



The Enigma of Organisational Culture

(First published in July 2020 and updated in July 2024)

Definition of Organisational Culture (OC):

“The accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.” (Schein and Schein, 2016).

A quick Google search will give you so many different definitions that it can be dizzying. But rest assured: To read this document, finding a definition you are happy with is not “yet” important, but do find one that sits well with you, as you’ll need it at some point.

The definition of a car is “a road vehicle for one driver and a few passengers. Someone who drives a car is called a driver or a motorist” (Floyd, 2018). Ask anyone to offer their thoughts on the definition of a car, and again, you’ll find many variations. Yet all of those people will know what a great car is because it is personal to them and sometimes situational too.

What OC means to each organisation can differ significantly! For example, what have you noticed between the organisations you have worked for? How has one approach to OC differed from the other? If one was better than the other, what made it better?

The crime:



It may seem a bit strong to call it a crime, but that’s precisely how we see it. Not fostering or monitoring your OC is a crime against your people and your organisation. It restricts openness and the freedom to speak.

When we pay an employee, we fulfil our agreed contract. If someone didn’t receive their pay, they would question that. I hear you thinking, “But that is contractual,” and yes, you’d be right. But that is my point. Why do so many organisations not have their organisational values written into job descriptions (contracts)? Why do we not hold everyone responsible and accountable for their behaviour in our culture? They must sign up to live our values.

A fantastic OC = Contentment, engagement, retention and growth.

The litmus test for your OC

The happiness of your people and their level of contentment at work are the litmus test for the health of your OC. I am not saying they should be laughing and joking all day, but they should be getting on, chatting now and again, supporting each other, and feeling recognised, rewarded, and motivated. They will work well in their environment and feel they can say anything politely, respectfully and professionally.



To truly discover how well your OC is working, you must have certain things in place and working. We strongly suggest an “Organisational Culture Engagement Team” (OCET), which works and gathers the evidence you require. Your OCET will provide that evidence through the data they gather regularly. Gathering data from people is challenging as people often hide their true feelings defensively (Schein, 2010).

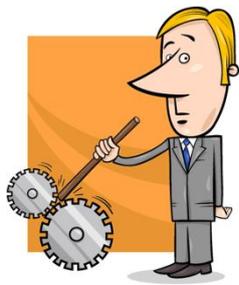
Go and walk amongst your people, chat with them regularly, and you will learn about their worries, concerns, what drives them, and what they love or hate about the organisation. In EI, Social Awareness is the key to building and maintaining relationships (and that is for both home and work).

Walking the walk:

An organisation employs a person to work for them based on the skillset the organisation requires, and the skillset the person they are employing possesses. So if your organisational values are, for example, open, honest, accountable, responsible, and authentic, but people are not, then why on earth have those values if they are not lived by? Unless, of course, it is purely what we refer to as a “flag-waving” activity to tick a box! Yes, it happens a lot!

If your people see that you do not actively promote, monitor, and expect your organisational values to be lived by all **and** do not hold **everyone** accountable and responsible for upholding your values, your values are pretty much worthless! Also, the lack of action will create tension, disputes, and ill feelings and may even help to create saboteurs.

When I say saboteurs, I mean that if an employee perceives injustice exists. They feel they are the victim of that injustice and will purposely withhold information, delay figures, or not pass on additional information (Greenberg and Colquitt, 2013). They want to make someone else’s world a bit more difficult as payback for the injustice they **believe** has been caused to them and possibly their colleagues.



Humans can be a complicated and vengeful species, capable of all manner of retribution if we believe we have been wronged. Every person reading this article will have experienced a saboteur or two in their time, perhaps even socially.

If you don’t address poor behaviour, good people will leave.

OC is rarely actively driven, nurtured and seldom monitored. Through a lack of accountability and responsibility, people cause the very issues which impact us, including favouritism, behavioural issues such as bullying, misuse of power/authority, and speaking ill of others). Then we can add absenteeism, sick leave due to stress, and finally, that killer of retention issues, the lack of accountability and responsibility, which enables some people to do the bare minimum while others pick up the rest. This results in many great or potentially great people leaving for better organisations.

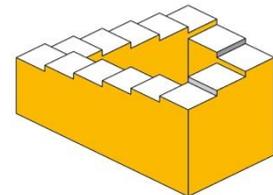
People usually leave an organisation because of other people or working cultures that go directly against their values. If you have organisational values, then engage with them fully. Don't splash them everywhere, and then do nothing with them! That's like buying shopping and leaving it to rot!

