a McLean & Co. report, 93% of engaged employees go above and beyond, compared to just 46% of disengaged employees, which gives a clear business case for getting this right.

So how can you drive culture change that is both impactful and sustainable in your organisation?

The signs talk isn't turning into action

Here's the problem: culture change always starts with good intentions.

Culture is declared a strategic priority. Leaders speak about new values with conviction. Workshops and engagement campaigns follow.

However, beneath the positive talk, the system often resists and without a clear plan of action, new behaviours won't show up by magic. It is all too common for different parts of the business, or for people of different generations within the workforce, to interpret a new culture in contradictory ways. Leaders may say the right things about cultural values such as transparency, collaboration and inclusion, and subsequently reward behaviours that prioritise corner cutting and short term profits.

Does this sound familiar?

When we ask leaders why culture change is failing to stick in their organisation, we often hear the same things:

"People are only doing it when someone's watching."

"We thought we were clear, but nothing's changing."

"It's not resistance, exactly…just inertia."

In companies that do not truly embed cultural change, we see that leaders don't make decisions aligned with new ways of working, or that teams prioritise the same things as before e.g. short-term delivery over longer term principles. And the signals that matter - who gets promoted, what gets measured, how meetings are run - reflect yesterday's culture. Take these two examples:

Meta - While the company publicly championed cultural transformation and ushered in its "Year of Efficiency," internal sentiment told a more complex story. Engagement scores held steady, but employees reported declining trust, strategic ambiguity, and a growing sense that the culture narrative no longer matched lived experience.

Amazon - Despite a well-known set of "Leadership Principles;" different regions and business units have interpreted them in ways that occasionally conflict with operational norms. What makes sense on paper can quickly become fragmented in practice.

These examples show the disconnect between intent and perception, which many companies struggle with. A 2018 Gartner study found that while HR leaders feel that their organisation promotes desired cultural behaviours, only 31% of employees agreed.

Culture doesn't fail with a bang. It stalls in the quiet moments - when disconnections are allowed to grow. When new norms are discussed but not enacted, when systems reward old behaviours, and when the gap between aspiration and experience widens.

Resetting your systems to repair disconnections

Culture is often approached as a narrative challenge, but in reality it's a systemic one; created during interactions between people and shaped by the organisational systems that surround them. People don't change behaviours because they've been inspired. They change because the environment makes it easier to act differently, and harder to carry on as before.

Too many organisations treat culture change as a rebranding exercise. New values are launched with fanfare. But the systems and structures beneath them remain unchanged. That leaves outdated decision rights, incentives, meeting norms, ways of working, and metrics in place.

This results in values becoming performative and people playing along while waiting for the initiative to fade.

One global services firm we worked with had launched a culture reset. They'd run values workshops in every region. But in practice, leaders were still being promoted for technical excellence, without considering how well they worked with others or contributed to wider organisational performance. Once the company re-aligned incentives, negotiated the interfaces between leaders and clarified decision rights, the necessary cultural shift began to take root. It wasn't the messaging that made the difference, it was the mechanics.

Failing to build systems that address disconnects between talk and action can have profound impacts. Take Wells Fargo. On paper, it had rigorous compliance structures. But the sales culture still rewarded unattainable targets, so staff opened millions of fake accounts. What mattered wasn't what the company said, but what it rewarded. Only after public scandal did the system start to shift.

At Muuto, our methodologies adopt a Whole Systems approach to culture change, looking beyond stated values and addressing lived experiences, behaviours and the broader system of processes, tools, leadership signals, and incentives that shape and sustain them.
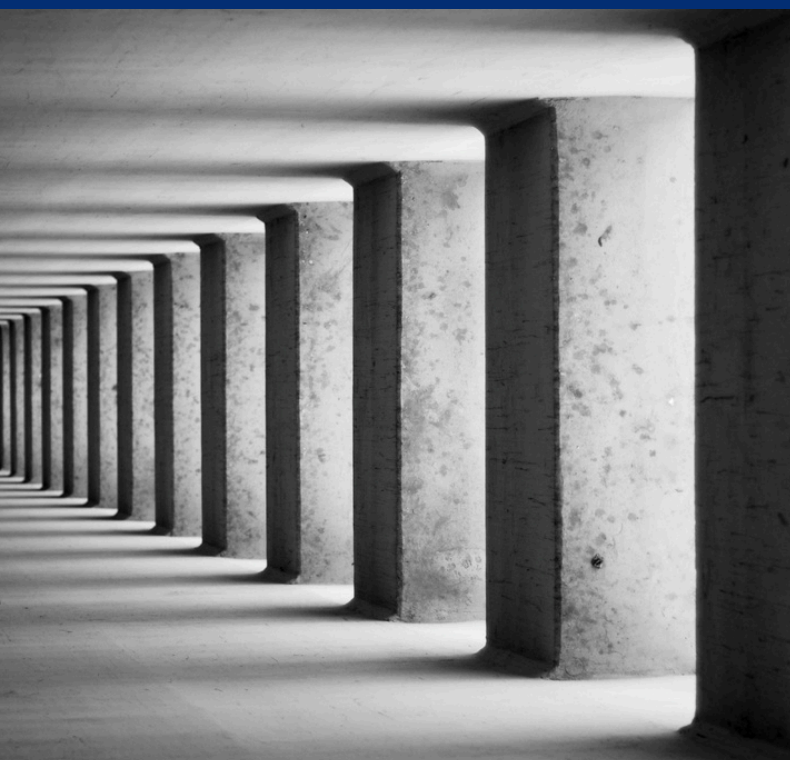
'Use Your Culture to Change Your Culture'

The most effective culture shifts start with what's already there. We help organisations use their existing language and values as foundations for a culture that enhances operational performance.

