

# When Culture Problems Are Operating Model Problems

Repeated culture problems deserve a deeper diagnosis. How the way an organization operates can sustain the very behaviors its leaders are trying to change.

By Lara Blackert

Most organizations want to become better. They invest in strategy, leadership, talent, culture, and transformation with genuine ambition.

Some nevertheless remain below their potential because familiar operating patterns make better performance harder than it should be.

Decisions do not hold. Accountability shifts under pressure. Influence travels through informal networks. Truth is welcomed selectively. Strong performers spend increasing amounts of energy compensating for what the system will not resolve.

These conditions are often described as a culture problem.

## When acceptable replaces possible

Organizational decline rarely begins with a dramatic failure. It develops through the accumulation of decisions that appear manageable in isolation.

A decision is quietly reversed after the meeting. A leader is allowed to avoid accountability because confronting the behavior would be uncomfortable. Important context is shared selectively. A strong performer absorbs additional responsibility because the formal owner cannot or will not carry it. A difficult truth is softened to protect a relationship.

Together, these moments teach people which decisions are final, whose behavior will be addressed, and whether raising a concern leads to action. Employees adapt to the repeated experience of the system rather than the organization's stated values.

This is how what was once unacceptable becomes familiar, and what was possible gradually gives way to what is considered realistic.

The organization may continue meeting commitments, but energy that should support customers, innovation, and execution is redirected toward navigating ambiguity and compensating for structural weakness. Better remains possible, though increasingly difficult to pursue.

## What leaders tolerate becomes the culture

Culture is often discussed as a set of values, behaviors, or shared beliefs. Those things matter, but employees calibrate culture primarily through what leadership permits.

If leaders say accountability matters but allow ownership to migrate when outcomes are at risk, people learn that accountability is conditional. If leaders encourage candor but discourage inconvenient information, people learn to manage the message. If collaboration is celebrated while decisions are shaped through private relationships, people learn that access matters more than role.

What leaders repeatedly fail to confront eventually becomes part of the operating standard.

Malicious intent is rarely required. Unproductive patterns are often preserved because leaders are trying to maintain stability, protect important relationships, or avoid disruption. Harmony achieved by withholding truth is deferred conflict, and the organization pays through slower decisions, weaker ownership, and declining trust.

The gap between what leaders say and what the system repeatedly proves is where cultural credibility erodes.

Employees need integrity between the declared standard and the lived one. When that integrity is absent, organizational politics becomes more reliable than stated values as a guide to action.

## The conditions that hold organizations back

Cultural dysfunction is often assigned to a difficult leader, a damaged team, or a collection of interpersonal conflicts. Individual behavior can certainly create harm. But when the same patterns recur across teams, persist through leadership changes, or survive repeated interventions, the problem is larger than personality.

When patterns persist across teams and leaders, the operating architecture is helping produce the behavior. Several conditions appear consistently:

## Decisions remain open after they are made

Formal meetings create the appearance of closure, but stakeholders continue lobbying through informal channels. Teams hesitate to act because they expect the direction to change. Authority becomes less important than access.

## Accountability separates from authority

People carry responsibility for outcomes without the decision rights, information, or resources required to produce them. When pressure rises, ownership diffuses and the most dependable leaders absorb the gap.

## Influence depends on belonging to the informal system

Critical context and early alignment move through long-standing relationships, shared experiences, or private networks. Those outside the dominant leadership prototype must invest disproportionate effort to achieve the influence their formal role should provide.

Relationships outside formal meetings can build trust and surface useful ideas. The risk arises when they become a shadow operating system and formal meetings merely ratify decisions shaped through networks that relevant leaders cannot enter. Influence should flow from responsibility, expertise, and contribution rather than shared hobbies, background, or social access.

## Harmony is rewarded more than truth

Leaders who challenge assumptions or name structural problems are experienced as disruptive, while those who preserve comfort are viewed as collaborative. Difficult conversations migrate underground, where they become politics rather than productive conflict.

Speaking up is essential, but candor requires an accountable forum. When a concern involves a person, decision, or team, those affected should understand the issue, know the relevant facts, and have an opportunity to respond. Backchannel criticism creates influence without equivalent transparency or accountability.

## The system depends on individual compensation

Execution holds because capable people translate unclear decisions, repair ineffective handoffs, stabilize teams, and manage around leaders who are not held to the same standard. Their effort disguises the weakness of the system, allowing it to persist.

These patterns reflect decision architecture, ownership, governance, leadership norms, and access to influence. Together, they determine whether the organization can turn talent and strategy into sustained performance.

## Why behavioral solutions are insufficient

When culture deteriorates, organizations often respond with coaching, leadership development, communication campaigns, values refreshes, or renewed expectations. These efforts can be useful, but they rarely hold when the architecture continues rewarding the behavior the intervention is meant to change.

A leader cannot be coached into clear accountability when decision rights remain ambiguous. A team cannot communicate its way through an operating model built on excessive dependencies. Employees will not trust a message about candor when difficult truths continue to carry personal consequences. Leadership development cannot overcome a governance system that allows informal influence to reverse formal decisions.

Behavior adapts to the conditions surrounding it. Leaders seeking different behavior must examine what the system is teaching, rewarding, and protecting, including what makes the current behavior rational.

Sometimes an individual must be held accountable. Structural thinking should never become an excuse for harmful conduct. But accountability becomes credible only when leaders also address the conditions that allowed the pattern to persist, spread, or become normalized.

Without both forms of accountability, the organization can remove one person while preserving the conditions that produced the problem.

## Creating the conditions for better

Better culture is not created through aspiration alone. It is built in ordinary moments: when a risk is raised, a decision is challenged, an owner needs support, or a leader falls short of the standard.

Leaders can begin by making truth safe, direct, and actionable. Material risks belong in an accountable forum where the people involved understand the issue, can respond, and know what happens next. Decisions should not be reversed through shadow systems. Leadership must state what was decided, who owns the next move, and what new information would justify reopening the choice.

Accountability must also be matched with authority. A leader responsible for a launch, transformation, or customer outcome needs the authority to make the necessary tradeoffs or a clear agreement with the people who control scope, funding, staffing, and timing. Every relevant role should have access to the material context and a genuine opportunity to shape the decisions it will be expected to execute.

Finally, leaders must stop depending on heroic effort to compensate for structural weakness. Recognize the people carrying the gap, then redesign the decisions, workflows, and handoffs making their heroics necessary. When the standard is breached, address the conduct, repair the consequence, and provide enough visible accountability for people to know the standard remains credible.

This work requires leaders to accept that culture is shaped by the repeated experience of the enterprise and that they are accountable for the architecture producing that experience.

The pursuit of better requires leaders to see what the organization could become, confront the conditions limiting it, and change the system where necessary.

Better begins when what has been tolerated is finally made visible, and leaders accept responsibility for redesigning it.