

The Importance of Managing Culture in a Hybrid and Asymmetric World



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1.0 Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses worldwide were compelled to adapt rapidly to remote work arrangements and hybrid models. The once familiar office environment gave way to virtual meetings, decentralised teams, and asymmetric communication. This significant shift challenged established norms and highlighted the critical importance of managing culture in the new work landscape.

The pandemic disrupted not only the way we work but also how we connect with one another. Physical distancing measures and travel restrictions necessitated remote work, leaving employees feeling isolated and disconnected. The sudden absence of face-to-face interactions and shared physical spaces posed an unprecedented challenge to cultivating and sustaining a strong organisational culture.

Today, organisations find themselves navigating the complexities of a hybrid and asymmetric work environment. Some employees work remotely full-time, others adopt a hybrid schedule, alternating between remote work and in-person collaboration, while some organisations are battling to bring people back into the office full-time. This shifting landscape demands a fresh approach to culture management—one that acknowledges the diverse needs and experiences of employees across different work arrangements, whilst importantly, necessitating and maintaining organisational performance.

The following sections of this eBook explore the strategies, concepts, and examples that can help organisations effectively manage culture in this new reality. By understanding the challenges and opportunities presented by hybrid and asymmetric work, leaders can foster a culture that promotes engagement, collaboration, and shared purpose, irrespective of physical proximity.



2.0 Hybrid & Asymmetric Work

In today's rapidly evolving work landscape, the emergence of hybrid and asymmetric work models presents a host of unique challenges for organisations, particularly in the realm of culture management. The traditional understanding of culture, forged through personal interactions and shared physical spaces, must now undergo a transformative shift to accommodate the dynamics of remote work, virtual collaboration, and flexible schedules. As employees navigate a multitude of work arrangements, it becomes increasingly imperative to proactively address potential gaps and obstacles that may hinder the development of a cohesive and thriving organisational culture.

To successfully navigate the complexities of culture management in this new hybrid and asymmetric world, organisations must wholeheartedly embrace key principles that foster connectivity and engagement across diverse teams. Concepts such as trust, communication, and flexibility take on heightened significance in this context. Building and nurturing trust assumes even greater importance when face-to-face interactions are limited, requiring individuals to rely on virtual channels for effective collaboration. By cultivating an environment of openness and transparency, organisations can foster a profound sense of belonging among their employees, ensuring that each voice is heard and valued, irrespective of physical location. Additionally, embracing flexibility in work arrangements and accommodating individual needs becomes paramount, as it not only contributes to a more inclusive culture but also supports employees' diverse circumstances.

In essence, by proactively integrating these fundamental principles into their approach to culture management, organisations can successfully traverse the uncharted waters of the hybrid and asymmetric work landscape. By valuing trust, communication, and flexibility, organisations can create an environment where their employees thrive, enabling a seamless integration of various work models and nurturing a robust and vibrant organisational culture that transcends traditional boundaries

“52% of our employees are remote, allowing us to attract and access stronger talent, but also introducing the need to develop micro-cultures and introduce culture champions.”

6,000+ US Based Digital Health Org.

2.1 The Power Pendulum



In the context of managing culture in a hybrid and asymmetric world, the power pendulum represents the recent shift in power dynamics between employees and leadership. With the rise of remote work and flexible work arrangements, employees have gained more autonomy and decision-making power regarding where and how they work. This shift has enabled individuals to have greater control over their work-life balance, leading to increased satisfaction and productivity.

However, as organisations strive to strike a balance between remote and in-office work, there is a growing tension between employees' desire for flexibility and leadership's push to bring people back into the office. This struggle over the power to determine work arrangements has clearly become a focal point in managing culture for many organisations.

On one side, employees value the freedom to work remotely, allowing them to tailor their work environment to suit their individual preferences and needs. Remote work has offered benefits such as reduced commuting time, increased flexibility, and improved work-life integration, often leading to higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction due to the greater autonomy to decide where they work.

“There has been pressure with growth and hiring post pandemic and there is tension between clients and business needs and what employees want in terms of flexibility.”

Head of HR at a Global Executive Search firm during a recent [Culture15 webinar](#).