The OC enigma:

Enigma: "a puzzling or inexplicable occurrence or situation".(DICTIONARY, 2020).

I have described OC as an "enigma" due to my experiences with many organisations I have worked closely with. Some continue to baffle me to this day.

The enigma is that while organisations publicly share their description of their OC through their organisational values, they rarely drive, cultivate and monitor their p resented culture and values through a rigorous OC programme. Values and behaviours are not monitored or lived by their people, and there is no responsibility or accountability anywhere. The enigma is, therefore, "why"?



In my experience, most senior leaders within organisations believe (or choose to believe) that everyone upholds the values. Some will even support this belief by saying that when they ask their people, the answer is generally, "yes, everything is fine". That is not evidence! The only evidence you have there is that someone said: "yes, everything is fine"! The truth is, more often than not, things are not fine!

In some organisations I have worked with, it took many months to persuade the organisation to conduct an independent (external) survey on their employee satisfaction and engagement. In two of those cases, the organisations tried to push aside the route we strongly suggested. They did not allow their people to design and drive the change required and still have increased discontent, yet they continue to stick their heads in the sand! More of the enigma of OC!



Adding to their dismay and their future issues, they did not realise that their employees no longer trusted them. People were sick of hearing how great everything was when it wasn't. People were sick of false promises and their questions and complaints being ignored.

Trust can only be created through the consistency of honesty and reliability.

Not addressing dissatisfaction immediately is signing the death warrant for employee engagement. Discontent, sabotage, bad temperament and low work output will grow, and of course, worst of all, you will lose great or potentially great employees (Edmonds, 2014).



All too often, we take information from others as truth/fact. But remember that sometimes, when people tell us “everything is just fine”, they may believe that they need to protect themselves. Look at the programme entitled “Undercover Boss”; it lets CEOs discover all sorts of issues they know nothing about. Why didn’t they know of them? Nobody told them! Why? I’d imagine they didn’t want to risk the perceived backlash or consequences of telling the truth! What had caused people to feel that it was dangerous to say anything?

Resolving the enigma!



First, identify what is wrong. Warning! This will probably be uncomfortable, as you need to identify why your perceived culture is not what people “say” it is and ask why it has not been challenged. We call this the Phoenix Effect. Burn down all the misconceptions, avoidance, and assumptions, and do it quickly by promoting a better future for all. To do this, you’ll need people willing to speak freely, so build trust by creating a robust, [psychologically safe](#) environment.

(A psychologically safe environment is where the organisation provides Emotional Security so everyone has Emotional Safety, **knowing** that they can be authentic and say whatever they wish, respectfully and without the fear of consequence or reprisal).

Second, establish your (OCET) made up of engaged and motivated individuals from all areas and levels of your organisation. These people will become the engine for HR to drive your OC programme.

Third, plan, prepare and advertise your OC analysis workshops. These cannot be facilitated until the psychologically safe environment is fully in place. These are open, searching and free speaking events where your people can say whatever they want. They must be allowed to do this for you to gather the true data you need for the programme.

Fourth, all the planned workshops should be facilitated monthly so they can experiment in between. Attendees should ideally be from the same levels so no peer pressure may prevent colleagues from speaking freely. So, team members, leaders/managers, senior leaders and managers, and your executive team (yes, them too).



Fifth? Ask us for a chat to discuss all this and more.

How do we create and cultivate a great OC?

OC is created like a wonderful recipe for a great meal. It combines various ingredients to form a mouth-watering and fulfilling outcome for all. It provides flavour, warmth, nutrition, and sustenance for a wonderful, SAFE working environment.



Your robust OC programme must bring to life the organisational values displayed everywhere. Each team will be responsible for driving its success, and your newly founded OCET (“Organisational Culture Engagement Team”) will support, monitor, and report on it.

But how is a great OC created, and what are the ingredients that ensure a great OC?

While we have been cheeky enough to suggest just three of the key ingredients, each of those three ingredients holds further critical ingredients:



1. Altrcentric and Collaborative Leadership – focused on the people.
2. Authenticity – be you and let psychological safety do the same for your people.
3. Emotional Intelligence (EI) – recognise and manage emotions intelligently.

Having created your OCET, empower it to do many things, which we’d happily recommend. Your OCET will become the engine that drives your OC programme onwards and upwards to success and a far better working environment. This will not be easy, but the more you invest in this, the quicker the difference will be felt across the organisation.

Regardless of what the organisation promotes as its OC, it is ALL about the feeling of each individual's lived experience. More often than not, this frequently differs between teams or areas of the organisation. It is rarely what the organisation says it is. This needs to change. Organisations need to get people on the same page regarding openness and honesty and let everyone know they can share vulnerabilities safely.



