



What if you're not part of your organisation's culture?

You're a well-loved and respected leader. Your people trust you and genuinely believe you have their best interests at heart. But you're not part of your culture. Wait, what?

One of the most impactful books I've read recently is Stan Slap's 'Under The Hood'. In it, he introduces the concept that an organisational culture acts like a completely separate organism – separate from management – that exists to ensure its own survival. My many years of working in the field have convinced me that this is undeniably true.

Think of it as though there are actually two cultures in your organisation: an employee culture and a management culture.

If you're in a management or people leader position, you're part of 'them', not 'us' as far as your employee culture is concerned. Even if you're well-loved, respected and trusted, your employee culture's job is to try to predict, to the best of its ability, what you'll do next. It must constantly read your decisions, behaviour, and reactions to others' behaviour so that it knows what you value and can protect itself by behaving in the 'right' way and constantly adjust its behaviour as you adjust yours. Its first, and often only, priority is to survive – to remain an intact group with predictable rules and accepted norms.

The more often you say one thing and do another, the more energy your employee culture needs to expend on trying to predict your next move. The more energy it spends on watching you, the less it spends on watching your competitors, the market, and developing new and innovative ways to delight your customers. You end up with an inwardly focused organisation where pleasing the boss is far more important than pleasing the customer.

And if your employee culture figures out how to read you well and therefore how to survive, its next priority is to work out how to be rewarded and avoid punishment – a concept often described as 'psychological safety'.

In a recent meta-analysis of psychological safety written by M. Lance Frazier et al in the journal *Personnel Psychology*, the authors distinguish psychological safety from other related concepts like empowerment, engagement, and trust. To be empowered, employees need to feel they have control over their work. To be engaged, they need to

invest their commitment and energy into their role and tasks. The concept of trust captures their willingness to be vulnerable to others, to give others the benefit of the doubt. Psychological safety, on the other hand, captures the extent to which they believe *others will give them* the benefit of the doubt, how they perceive that others in their workplace will respond to 'emotionally risky' behaviours. William A. Kahn defined it as “feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career.”

As noted by Amy C. Edmondson and Zhike Lei in Harvard Business School's 2014 annual review of psychology and organisational behaviour, “a central theme in research on psychological safety - across decades and levels of analysis - is that it facilitates the willing contribution of ideas and actions to a shared enterprise”. In other words, if you don't provide your culture with psychological safety, it will not provide you with the innovative ideas and actions that are critical to the execution of your strategy and to future-proofing your organisation. And no amount of kick-offs, roll-outs and town hall inspiration sessions will change that.

Stan Slap says “Because it's self-protective, it's a little crazy. Even on its best days, an employee culture is neurotic and prone to hypochondria. How could it not be? It's trying to understand how to survive in an environment it can't reliably predict or control.”

So what can you do about all this? First, you need to help your employee culture as much as you can to reliably predict what you'll do – and by 'you', I mean 'management'. *Always* explain not only what you're doing but why you're doing it. Consistency is the key – which is not to say you can't change decisions to respond to changing market conditions. If you need to change a decision or back away from an earlier commitment, particularly one that's high profile or risky, explain what has changed and why you backed away from it. Always link back to the why – ideally a 'why' that is already well-known, fully understood and believed in, such as your company purpose that is genuinely lived by senior management.

Then consciously and relentlessly do what you say – and provide a steady stream of reinforcing evidence that you are doing what you say. 'We said, we did' articles need to start appearing frequently on your Intranet, in your leaders' regular email updates and in the stories they tell when they speak to their people in town hall sessions, team meetings, and coffee conversations.

If you do that long enough, your employee culture will start to feel a level of confidence that it can reliably predict what you're going to do – and that will release a whole lot of energy it would otherwise need to spend on trying to predict your next move and figuring out how to survive it.

Once there's enough reliable predictability to ensure its own survival, your culture will turn its attention to psychological safety.

There are countless ways to increase your employee culture's feelings of psychological safety. They are usually simple, but not easy. The best place to start is by giving your people the benefit of the doubt. As far as humanly possible, trust your people's good intentions and make it clear that that's what you're doing. When deciding policy, creating

rules or providing guidance on how tasks should be performed, do so with the underlying assumption that your people are sensible grown-ups who want to do great work. Sure, there are likely to be a few who aren't, but the vast majority are and determining policy based on the lowest common denominator will send the signal to your culture that you don't trust it. If you don't trust your people, they won't trust you and psychological safety will be impossible. Then you'll find yourself with an employee culture that spends all its time trying to work out how to please you instead of your customers.

No matter how well-loved a leader you are, you're not part of your employee culture. Your employee culture's first priority is its own survival and its second priority is psychological safety. If you can figure out how to reassure it on both counts, it will give you anything you want.



Fiona Robertson is a culture change coach, trainer and speaker focused on helping leaders create teams and organisations that thrive.

She can be contacted via fionarobertson.com, fiona@fionarobertson.com or +61 (0)3 8719 8020.