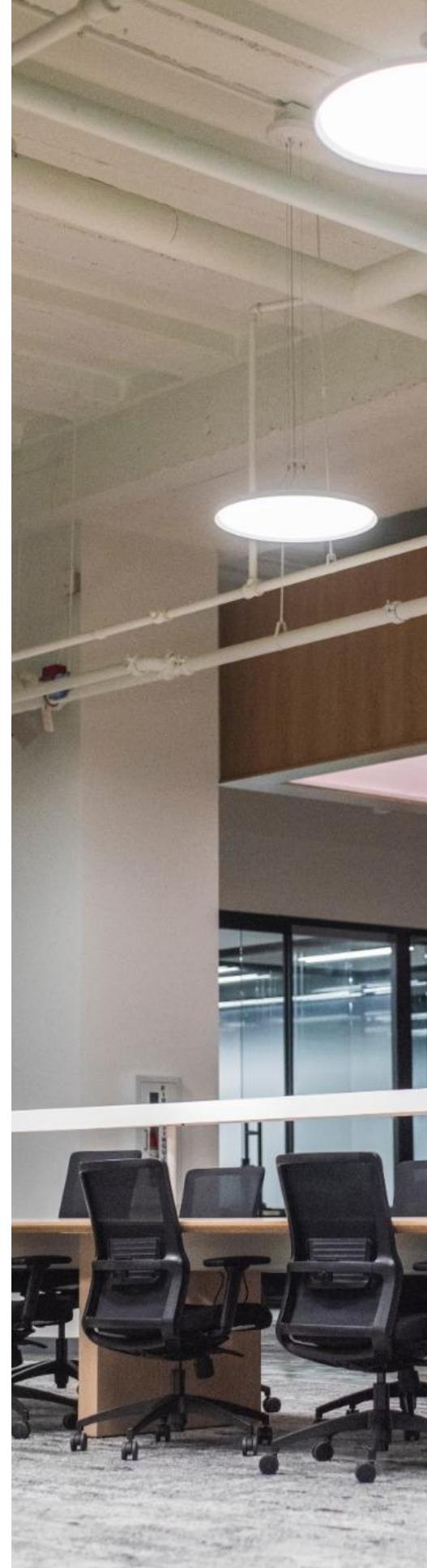
2.1 The Power Pendulum

On the other side, leadership may see the return to the office as an opportunity to enhance collaboration, creativity, and social interactions among employees; ultimately, developing and embedding culture. They also recognise the value of in-person connections, spontaneous conversations, and the synergies that can emerge from working together physically. Bringing employees back to the office aligns with the belief that a shared physical space fosters a stronger sense of culture, camaraderie, and team cohesion.

Additionally, with the arrival of consistently high inflation, cash has been sucked out of the economy and many/most organisations are struggling for profit and are conserving cash. This has meant a rapid switch in focus from revenue/growth to cost and efficiency, resulting in cost cutting and layoffs (which are everywhere) and has created a greater desire for control in management.

Balancing the benefits of remote work with the advantages of in-person collaboration becomes crucial - it involves creating a culture that values individual autonomy and trust while also promoting the importance of face-to-face interactions and leveraging the benefits of physical proximity.

Navigating this power pendulum requires organisations to find a middle ground that respects both the desires of employees for flexibility and the objectives of leadership to not only foster a strong culture but to survive during these uncertain economic times.



3.0 Did Yahoo get it wrong?



It is prevalent that there is no shortage of examples of organisations navigating this “power pendulum” struggle, a more notable example being Yahoo.

In February 2013, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer announced the decision for all 12,000 employees return to the office full-time in hope for increased productivity and a more connected company culture. She observed that “speed and quality are often sacrificed” when working remotely and Yahoo struggled to communicate and collaborate with remote employees. This physical distance between employers and employees acted as a catalyst to the erosion of yahoo’s trust in employees. She elaborated by stating for Yahoo to be the absolute best place to work it is critical that all employees are present in their offices.

Subsequently, a plethora of Yahoo employees leaked an internal memo regarding the shift away from remote work conveying their frustration. This also caused debate to spark within industry professionals such as Richard Branson which initiated early conversation of whether workplace flexibility is in large organisations’ best interest.

[Read more](#)

This example of Yahoo which occurred over a decade ago acts as a parallel to the power pendulum struggle many are experiencing currently in managing culture in a hybrid and asymmetric world. Mayer initially announced the return-to-office policy to stimulate impromptu insights and discussion which remote working is unable to facilitate.