As more people do this, more people will follow their lead. So, regardless of your hierarchical position, get out there and lead from the front. Everyone can lead change.

A growing number of wonderful organisations promote authenticity and care for their people in a totally psychologically safe environment.

OC needs time, patience, accountability and lots of hard work.

What does a great OC feel like?

When an organisation has a great OC that is proactively driven, it is like a jigsaw. The jigsaw pieces are arguably delicate and not strong, but when that jigsaw is completed, its united strength makes it much more difficult to pull apart.



Your people need to be like that jigsaw. Each piece must help the pieces beside them work together to keep themselves attached as they each form an integral part of the whole jigsaw.

Jigsaws can be hard work to complete. They can take a long time, especially at the beginning when there is planning and preparation to complete. But as you complete it, the missing pieces become more apparent and easier to find. And, of course, once it is complete, the picture appears, giving that feeling of achievement.

In the same way, an organisation with a robust OC programme will ensure that each person and team helps the other as each depends on the other to ensure unity and collaboration. This allows everyone to become a living, breathing part of the OC programme.



Any organisation that genuinely wants to invest in its OC and reap the many rewards it will bring needs to understand and accept all the time, effort and commitment it will take to get it working and maintain it. Once complete, maintenance is easy as it just requires a great programme to support it and the right people to manage it. Start to live and breathe your values, and your people will walk beside you, unconsciously promoting how good it is to work at your organisation as it **cares** for its people. Our Phoenix Effect takes you from the burning down of what didn't work to implementing the new and best for your organisation. We work with you, offering thoughts and suggestions.

Show your customers and clients that you care about them and your employees, and they will care about your organisation and respect and admire your brand because you care (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2010).

Why is culture different between teams?

For this, I will split an organisation's culture into three categories.

Presented culture – where the organisation proudly describes the culture everyone exhibits. This is almost the marketing advert of the organisation's culture.

Experienced culture – the actual lived experience people feel from working there (please note that this can differ significantly between and even within teams).

Localised culture – this can be completely different between two teams situated right beside one another.

The trick is to get everyone onto that same page, which is easier than it may initially seem.



Healthy team cultures are usually down to great team leaders/managers.

How can we do this?

Well, there is a lot to consider, but to give you a starter:

- a. Identify where the OC is deemed excellent and analyse why that is.
- b. If it is due to a manager's style, understand it first, consider and share the ingredients as best practice.
- c. If the people drive it, then understand it first, consider the ingredients and share them too.
- d. What are the individuals' values? If unsure, help them create new and unrealised values from their beliefs (Kegan et al, 2009).
- e. What do THEY want the OC values to include?
- f. What are the pain points for people regarding the culture?

What are some of the signs and causes of a toxic culture?

Key signs can include:

- a. No enjoyment for their work, no informal chit-chat.
- b. One-way communication (little or no interest in other people's thoughts).
- c. Personality and procedural issues are seldom raised due to fear of reprisal. Infighting between teams or within teams goes unchecked.
- d. Everything seems driven by policies (rather than as guides).
- e. Senior leadership/management fighting for position and promotion.
- f. A general feeling you need to keep quiet to stay safe.
- g. Unhappy employees who whisper about low morale and how bad things are.
- h. A distinct lack of care or empathy. Empathy is not something we have "X" amount of, and that's that. It is a skill and can, therefore, be developed) (Zaki, 2019).
- i. Unconscious and conscious saboteurs exist and go unchallenged.



Reasons:

- a. Lack of training in managing others (EI, leadership skills etc).
- b. Blockers - as in a leader or a manager (sometimes driven by others) such as they are scared to allow innovation as they feel threatened by it.
- c. Senior leader/manager drives a junior manager on targets/KPIs relentlessly, without using the Moccasin Approach[®] and considering that person from their perspective.
- d. Ineffective performance management processes. Examples may include:



- I. Stress! They are so stressed their behaviour is driven by emotion. (These can all be unconscious blockers).
- II. We get different processes in each team.
- III. No one really wants these as they are awkward.
- IV. They happen every 6/12 months, but nothing happens from them.
- V. Personal development rarely materialises.
- VI. It feels like being back at school.



- e. Lack of open, honest discussions and using the many heads approach.
- f. Lack of real recognition and praise for effort, ideas and achievements.
- g. No real permission to go “off-piste” and have a go at new.
- h. No wider organisational community was fostered at all.

Why should all this matter to the organisation’s leadership?

Poor OC stifles the performance, innovation and productivity you could have.



