



# The Guides for Equitable Practice: Chapter 2





# The Guides for Equitable Practice: Workplace Culture

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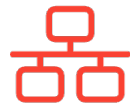
Workplace culture affects every aspect of the work we do, and everyone is responsible for it. Questioning the assumption "that's just how we do things" can bring change to ways of thinking and doing and, ultimately, to systems that advantage some individuals and groups while disadvantaging others.

2

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.



# 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 articulate + aligning staff and processes with the culture



A healthy culture = Engagement that recognizes diverse needs and thoughts that are incorporated into decision making



# Architecture's cultural iceberg

## OBJECTIVE

*seen* shared culture—  
you can see or point to:

**artifacts we produce** - sketches, models, drawing sets  
**behaviors we value** - working long hours, moonlighting  
**common dress** - in black, with interesting glasses  
**language we often employ** - façade, massing, jury  
**narratives we share** - famous architects being odd or difficult  
**spaces we inhabit** - arrays of desks and usable wall surfaces, open storage for books and materials  
**tools we use** - X-Acto knife, modeling software, 3-D printer  
**traditions we continue** - pinups, competitions, awards

## SUBJECTIVE

*unseen* shared culture—  
attitudes, expectations, stereotypes,  
assumptions about:

**age** - the young are inexhaustible and do not know very much; the middle aged gain responsibility after years of hard work and paying dues; older architects are repositories of knowledge to be respected but are technologically inept  
**authorship** - individuals are the creative force on projects; teamwork is used for production  
**autonomy** - architecture on its own has the power to change society through the objects we create; too much integration can compromise the designer's voice  
**body language** - attention is directed toward the artifacts of architectural representation in the room; projecting confidence and authority means you can work on job sites and with clients  
**class** - architects distinguish themselves from working-class laborers; privilege or lack thereof is not discussed  
**commitment** - staff members have to be available when needed; those who take advantage of flexible workplace options are less interested in advancement  
**education** - higher education is necessary and valued; status is attached to program and degree type  
**gender roles** - men are ambitious and assertive; women are supportive and nurturing and do interiors and landscape  
**money** - opportunity and achievement are more important than income; fees are too low to do good work and compensate well  
**objects** - designed artifact is lasting; people and uses are ephemeral  
**parenthood** - people without children can work late hours; fathers are dependable, mothers struggle  
**personality** - a person's personality determines their role; self-promotion is necessary to advance  
**race and ethnicity** - most architects are white; architects from underrepresented groups are different; people of color work on community and government projects  
**relationship to authority** - most architects follow rules; the avant-garde buck or undermine authority and power  
**roles** - architects are polymaths (artist, technologist, inventor, scientist); designers are visionaries; others are support  
**speaking** - the person with the most power talks the most; dialect, accent, and vocabulary signal status  
**types of work** - part-time work has lower status than full-time work; "domestic" or office-help tasks are done by women  
**work assignments** - interns should receive growth opportunities; work is assigned according to firm, not employee, needs; staff who can do detailed work should do production  
**ways of working** - different generations use different tools; heads go down for long periods to meet deadlines  
**work ethic** - good design takes much time and iteration; personal sacrifice is necessary at times during a project and career

### ARCHITECTURE'S CULTURAL ICEBERG

Examples of dominant culture's patterns or assumptions of what is "appropriate" in the architectural profession in the United States.

Notice which aspects of the example stereotypes could be limiting for some individuals or groups in a workplace setting and that might impede the ability of architects across identities to contribute and do their best work.



# Why does workplace culture matter?

- Influences engagement and trust
- Attracts and retains talent
- Smooths leadership transitions
- "Culture eats strategy for breakfast"



# 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
- A minus for those that are missing.

GUIDE 2 \* WORKPLACE CULTURE

WHAT DOES GOOD LOOK LIKE?

**We have a strong and healthy workplace culture when...**

**CLARITY**

the workplace culture is deliberately shaped

100% of people in the organization can describe its culture

clients are aware of and can connect with the firm's values

firm leaders understand and are intentional about where they are able to lead and advocate effectively and where they are still learning

the time required for collaborative, inclusive practices is made a priority when setting workloads and schedules

**COMPLIANCE**

risks are controlled to protect workers from harm, whether physical, emotional, or mental

the work environment is supportive, not hostile

harassment is not tolerated and has clear consequences

**ALIGNMENT**

values and goals of the business align with the workplace culture

language and behaviors reinforce positive culture

onboarding and ongoing training teach how to be effective within the workplace

messaging from leaders, managers, human resources is consistent

leaders and employees work together to assess and guide culture

**TRUST**

everyone is respected and interacts respectfully

everyone is heard when sharing their perspectives

some risk-taking is allowed

everyday mistakes are explored and corrected, not punished

problems are met with curiosity, not blame

work environment is engaging, not threatening

success is a win-win outcome

**ENGAGEMENT**

social relationships are fostered

everyone takes responsibility for a positive culture

leaders model empathy, compassion, and justice

leaders are seen as fair and able to forgo self-interest

the meaning of work is emphasized

retention is high, absenteeism is low

employee and client referrals are common



# **Actions to foster positive culture (individual)**

- Be aware of your own values.
- Engage and grow.
- Understand boundaries.
- Model inclusivity and trust.



# **Actions to foster positive culture (firm-level)**

- Regularly check value alignment.
- Organize feedback cycles.
- Communicate workplace culture.
- Track trends in HR decisions.
- Stay attuned to social issues.





## Consider

### THE PROFESSION HAS NO ROOM FOR ME

After I moved to my current firm, I started watching the show *Mad Men*, and I thought, “Oh my God, I worked for *Mad Men*.”

I was marginalized when I walked into the room. It didn’t matter what I said, it’s what I look like. There was not much I could have done. So there’ve just been these unforeseen obstacles and walls. And in some sense, it’s been happening my whole life and I just didn’t realize it. Now I’m realizing that I don’t believe that if I went to a different organization it’d be any different, because the profession has no room for me. I’d have to go to a Black-owned firm for it to be different. Or be silent. It’s a systemic problem.

It’s really hard, but it’s also terrifying because I’m in this by myself. I’m already scared to speak out and to have a voice at the table. This has made it worse because I already feel the burden to speak up for other people who don’t speak up for themselves, and now I feel I’m also speaking for and representing a whole group of people I don’t even know. I just want to practice architecture—do good work and grow and have opportunities like everybody else and be able to look at my career and know there was a trajectory.

If I were a white woman, my life could be different. I recognize there are so many variables, and it’s all relative. [Another architect] was talking about all the things that make him powerful, making references to equity. “I’m a white man; I’m powerful, I’m educated; I’ve got all these things.” I’ve got most of those things that make you powerful as well. But even if I graduated from Harvard, I would have to say so for you to listen to me, so clearly there’s an issue. As long as I’m educated anywhere, it shouldn’t matter. What is it that I have to contribute and say? Why do I have to start the conversation with a preference and a qualifier? I was saying to someone, “In order for me to make a point, I have to say that I got that information from someone else or that someone else has backed up that information.” That person said, “Yeah, but you can’t say that to everybody because they go on the defensive because they feel like you’re proving to them that someone else said it, therefore it is doctrine.” I can’t win. You don’t want to hear it if I say I looked it up and decided this is what we should do, but you still want to know that it’s confirmed. It’s exhausting.

—Architect, Black, Female, 30–40

# Consider scenarios & reflections

Read, discuss in small groups, and share insights



## **Now what?**

Review your thoughts and observations thus far and identify an action that you can take to strengthen your workplace culture.