Align Employee Behaviors to Influence Culture
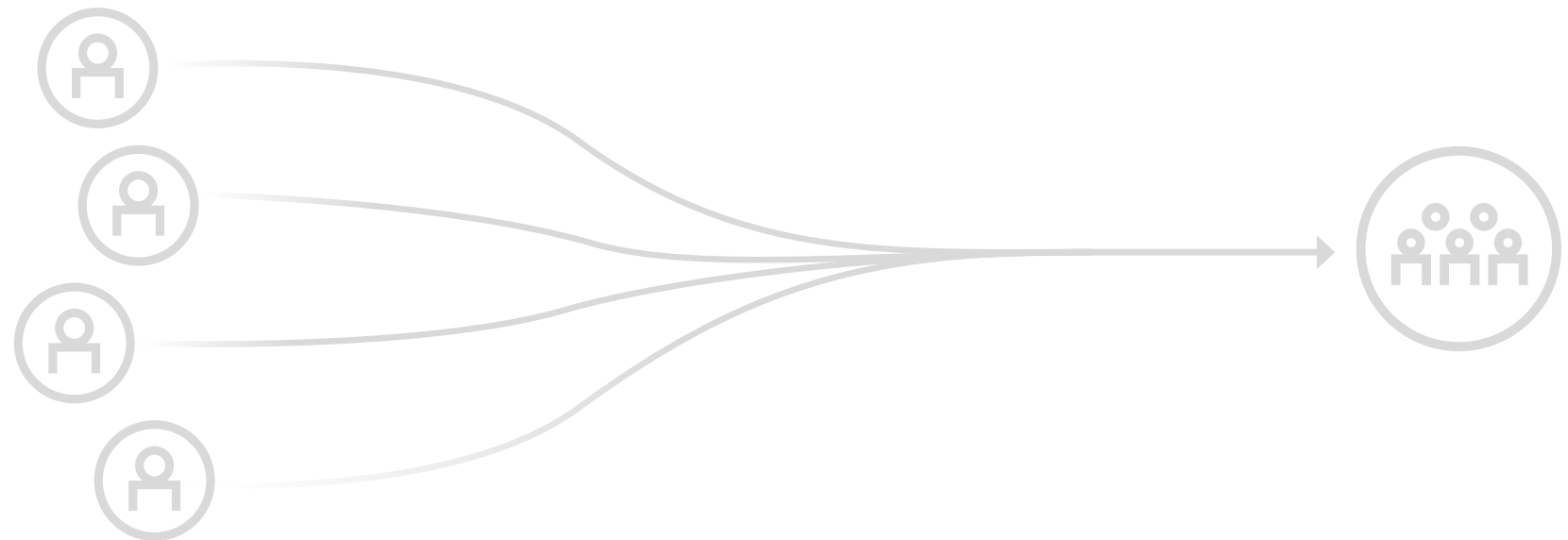
Gartner

CEOs list culture as a top strategic priority, yet culture is difficult to shape. CCOs must remove barriers keeping employees from adopting target behaviors by addressing cultural tensions, implementing peer-driven programs and creating shared experiences around one or more of 11 cultural levers.

Emily Earl
Director, Research, KI Leader

Overview

Key findings

- A healthy, high-performing culture is much more than a nice-to-have for organizations. Cultural alignment among employees (the extent to which they understand, buy into and demonstrate the culture) has been shown to increase their performance. And their connectedness with the culture (the extent to which they identify with, care about and feel they belong within it) has been shown to significantly improve retention.

- Organizational culture — as experienced by employees — is more complex than Communications leaders would prefer. Employees often face dilemmas that require some decision making about how to behave in alignment with the ideal culture.

- These "cultural tensions" are likely created by the organization itself through conflicting priorities, leadership signals or incentives.

- Change is accelerating, but employees' capacity to support it is collapsing. In the past decade, the number of yearly organizational change initiatives has more than doubled, while employee willingness to support organizational changes has dropped by 40%. In an era of frequent disruptive change, leadership sees activating a unifying culture as more important than ever: both CCOs and CEOs now name it a top strategic priority.