That starts with identifying what is good about the current culture and how we can use those strengths to support changes.

We focus on what we call "Goldilocks Behaviours" - on driving actions that are concrete, context-fit, and calibrated "just right". Not generic virtues like "collaboration," but specific actions and behaviours like "in decision meetings, state your position and ask for a counter-view."

These interventions are designed to work with the grain of the business, so that they support rather than disrupt the flow of work.

Identifying actionable insights with a diagnostic approach

The first step to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of your culture is a diagnosis. This is particularly true for complex or decentralised organisations with active micro-cultures, as it is important to understand what culture dynamics are 'in-play' and how they are supporting or hindering operational performance. So the first step isn't more communication, it's diagnosis.

- **Where is the culture landing?**

- **Where is it stuck?**

- **What's reinforcing old behaviours?**

- **Which teams are already adapting to change and why?**

At one multinational client, data from cultural surveys showed little behavioural shift. The reason? Leaders weren't clear on what "living the values" actually looked like when it came to decision-making.

Our targeted diagnostic revealed one cause - performance reviews prized technical excellence but ignored collaboration. Once those two priorities became balanced, new behaviours took root, because they weren't being penalised.

Another company that has successfully shifted its culture by taking a diagnostic approach is **Volkswagen.**

The emissions scandal - known as "Dieselgate"- highlighted an urgent need for change. Engineers had been installing software that cheated emissions tests, enabling diesel vehicles to pass regulatory scrutiny while vastly exceeding pollution limits in real-world conditions. This wasn't the result of a single bad decision. It emerged from a system that rewarded technical ingenuity and performance delivery over transparency.

How did such a counterproductive system develop? Because the organisational culture made speaking up difficult, and the internal signals rewarded results, not reflection. After the scandal broke, Volkswagen began repairing its culture by embedding clearer decision rights and strengthening ethical oversight.

The reset was underpinned by a diagnostic approach that provided clear understanding of where pressure and silence had become systematic, enabling the problem to grow, and designing a structure that supported a culture of transparency.

It's tough work but worth the effort. A study by People Element in 2024 found that organisations with healthy cultures were 3.2 times more likely to retain staff and nearly three times more agile.

Empower Your Culture with AI

AI is transforming how organisations operate, but its greatest impact is in how it transforms culture itself.

At Muuto, we believe AI doesn't just change tasks, it reshapes how people think, decide, and connect. Done poorly, it can automate bias and entrench old habits. Done well, it becomes a catalyst for scalable learning, collaboration, and creativity.

That's why we embed AI intentionally into culture change, in ways that:

Reveal hidden dynamics: From surfacing invisible patterns in behaviour and mindset to mapping opportunities for innovation and alignment. For example, Natural Language Processing analysis of large scale qualitative feedback can spot patterns in sentiment, trust and collaboration and provide insights into the actions that can be taken.

Engage people in the journey: Through interactive simulations and prompt-based co-creation, teams see and shape their place in a changing system. We use AI enabled storytelling platforms that create tailored case studies showing how culture and performance shift over time and AI-powered self-reflection that supports their own, personal transformation.

Shift mindsets at every level: AI is bringing one of the largest and broadest mindset shifts, at a pace that is unprecedented. How? Individuals are moving from perfectionism to agentic delegation, teams are having to embrace iterative, short feedback cycles, and leaders are evolving at speed from top-down control to orchestration. We are finding that microlearning apps that offer scenario based lessons and AI powered chatbots are able to support people and provide scalable access to insight and experience rather than just knowledge.

AI can become a cultural accelerant when it is woven into how work happens, not just what gets done.

Organisations that lead with intention, curiosity, and ethical clarity don't just adapt to change, they set the pace.

Ensuring your culture change sticks

If your culture shift isn't sticking, it's not because people don't care. It's because they're still navigating an old system. A system that rewards yesterday's behaviours while asking for tomorrow's.

Successfully reshaping a culture that enables long-term performance improvements requires systemic change. That doesn't necessarily mean a total reboot. But it does mean adjustments need to be smart and targeted.

That's where our diagnostic approach excels. It provides insights on which we can base practical and impactful adjustments such as: realigning incentives, clarifying behaviours, and changing decision makers. It can also guide coaching that empowers team members and leaders to embrace new behaviours.

If your organisation needs support to turn its vision of a high-performance culture into reality through practical, evidence-backed actions, get in touch:

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About the Authors

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