

Organisational culture change: 11 misconceptions that will make you fail

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Different scholars have come up with different definitions of *organisational culture*. In another article; [The best definitions of organisational culture](#) I share the nine best definitions on *organisational culture*. Others prefer the simpler definition that looks at culture as *the way we do business around here*. (James & McIntyre, 1996; Hemmelgarn, Glisson & James, 2006). The different definitions have brought different conceptualization of organisational culture change. This has also created many misconceptions about [organisational culture change](#).

1. When you change organisational values you change organisational culture.

This is a misconception that has led many organisations to implement failed *organisational culture change* programs. If you go to Schein's conceptualisation of organisational culture, espoused values are at the top of the culture iceberg. Schein clearly shows that a change of company values does not lead to a culture change. In a study by Donald Sull cited in the Sloanreview, they found that 80% of the 700 companies they studied had their values published on their website. It would seem corporate values are useless because companies with good espoused values still practice bad management and other practices contrary to their values. Donald Sull in the study found no correlation between official [company values](#) and [corporate culture](#). The message here is very clear; do not waste time thinking that changing your [corporate values](#) will lead to a change in *organisational culture*. Research shows no correlation with culture.

2. You can change the culture by changing the leadership.

While this seems to make sense at face value, a deeper understanding of [organisational culture definitions](#) clearly shows that *organisational culture* is a group phenomenon. It does not reside in one individual. As long as the whole group is not disbanded, changing individuals will not lead to [culture transformation](#). It is, therefore, foolhardy for Boards to hope that they can *change organisational culture* simply by changing the leadership of the organisation.

3. Culture can be changed without linking it to business outcomes.

Those with experience in organisational culture change caution that businesses should not plunge into *organisational culture change* without a clearly defined business outcome that is currently impacted negatively by the current culture. Schein talks about the need to identify organisational culture enablers and obstacles before you go on *organisational culture* interventions. For *organisational culture change* to take place it must be premised on addressing specific business problems. [Organisational culture](#) in that instance act as an enabler once aligned to what you want to achieve.

4. Organisational Culture can be measured through a questionnaire.

While it is popular to deploy *organisational culture* questionnaires, those with extensive experience in *organisational culture change* will tell you that it is very difficult to capture the culture of the organisation through surveys especially using questionnaires. It is very likely that if your approach to *organisational culture change* is premised on [questionnaire derived data](#), you are likely to capture the transitory mood in the organisation which does not reflect the *culture of the organisation* which is more enduring and stable. You should use focus groups discussions to enable a deeper understanding of the culture of the organisation.

5. Culture = engagement. Culture = organisational climate

There are some of the people who equate engagement with *organisational culture*. That is a sure way to fail in the organisational culture change journey. Employee engagement is an individual feeling while *organisational culture* is found within a group and is based on shared learning experience as people deal with challenges of day to day leaving. You will never be able to achieve the desired organisational culture change if you equate *organisational culture* to employee engagement. It is also important to note that the organisational climate is not the same as the *organisational culture*. Organisational climate and employee engagement can be impacted by the *organisation's culture* or climate. Edgar Schein the top Expert on Culture in his book *The Handbook of Organisational Culture and Climate*: “A climate can be locally created by what leaders do, what circumstances apply, and what environments afford. Culture can evolve only out of mutual experience and shared learning.” It is evident here that changing the [organisation's climate](#) will offer temporary relief to your organisation and the challenges you are facing. Such an approach will only bring short-lived relief, true *organisation culture change* will only come when there is a drastic shift in organisational culture.

6. Organisational culture can be changed by educating employees about our desired culture

Since *organisational culture* is a shared learning experience by a group, it makes sense that culture

change becomes more experiential rather than teaching your employees about culture change in a classroom setting. Such an approach will face the same fate that most training program face; loss of whatever has been taught.

7. Changing organisational policies will lead to a change in organisational culture.

This approach and misconception can at best be described as daydreaming. No matter how many times you change organisational policies it will not lead to *organisational culture change*. The fundamental basis of *organisational culture change* is to change the basic assumption used to underwrite that culture. However, it is important to note that if you are on a journey of *organisational culture change*, once the culture has been changed you would need to align your organisational policies to support the new culture.

8. The organisational restructuring will change the organisation's culture.

This is an illusion peddled by people who do not understand how culture originates and evolves. Reconfiguring your structures will not change the *organisation's culture*. Instead, start with a deep *organisational culture change* program before [restructuring](#). Without that shift and approach, any *organisational culture change* initiative premised on changing organisational structures will fail.

9. Changing the organisation's location and offices will lead to a culture change.

This is another illusion. We have heard senior people indicating that because they have changed their location and have new offices the *culture of the organisation* would accidentally also change. There is no truth in this assumption. *Organisational culture change* must be based on an understanding of what culture is and how it is formed.

10. Our uniform reflects our organisational culture.

According to Edgar Schein, the corporate uniforms falls under what is called cultural artefacts, it's not the culture itself. You can only get to a deeper understanding of the *organisational culture* when you get

to understand the basic assumptions driving corporate wear such as uniforms.

11. Organisational culture change occurs when all people in the organisation behave and think the same way.

This misconception is misleading. *Organisational culture change* does not desire an outcome where people think and act the same. *Organisational culture change* can still take place and produce a desirable *organisation culture* even in instances where people have a diversity of opinions. Sometimes people behave and think alike simply because they are trying to avoid punishment from the leadership. It is not a sign of a successful *organisational change* program.

The misconceptions above could be the major reason why [*organisational culture change*](#) efforts fail. It is therefore imperative on all leaders intending to institute *organisational culture change* to understand what it is and how it can be changed. Without a clear understanding of [*organisational culture*](#), any efforts to change it are likely to fail. Understand these fallacies as you are going through your organisational culture change efforts and will help you to redirect your effort. They act as signposts for you to reflect on as you go on the organisational transformation journey.

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