- Rising anxiety over financial stability, work flexibility and sociopolitical division is affecting employees' emotional bandwidth and thus, their ability to also engage with organizational culture initiatives.

Recommendations

To make it easier for employees to behave in ways that align with organizational culture, CCOs should:

- **Identify and address internal cultural tensions** by diagnosing contradictions in the information ecosystem that create behavioral dilemmas in cultural values and expectations. Work across functions to conduct employee listening, spot tensions where possible and convene leadership to decide how to resolve tensions (e.g., by clarifying organizational priorities or providing clear guidance that helps employees navigate competing expectations).

- **Enable localized employee ownership** of the ideal organizational culture by empowering employees to reinforce desired behaviors through peer-led programs. For these programs (e.g., "culture ambassador" or "culture champion" initiatives, storytelling, mentorship), it can be particularly challenging to drive adoption amid a workforce fatigued with change. But this can be overcome by addressing barriers related to motivation, role clarity and visibility of impact.

- **Improve the consistency** of how employees experience organizational culture by sending targeted signals that reinforce ideal norms, values and/or behaviors. CCOs should identify which of the 11 cultural levers offer the greatest impact and opportunity to reinforce or correct "shared" experiences at their organizations.

Introduction

In the past decade, the number of organizational change initiatives each year has more than doubled, while employee willingness to support organizational changes has dropped from 74% to 44%. Ongoing fatigue from geopolitical instability and macroeconomic uncertainty makes it hard for employees to give attention to any less-than-critical, discretionary decisions at work. Culture initiatives risk being deprioritized if they feel disconnected from operational reality and detached from an employee's day-to-day job.

Culture is the set of behavioral norms and unwritten rules that shape how we interact with each other and get work done.

In this challenging environment, leaders know they must make the desired organizational culture feel relevant to day-to-day work, but also ensure that the culture supports the organization's strategic direction and identity. CCOs name "upholding an evolved organizational culture to keep employees engaged" as a top 5 most urgent question for 2025. CEOs list culture as one of the top 5 corporate actions they consider a strategic business priority for 2024/2025. But how to act on that priority is less clear: although business leaders agree that culture is critical to organizational success, it remains notoriously difficult to shape.

Employees tend to take their cultural cues more from team norms and unwritten expectations than from formal values statements. As values-based polarization and information skepticism are at an all-time high, it is particularly challenging today to manage employees' behaviors to align with leadership's vision of an ideal culture.

CCOs must treat behavior as a Communications challenge that requires identifying and removing behavioral barriers.

A workforce rife with polarization and skepticism nevertheless must remain productive. CCOs must empower employees to align their behaviors to a shared sense of purpose that cuts across personal differences and work to keep any division outside of the metaphorical workforce walls. This research outlines three actions CCOs can take to align employee behaviors to organizational culture:

- Address internal cultural tensions.

- Enable localized peer ownership of culture.

- Create shared experiences for employees.

Analysis

≫ Address internal cultural tensions

Especially in times of change, employees frequently experience internal "cultural tensions:" competing organizational priorities they don't know how to balance. Employees struggle to make trade-offs when their judgment — based on existing cultural norms — no longer applies. For example, long-standing norms around quality may clash with a new push for speed. Left unaddressed, this ambiguity undermines alignment and leaves opportunities for risky decision making.

Encountering cultural tensions intensifies the stress of change and can erode employee performance through indecision. CCOs can help by clarifying organizational priorities to reduce the ambiguity of unnecessary or unproductive tensions. They can also guide decision making and support employees in building their cultural judgment amid competing demands.

To address cultural tensions, CCOs first need visibility into the areas where employees are experiencing high rates of tension, confusion or ambivalence.

Conduct employee listening to diagnose cultural tensions

Effective employee listening reveals specific tensions that employees are facing. The downloadable tips below provide CCOs with qualitative and quantitative tactics to surface actionable cultural insights from across the organization.