If you think, “Well, we’re still meeting our targets,” you’ve actually missed the point. Even though you hit those targets, you’re killing morale, losing some great people, and costing the organisation through lost opportunity, reduced output, and increased recruitment costs.

As said earlier, “People and their level of happiness at work is the litmus test for how healthy your OC truly is”. If they’re not working happily, then discover why that is!

Happy workers perform FAR better, offer more innovative ideas, talk positively about their organisation, and LIVE the values and underpinning behaviours with which the organisation has agreed.

If you want to “bring people with you,” then take the time to learn about them; they will help clean the culture for you (Jarrett, 2010).

A toxic environment creates unconscious/conscious saboteurs, costs you FAR more in staff turnover, causes more errors, attracts more complaints, and breeds discontent within teams.

Having processes and having HR ensure people are encouraged to speak their thoughts and say how they truly feel is not enough! Research shows that in some cases, 50% of employees still feel unsafe doing so and, therefore, don’t speak out (Carroll et al., 2017).

An organisation's culture does not just create a content and motivated workforce; it also attracts customers' attention, which research shows attracts them to your organisation and brand image (Rossi and Krey, 2019). You can’t buy that!

Toxic environments don’t just happen; your people create them!

How can we improve our Organisational Culture?

- Recognise where it truly is! Say that you can see it. Show your people you're honest, not blind, and want to improve things. (You've just started on the road to building trust).
- Have regular updates to showcase improvements and changes.
- Help people understand that differences are not barriers but opportunities given to us to bridge a natural gap between how we are (Kegan et al., 2009).
- CEO/MD will join your OCET for updates, agree on what is possible, and address anything impossible. A good reason must be presented (ideally with evidence).
- CEO/MD to publish their thoughts in a newsletter run by the group (the CEO/MD should be seen as the guests in the OCET, which is benefiting from their input - they do **NOT** run the OCET).
- Values and underpinning behaviours are agreed upon and finalised by the people.

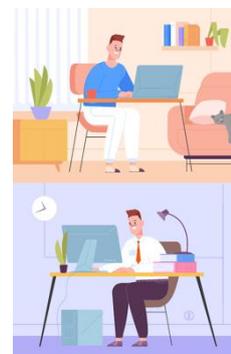


We have many more suggestions on improving your OC, so ask about our Phoenix Effect programme to get an idea.

Pandemic fallout:

The pandemic brought a massive overnight change to our working practices but a forced change. Many became used to working from home (WFH), but now (2024), businesses are moving back to a more 50/50 hybrid contract or an even higher workplace percentage.

OC is OC, regardless of whether your people are in the workplace or working remotely. We may need different approaches and to be more creative by designing engaging online interactions, but the essence of OC is still the same. We should always have been:



- Listening to what people think, and not what they feel they “should” say.
- Helping people feel safe to speak out by ensuring psychological safety. The organisation must provide emotional security; from that, people feel emotional safety (psychological safety) and feel truly safe to say what they wish.)
- Proactive and giving them the freedom to work in their own way.
- Encouraging and rewarding innovation and challenge.
- Using informal check-in interactions for more than “Are you ok?”.

WFH? One fixed rule for everyone can backfire, so manage your individuals.

However, if I am working remotely, that is now my workspace. The person with the most impact on my workspace usually checks in with me, my manager/team leader. Therefore, if my lifeline to the office is one person, they may not correctly impact my workspace and well-being. If you do not have a well-trained manager, the impact may not be that great, and again, people leave managers (Onnis, 2018).

So, involve your whole team and employ our [ROPE](#) thinking (Remote Office Pairing for Engagement) to ensure that people are truly connected to their work colleagues and office workspace discussions.



Quotes as food for thought:

“It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.”- **Steve Jobs**.

"I hire people brighter than me and get out of their way."- **Lee Iacocca**.

“True compassion means not only feeling another's pain but also being moved to help relieve it”. - **Daniel Goleman**.

“Great organisational culture requires everyone to be onboard” - **Mac Macdonald**.

If there is one thing the lockdowns across the world showed us, it is that we all have to treat each other as fellow humans regardless of hierarchical position, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, and all the other ingredients that make us “US.” Respect all of these and give time to ask and learn about them, understand that we are all different, and celebrate those differences. But most importantly, be considerate to one another and be kind.

*“Truly engage with others by showing you care
and that in your genuine authenticity, you, too, are vulnerable.
This is all about being human and building trust through our consistency”
~ Mac Macdonald ~*

Written by - Mac Macdonald

Please share this document with anyone you feel may be interested.

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