

# Chapter 2

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## Workplace Culture

### Facilitator Notes

**Chapter 2: Workplace Culture** explores how culture shapes the daily experience of employees and how values, behaviors, and unspoken norms create patterns of inclusion—or exclusion. Participants will learn how to recognize culture as dynamic and shared and will reflect on ways to contribute to more equitable and healthy workplace environments.

### What this guide includes:

- Definitions and elements of workplace culture.
- Cultural iceberg in architecture: visible vs. invisible norms.
- Impacts of unhealthy or exclusionary culture.
- Practices to shift culture at the individual and firm level.
- Scenario-based reflection and action planning.

### Use this guide to:

- Foster honest dialogue about what culture is and how it shows up.
- Identify cultural patterns that may need to change.
- Encourage personal ownership and system-level thinking.
- Generate tangible next steps for cultural alignment.

### Suggested Pre-Read:

- To maximize engagement and discussion, participants should read the corresponding chapters one page, [Executive Summary](#).

### Corresponding Learning Objectives

Attendees will be able to:

- Define workplace culture and identify its key elements, including visible behaviors and underlying norms.
- Analyze how unspoken cultural patterns shape inclusion or exclusion in the workplace using the cultural iceberg framework.
- Assess the impacts of unhealthy or exclusionary cultures on employee experience, team dynamics, and organizational outcomes.
- Apply individual and organizational strategies to foster healthier, more equitable workplace cultures, using scenario-based reflection and action planning.

**SLIDE 2 THE GUIDES FOR EQUITABLE PRACTICE: WORKPLACE CULTURE**

- Workplace culture affects every aspect of the work we do, and everyone is responsible for it. Questioning the assumption, “that’s just how we do things,” can bring change to ways of thinking and doing and, ultimately, to systems that advantage some individuals and groups while disadvantaging others.
- This guide outlines the importance of understanding and managing workplace culture and offers strategies for how to start the process, establish goals, and bring about change.

**Notes**

1. **Why is this topic important to you or your firm?**
  2. **Set expectations for rules of engagement.**
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**SLIDE 3 WHAT IS WORKPLACE CULTURE?**

- *The understood social order of an organization, the shared patterns that determine what is viewed as appropriate individual and group behavior and that help us make meaning of our collective environment.*
- A strong culture = having a clear culture everyone can describe + aligning staff and processes with the culture Cultural Iceberg visual.
- A healthy culture = engagement that recognizes diverse needs and thoughts which are incorporated into decision making.

**Notes**

1. **Culture is co-created: everyone’s behaviors can contribute to it, and it can shape everyone’s behavior.**
  2. **Culture is not the same as policies; it lives in everyday habits.**
    - **What stories does your organization tell to describe “how we do things here”?**
    - **Are there people who might be excluded from those narratives?**
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**SLIDE 4 ARCHITECTURE’S CULTURAL ICEBERG**

- Diagram of objective vs. subjective culture in architecture (they may remember this concept from chapter 1).

**Notes**

1. **Sketch your firm or organization’s iceberg; pair and share visible and invisible norms.**
2. **What is visible to a newcomer? What’s hidden?**
3. **Ask someone to share and explore how a particular trait impacts who thrives and who struggles.**

**SLIDE 5 WHY DOES WORKPLACE CULTURE MATTER?**

- Workplace culture influences engagement and trust in an organization, and therefore individuals' productivity, success, and wellbeing.
- Workplace culture that aligns with goals and values will attract and retain talent; firms that walk the walk will breed loyalty and trust.
- "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Strategy can only succeed if there is a culture in place that supports it. A healthy culture is required for smooth leadership transition and succession to occur.

**Notes**

1. Alignment of an individual's values with company values is a top predictor of an individual's satisfaction with the workplace culture, while negative workplace culture leads to an almost 50% increase in voluntary turnover—and turnover costs (recruiting, training, lowered productivity, lost expertise, lowered morale, etc.) are high.<sup>1</sup> Culture shapes how people feel *and* perform.
  2. When have you felt most engaged at work? What contributed to that?
  3. How does your firm's internal culture align with how it presents itself publicly?
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**SLIDE 6 WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE****Notes**

1. Review each example of what good looks like. Make a check mark next to practices that you can find in your firm or organization, a question mark for those that you are not sure, and a minus for those that are missing.
  2. What areas are strong, which are you not sure about, and which areas are weak?
  3. Ask for volunteers who have examples to share. Are there common categories or items in the group? What does that suggest?
  4. What can you do to influence change?
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**SLIDE 7 ACTIONS TO FOSTER POSITIVE CULTURE (INDIVIDUAL LEVEL)**

- Be aware of your own values; identify and join employers with cultures that align.
- Be an active contributor; look for opportunities to engage in firm culture and grow as a leader.
- Understand your boundaries and your rights. If you encounter something that does not align, speak up and share your experiences with others.
- Model positive culture that is supportive and inclusive and that builds trust.

**Notes**

1. Emphasize agency: every employee contributes to culture.
2. Think of a time you made the culture stronger. What did you do? How was it received?
3. When have you stayed silent about something you now wish you had addressed?

**SLIDE 8 ACTIONS TO FOSTER POSITIVE CULTURE (FIRM LEVEL)**

- Regularly check for mission and value alignment. Leaders can self-examine by filling in the sentence:
  - “We say that \_\_\_\_, but when we \_\_\_\_, or when we don’t \_\_\_\_, we’re conveying \_\_\_\_ instead.”
- Organize a regular feedback cycle through focus groups and surveys.
- Look for unintended trends or patterns around promotions, hiring, and turnover. Pay attention to feedback given during exit interviews.
- Build references and enhancements to workplace culture in regular communications. Reinforce the message by integrating values into performance goals and rewards.
- Stay attuned to important social issues, research, and social movements that might impact your employees and the profession and put thought and effort into how you communicate about them. Don’t ignore them.

**Notes**

1. **Share that culture change requires leaders’ sustained commitment to learning and communicating.**
  2. **Discussion Prompts:**
    - **What’s working well at your organization or firm? Where are the gaps/what could be better?**
    - **How do your leaders create space for honest feedback about culture?**
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**SLIDE 9 CONSIDER SCENARIOS & REFLECTIONS****Notes**

1. **Select a scenario from the chapter that you feel will resonate with the group. Ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Discuss the prompts in small groups and share with the full group.**
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**SLIDE 10 NOW WHAT?****Notes**

1. **Ask everyone to review their thoughts and observations thus far and identify one action that they can take to strengthen their workplace culture, with a commitment date.**
  2. **Give everyone the option to share.**
  3. **Suggest they check in with a peer or accountability partner one month later.**
  4. **If you have specific resources, committees, or additional worksheets you can promote those here.**
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1. Emma Seppala and Kim Cameron, “Proof That Positive Work Cultures Are More Productive,” Harvard Business Review, December 1, 2015, <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>