When looking for cultural tensions, it is best to involve representatives from all relevant employee groups across major functions, business lines and geographies. You may want to prioritize certain roles or functions based on their importance to the transformation's success or the likely quality of their contributions. For example, lower-level leaders tend to have a good balance of strategic and operational perspectives, which helps them identify cultural tensions and brainstorm potential solutions. Discussion of some cultural tensions may be highly strategic and limited to top executives.

Choose one or more audience listening methodologies based on resource availability (such as time and budget):

Use quantitative surveys to achieve a broad understanding of the prevalence of different cultural tensions across employee groups. By inserting one question into an existing employee pulse survey, you can get a broad understanding of the prevalence of different cultural tensions across employee groups. We recommend the following quantitative data collection question:

- Sometimes organizational change can lead to cultural tensions or competing priorities that you don't know how to balance. In your recent experience with transformation initiative [X], have you experienced any of the following cultural tensions? Select all that apply.

  – Quality vs. speed (e.g., precision vs. timeliness)

  – Unity vs. diversity

  – Central vs. local focus (e.g., company vs. department focus)

  – Efficiency vs. innovation

  – Consistency vs. empowerment (e.g., fitting in vs. self-expression)

  – Compliance vs. risk taking

  – Commercial vs. people focus (e.g., financial goals vs. employee satisfaction)

  – Other; please tell us more

  – None of these

- Use qualitative interviews or focus groups of 12 to 15 employees to reach a deeper understanding of the reasons why employees feel tensions; the situations in which cultural tensions arise; who experiences tensions and how often; and how tensions affect employees' work and decisions. You will need a minimum of one hour per session and a way to capture notes from the conversations. A roundtable helps create a discussion-friendly environment. We recommend using the following qualitative discussion questions:

  – What prioritization decisions are you finding most difficult right now?

  – What did you do when faced with a decision where you didn't know what to prioritize?

  – What feels like the biggest change to the way you used to do things?

  – Do you feel like people have conflicting expectations of you? How does this affect your ability to make judgments and prioritize specific values?

Cultural tensions employee listening tactics

Convene leadership to decide how to resolve tensions

Once cultural tensions have been diagnosed, CCOs must work with other leaders to decide how to acknowledge the tension employees experience due to competing priorities and help them understand how to navigate those trade-offs.

Not all tensions require the same level of attention. Consider the example of "quality" versus "speed" as two organizational values creating a cultural tension:

- Is the tension arising because of a core change to business strategy, or

- Is it an area where employees have been receiving different messages from different leaders?

See Figure 1 for a cultural tension action planning framework that helps CCOs determine what to do about specific tensions by diagnosing how critical it is to organizational identity and strategy with simple yes/no prompts.

Organizations must offer clear and consistent guidance on what to prioritize, clarifying competing priorities and aligning on a unified, consistent message. Doing so helps reduce confusion and prevent misalignment during company transformation. AMRI shows one approach to figuring out a path to resolution.