However, this decision was met with many employees frustrated, voicing they felt as though they were hired under false pretences. Commencing a highly prevalent debate between supporters of workplace flexibility and those in favour of an in-office workforce. This clash clearly highlights the power pendulum in action, as employees assert their desire for flexibility and autonomy in work arrangements, demonstrated by the leaking of internal memos, while leadership aims to prioritise in person collaboration and cultural cohesion.

4.0 Culture Management - The Culture Equation

In order to effectively manage and strengthen culture in a hybrid and asymmetric world, we have constructed the following framework:

$$\text{Clarity of culture expectations} \times \text{Number of Interactions} \\ = \text{Strength of culture}$$

This equation emphasises the importance of explicitness and intentionality in clarity of culture expectations, as well as the significance of interactions in shaping and reinforcing organisational culture.

Clarity of culture involves clear and transparent communication within the organisation. In a remote or hybrid work environment, where face-to-face interactions are limited, it becomes crucial to convey desired expectations, values, and behaviors explicitly. By utilising clear communication channels, providing explicit guidelines, and documenting processes, organisations ensure that everyone understands the cultural expectations. Just as importantly is intentionality, which is a vital factor within building clarity around culture. This refers to the deliberate effort of leaders to shape and nurture the desired target culture. Leaders play a critical role in setting the tone and modeling behaviors aligned with the organisation's strategy. In a remote setting, it may be more challenging to directly experience these behaviors, making intentional efforts even more crucial in developing the desired culture.

The number of interactions refers to the frequency and quality of interactions among team members. In a hybrid work environment, maintaining regular and meaningful interactions becomes essential. On the other hand, in an office environment with more interactions, culture may develop more organically through day-to-day interactions, requiring less emphasis on explicitness and intentionality.

Leaders must strike a balance and focus on the areas most important to their specific business. If they are building a remote workforce, more emphasis on explicitness and intentionality is required, and vice versa for an office-based workforce.

While the specific answer to the Culture Equation may vary from business to business, one thing is certain: managing culture is essential, and it can only be effectively managed once it is measured.

4.1 Culture Measurement



Define

Defining a target culture is essential for organisations, whether operating remotely or in-office. It provides a clear direction and shared understanding of desired values and behaviors, guiding employee actions and fostering a cohesive work environment aligned with the organisation's goals.



Diagnose

Diagnosing the current culture is of utmost importance for organisations. It enables you to assess the alignment of your existing culture, with the desired target culture, identify areas of improvement, and uncover any gaps or discrepancies across varying working preferences. This diagnosis provides valuable insights for implementing targeted interventions and strategies to bridge the cultural divide, and drive meaningful cultural transformation.



Track

Tracking progress over time in closing the culture gap is vital for organisations. It measures the success of culture management efforts and guides data-driven decision-making. By monitoring metrics and key performance indicators, organisations refine strategies, identify areas for improvement, and ensure a stronger culture aligned with their desired target.

5.0 Facebook - Striking the Balance



Facebook are a good example of successfully striking the balance with remote work; by allowing all full-time employees to request remote work if their jobs can be done remotely. This flexible approach enables employees to have more control over their work arrangements while still maintaining productivity and collaboration.

Facebook acknowledges the benefits of remote work, such as increased employee satisfaction and access to a broader talent pool, but also recognises the importance of in-person interactions to foster a strong company culture.

By implementing a thoughtful and adaptable remote work policy, Facebook demonstrates its commitment to finding the right balance between remote and in-person work to meet the needs of its employees and maintain its organisational culture.

[Read more](#)

Facebook's successful balance of remote work resonates with the principles of the Culture Equation mentioned earlier. By providing employees the option of remote work and establishing clear and explicit expectations, Facebook successfully cultivates its desired culture. Furthermore, they acknowledge the significance of interactions, whether virtual or in-person, in shaping and reinforcing its organisational culture. This well-rounded approach showcases Facebook's dedication to effective culture management, aligning with the principles of the Culture Equation within the context of hybrid working.

6.0 Implications

The hybrid and asymmetric work landscape, accelerated by the impact of the pandemic, presents significant implications for managing culture, making it crucial for organisations to understand and address these implications to navigate the changing dynamics successfully.

Firstly, the shift towards hybrid work necessitates a re-evaluation of how culture is built and sustained. In this context, leaders must be deliberate and explicit in their communication to convey the desired culture, emphasising clarity, transparency, and intentionality in virtual interactions to maintain a strong culture despite limited in-person interactions.

