

Cultural influencers: how to shift and sustain organizational culture

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The research team at non-profit [APQC](#) is conducting a study on how organizations shift and sustain organizational culture. As part of their research, they are conducting interviews ‘with a range of individuals who have expertise and experience related to organizational culture.’ They invited me to participate and I talked with Elissa Tucker of APQC, last week.

She had a set of interview questions to go through with me, as she said, ‘in order to gain your insights on this topic’. For the most part, I enjoy these types of interviews. Once I came across [the phrase](#) ‘When I hear what I say, I’ll know what I think’, which seems to hold true for me. The act of formulating a point of view in a way that transmits seems to clarify my thoughts. Here are the questions with aspects of my answers and further resources.

- 1. How do you define organisational culture?** There’s no simple answer to this question. There are multiple definitions of organisational culture ranging from ‘the way we do things round here’ to elaborate [paragraphs](#) that include behaviours, values, assumptions, norms and expectations. I’m of the view that there is no singular organisational culture. An organisation is similar to a [climate zone](#) in that, within a recognisable range/geography, it encompasses multiple weather patterns that vary from location to location and day to day. Organisations comprise multiple cultures, within recognisable parameters.
- 2. Who defines an organisation’s ideal/desired culture?** Sometimes a strong CEO can set the tone of the culture. Think about the ex CEO of Uber, [Travis Kalanick](#), for example. He resigned, having been held accountable for a culture of harassment. But even if the CEO does set the tone, that does not mean that everyone subscribes to it. There are many other influencers that act to define organisational cultures – national cultures, professional cultures and networks of interest cultures are some of them.
- 3. Why is culture important?** Cultures shape, reflect and represent prevailing expectations, norms and behaviours, and, in turn, are shaped by systems, processes, rules, policies and structures. Their importance lies in the way they enable, or disable a healthy organisational life to play out.
- 4. Do you see increasing awareness of the role culture plays?** Yes, in relation to discussions going on now about the Covid-19 world. Particularly in relation to maintaining or developing a sense of affiliation and ‘belonging’ to an organisation when a proportion of the workforce is now working remotely without the day-to-day and face-to-face interactions with colleagues. There’s also a growing awareness that over-focus on hybrid working could cause [cultural fractures](#) in cases where some organisational members can work remotely and others cannot by virtue of the roles they have. Additionally, I’ve seen a recent rise in the number

of references to ‘toxic cultures’. (See my [blog](#) on this).

5. **Do you have any advice on making sceptics see the value of investing in culture?** Everyone is investing or disinvesting in culture all the time, we are each engaged by, and enmeshed in, our cultures – we can’t escape them. By deciding to, for example, ‘follow the rules’ you are maintaining your investment in that cultural norm. Or if you decide to buck the rules you are culturally disinvesting. Often the investment or disinvestment is not recognised as such, but it is still powerful. There’ve been some examples of disinvestment in cases involving [What’s App](#) usage when cultural values of inclusion and respect have been challenged by exclusive and disrespectful What’s App exchanges.
6. **What do you see as the key levers that shape organisational culture?** [Johnson and Schole’s cultural web](#) is a useful tool to start considering the levers of organisational cultures. Too often culture is seen simply as beliefs, or behaviours, or values, but these are shaped by control, power, and organisational systems which are themselves part of the culture. Suppose you consider the culture of responsibly driving a car on a road. Your driving ‘culture’ is shaped by road signage, enforceable speed restrictions, road layout, etc. The driving cultures vary by country depending on the systems which shape [driver behaviour](#) and also on the way certain [driving apps](#) are configured. Cultures are shaped in many different ways – I hesitate to say there are ‘key levers’ – cultures are continuously emergent, shaping and being shaped by their context.
7. **Which individuals or groups are “key influencers” of organisational culture?** Finding the key influencers of organisational culture is a task that can be aided by social network analysis. I4CP recently published a report (unfortunately behind a paywall) on [Five Ways Networks Create Culture](#) – it concludes, ‘Senior leaders who want to enact culture change must be prepared to learn about the many cultural undercurrents in their organisations. They need a clear understanding of their cultural subnetworks, a willingness to identify and engage with informal influencers, a sense of the absorption rate of new priorities and behaviors, an ability to defuse pockets of tension, and a profound awareness of emotional responses.’

Alongside the internal cultural influencers there are [external cultural influencers](#) – think of rise of ‘influencers’ on Instagram, for example, or the role of activist investors.

8. **What is the role of organisational subcultures? Do they need to be managed?** I am not sure that cultures and sub-cultures can be managed. They are not ‘things’ amenable to ‘management’. They are more like rivers that can be harnessed and shaped but the ramifications and consequences of doing this are [unpredictable](#).

9. **People often talk about “changing the culture” but don’t know where to start. What would you tell them?** Again, the Johnson and Scholes web could help. For example – listen to the stories about the organisation, try telling different stories. Look at the power structures and see if any are restricting cultural movement and so on. Look at the symbols – change them. I once worked in an organisation that had in the reception area photos of the 12 (white, male) members of the executive team. Part of the organisational rhetoric was about everyone being valued. Believing in the power of symbols, I suggested that if this was the case, we take down the pictures of the 12 executive team members and replace it with a photomontage of the entire workforce. My suggestion was not accepted, but consider the impact of different visual symbols as reflectors of culture in practice rather than culture in rhetoric.

10. **How do you think the pandemic and social distancing are affecting organisational culture?** Both positively and negatively. I like the way Zoom puts everyone in the same size rectangle and shuffles the order so that [hierarchies get blurred](#). Or you get insights into colleagues lives through their children wandering into screen view. But there are also new pressures or work-life balance, mental health, and things around a sense of belonging, as I mentioned earlier.

11. **What are your biggest lessons learned from your culture work?** That it is an endlessly fascinating exploration with no easy answers, only more questions.

12. **Some organisations are adopting roles dedicated to organisational culture – for example a chief culture officer. Do you think having a role or team specifically focused on culture is beneficial for organisations?** It depends on the organisation, what the [purpose of the role](#) is, and how the role-holder shapes the role.

How would you answer these questions? Let me know.

*The post "Cultural influencers: how to shift and sustain organisational culture" was first published by **Dr. Naomi Stanford** [here](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/cultural-influencers-how-shift-sustain-organisational-naomi-stanford/)*
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About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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