Figure 1. Cultural tension action planning framework

Source: Gartner
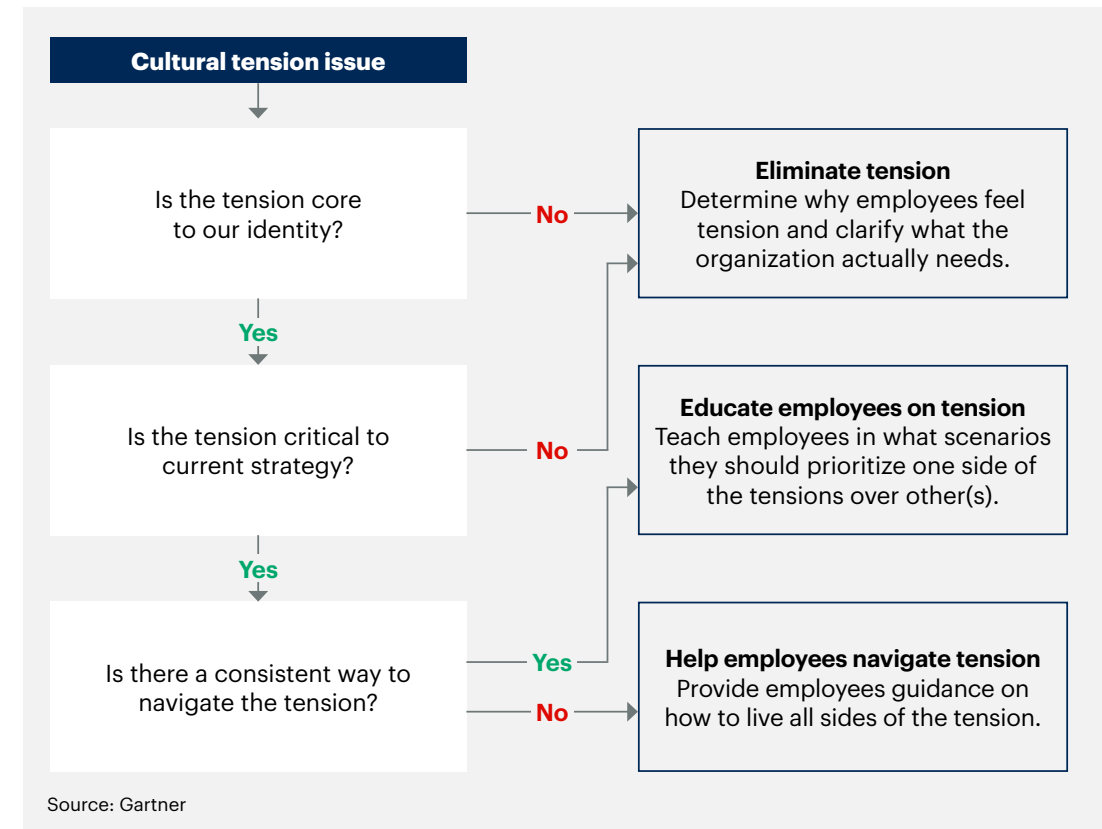
Case in point: AMRI's strategic trade-off workshop

Through a one-hour virtual training session, the Communications team teaches leaders to recognize cultural tensions and collects hundreds of examples of tensions that leaders identify. Communications then filters those examples to select the top 10 tensions leaders can address.

At a two-hour working session during AMRI's annual leadership conference, the top 100 leaders break into small groups to discuss each of the top 10 tensions. An outside consultant facilitates the session and provides a workbook with discussion questions and a model of strategic trade-offs. The model contains two poles that are opposing yet interdependent, so leaders must continually choose between them. Because each pole includes both benefits and negative repercussions, leaders must consider trade-offs when making a strategic choice to focus on one of the two poles (see Figure 2).
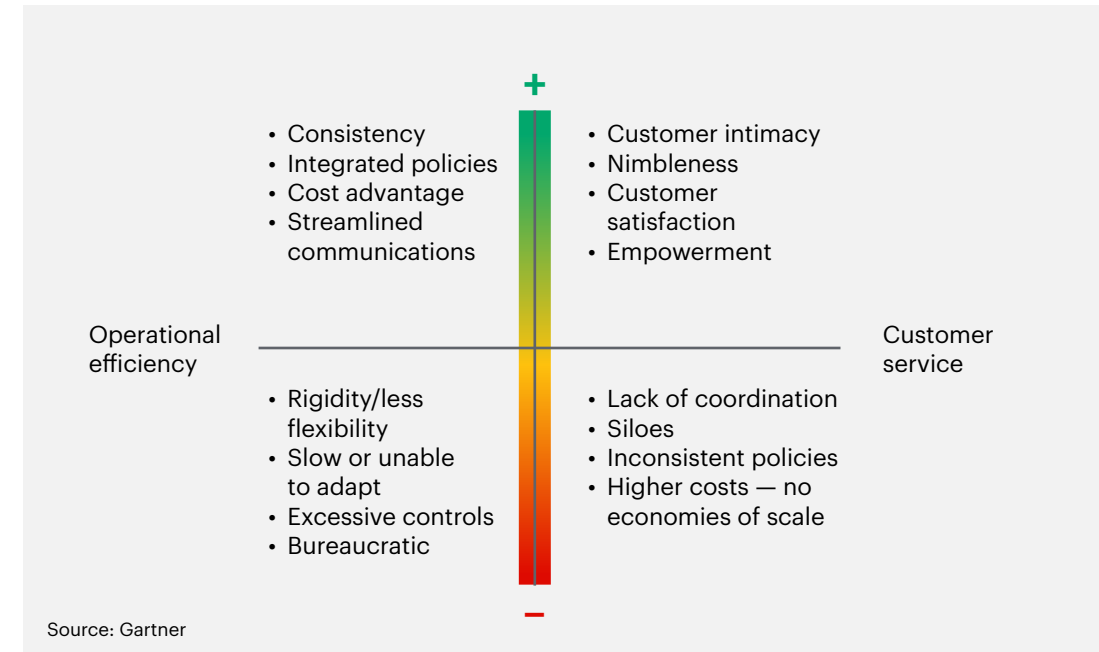
Figure 2. Model for evaluating cultural trade-offs