Secondly, the observed power pendulum struggle highlights the importance of striking a balance between employee autonomy and leadership influence. Finding the right equilibrium requires leaders to recognise and respect the preferences and needs of their workforce while ensuring alignment with the organisation's goals and values.

Moreover, organisations need to invest in developing a culture of trust and psychological safety to support remote and hybrid work arrangements. By creating an environment where employees feel empowered to express themselves, take risks, and contribute to collective success, organisations can foster a positive and inclusive culture.

Additionally, continuous monitoring and assessment of culture are essential to address potential gaps and challenges that arise in hybrid work environments. Regularly measuring and tracking cultural metrics allows organisations to identify areas for improvement, and make data-driven decisions to drive cultural development.

Finally, organisations must exhibit agility and adaptability in their approach to culture management. As the hybrid and asymmetric work landscape continues to evolve, being open to experimentation, learning from experiences, and adjusting strategies accordingly will be key to nurturing a resilient and thriving culture that thrives in the new work environment.

See the next chapter for tips on how to overcome these implications and challenges...

7.0 Overcoming Challenges



Regularly assess and adapt:

Continuously monitor and assess cultural dynamics within the organisation. Collect feedback, measure cultural metrics, and use the insights gained to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments to culture management strategies.



Foster clear and frequent communication:

Ensure that communication channels are open and transparent to convey expectations, values, and behaviors explicitly. Regularly communicate updates, provide feedback, and encourage open dialogue to maintain a strong culture.



Leverage technology and collaboration tools:

Embrace digital platforms and technology solutions that facilitate seamless communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing. Utilize virtual meeting tools, project management software, and other collaborative platforms to bridge the gap between remote and in-office teams.



Empower and support leaders:

Provide leaders with the necessary tools, training, and resources to effectively manage culture in a hybrid work setting. Equip them with the skills to inspire and engage remote teams, while also fostering a cohesive culture across different work arrangements.



Lead by example:

Leaders play a critical role in shaping organisational culture. Lead by example by embodying the desired culture and behaviours. Demonstrate inclusivity, flexibility, and adaptability in your own actions and decision-making to inspire employees and foster a positive work culture.



Prioritise inclusion and connection:

Take deliberate steps to create a sense of belonging and foster connections among remote and in-office employees. Encourage team-building activities, virtual social events, and opportunities for cross-functional collaboration to build relationships and strengthen the organisational culture.

8.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the management of culture in a hybrid and asymmetric world has become critical for organisations in the face of evolving work dynamics. The profound impact of the pandemic and the proliferation of remote and flexible work arrangements have posed unique challenges and opportunities in the realm of culture management.

Throughout this eBook, we have explored the significance of effectively managing culture in this new landscape and provided insights and strategies to successfully navigate these challenges.

By understanding the contextual landscape and the power pendulum struggle between employee autonomy and leadership influence, organisations can find a delicate equilibrium that fosters a thriving culture. The Culture Equation introduced in this eBook, encompassing explicitness, intentionality, and interactions, serves as a guiding framework to build and sustain a strong organisational culture.

Managing culture in a hybrid and asymmetric world entails various implications that demand attention. Clear communication, balancing autonomy and leadership influence, leveraging technology, fostering trust and psychological safety, continuous monitoring and assessment, and embracing adaptability are vital considerations to navigate this complex landscape.

In the ever-evolving work environment, managing culture is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each organisation must tailor its strategies to align with its specific business goals, workforce preferences, and contextual realities. By embracing the principles, insights, and strategies shared in this eBook, organisations can cultivate a resilient, cohesive, and thriving culture regardless of working preferences, propelling their success in the dynamic landscape of the hybrid and asymmetric world.

As organisations embark on this journey, they must remember that managing culture is not a destination but a continuous process. It requires ongoing commitment, adaptation, and a willingness to learn from experiences. By fostering a culture that embraces change and innovation, organisations can thrive amidst the shifting work dynamics and create a sustainable competitive advantage.





Thank you for your interest in our eBook

Culture15 is your complete toolkit for tracking culture change. CEOs and HR Leaders at world-leading organisations use Culture15 analytics to ensure success by aligning their culture with what they need to execute their strategy.

If you'd like to find out how to define the culture and values you need, diagnose the culture you have and close the gap, talk to our team via the button below:

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