Source: Gartner

Leaders populate the two poles for their assigned cultural tension (e.g., "operational efficiency" on one side and "customer service" on the other). Then they identify the benefits and negative repercussions of focusing on each pole. Once completed, the model helps leaders visualize trade-offs that affect employee decision making. For example, a focus on operational efficiency results in greater consistency but reduced flexibility, while a focus on customer service results in greater customer intimacy but reduced coordination (see Figure 3).

Considering the risks of mismanaged trade-offs helps leaders identify indicators of cultural tensions, as well as actions they can take to reduce the negative impact. The model requires leaders to choose a pole and actively manage the consequences of that choice. Answering the question "What actions should we take to shift or reinforce our position?" leads to creative ideas for organizational investments and initiatives that can reduce the burden on employees.

Figure 3. Example of operational efficiency versus customer service

Operational efficiency / **Customer service**

+
- Consistency
- Integrated policies
- Cost advantage
- Streamlined communications

- Customer intimacy
- Nimbleness
- Customer satisfaction
- Empowerment

- Rigidity/less flexibility
- Slow or unable to adapt
- Excessive controls
- Bureaucratic

- Lack of coordination
- Siloes
- Inconsistent policies
- Higher costs — no economies of scale
−

Source: Gartner

》 Enable localized peer ownership of culture

In anxious times, individuals revert their trust to familiar, local networks — not corporate leadership. The organizational culture that employees experience is thus dictated by peer-to-peer behavior as much as top-down messaging. CCOs must empower employees to reinforce behaviors aligned with the desired organizational culture rather than rely only on formal communication channels to message about the desired culture. Implementing "culture ambassador" programs, "culture champion" initiatives and other peer-driven programs (e.g., storytelling, mentorship) can leverage employees as an organization's best advocates.

An ambassador program might work particularly well for companies looking to take a macro/microculture approach to organizational culture. With proper guidance, culture ambassadors can align local teams to broader organizational "macroculture" while simultaneously preserving team autonomy over their own microculture. The goal of such a culture ambassador program is to make space for team-defined behaviors to thrive under the broader umbrella of organizational macroculture.

If you're a Gartner client, get access to how Royal DSM used peer-led culture conversations to embed a new macroculture model within local team cultures during a major transition in 2020.

》 Bypass common culture ambassador program barriers

Implementing culture champion or ambassador programs can be challenging amid a polarized and fatigued workforce. As such, CCOs must identify employee motivations for program participation and work to remove the two common behavioral barriers that prevent ambassadors from remaining engaged:

- **The "motivation" barrier:** Ambassadors (and potential ambassadors) perceive the role to be time-consuming with few benefits, so they don't exert much extra effort.

- **The "knowledge" barrier:** Program objectives are not very clear, so ambassadors don't know how to contribute or get involved.

Table 2 describes four techniques CCOs and HR partners can use to remove behavioral obstacles to engaging culture champions or culture ambassadors in their roles.

Table 2: 4 ways to engage employee ambassadors and remove barriers

	Make it easy to contribute	Tap into social cues	Reward and recognize	Get leaders involved
How can you do it?	• Set clear goals for ambassadors. • Outline specific behaviors to help ambassadors achieve their goals. • Equip ambassadors with the tools required for effective contribution. • Narrow the scope of participation.	• Showcase endorsement for the program by passionate ambassadors. • Facilitate the sharing of peer stories.	• Provide ambassadors with a sense of exclusivity. • Showcase their efforts through company and peer recognition.	• Create opportunities to connect ambassadors with senior executives. • Coach executives on how to make the sessions interactive and engaging.
Why does it work?	Reduces ambassadors' burden of discretionary effort in role	Encourages ambassadors to model peer behavior	Appeals to ambassadors' motivational drivers	Instills ambassadors' confidence in the program

Source: Gartner

≫ Create shared experiences to build a shared reality

Some kind of consistency in "how things work around here" — in other words, a shared reality — is a required foundation for employees to find the commitment, capability and social cues necessary for behavior change at work. As such, it is critical for CCOs to create opportunities for employees to experience something consistent about organizational culture. This should be done whether or not they are physically located in the same space or segregated outside of the workplace by polarized media bubbles. But how are CCOs to know where and how consistency will have the greatest impact in the context of an organization's specific dynamics?

Organizational dynamics vary in terms of their impact on the culture and the ease with which they can be changed, but they all signal to employees what values and behaviors are appropriate and normal. When organizational priorities change, historical signals may not be aligned with the new desired culture. Some organizational dynamics may exacerbate the tension employees feel when making judgments about which cultural values to prioritize, and this makes decision making difficult and negatively impacts performance.

CCOs can act on these facts about organizational dynamics by identifying:

- What the enterprise might be doing that is sending inconsistent signals, and

- What the Communications team could do instead is send consistent signals about organizational culture.

Table 3 shows 11 different organizational levers that influence culture. Use these as inspiration to design employee experiences of a consistent culture at your organization. Consider either drawing on a lever where the organization's culture is already strong (e.g., if manager role modeling is already a strength, use it to teach new behaviors) or working backward from areas of weakness in culture and identifying the right lever to address it (e.g., values not well understood? Try a rewards and recognition program).

Table 3: Organizational levers that influence culture

Structures and processes	Formalized activities	Words and actions
Systems and procedures: Routine operational tasks that embed and reinforce norms	**Goals and measures:** Indicators of progress against cultural values and norms	**Communication:** Explicit messages about cultural values and norms, including stories about important events and people as well as statements about the organizational identity
Organizational structure: A system of work roles and responsibilities that facilitates cultural norms	**Rewards and recognition:** Incentives to make cultural norms more attractive	**Leadership behaviors:** Deliberate role modeling, teaching and coaching on how to act in line with cultural values; how leaders allocate resources and react to critical incidents (which provides an implicit signal of values)
Rules and policies: Explicit principles governing conduct in line with cultural values	**Training and development:** Instruction in concepts and behaviors tied to cultural values	**Ceremonies and events:** Ritualized activities and observances of key cultural values
Physical environment: Design of buildings and digital workspaces to signal key values and facilitate cultural norms	**Selection and onboarding:** The processes by which potential new members of the organization are screened for suitability and taught about cultural values and norms	

Source: Gartner

Consider these examples of how CCOs can leverage specific levers to create consistent employee experiences of a shared organizational culture at the local level:

- **Communication:** Peer stories have the power to engage employees on an emotional level. CCOs can support the sourcing and crafting of employee stories that reflect grounded examples of key aspects of organizational culture.

- **Rewards and recognition:** CCOs can promote peer recognition programs where employees nominate one another for public accolades based on witnessed behavior that aligns with organizational culture (e.g., a specific organizational value).

- **Physical environment:** CCOs can advise corporate real estate, HR and/or IT about how spaces (or digital platforms) could be designed to promote cultural values (e.g., collaboration) and encourage culture-aligned behavior (e.g., sharing customer wins).

- **Ceremonies and events:** CCOs can leverage ceremonies and events to shake up a stagnant culture to spark change. Participants in a ritualistic ceremony or event (e.g., an awards ceremony) experience a special shared sense of camaraderie amid ambiguity called a "liminal zone," in which typical hierarchies are broken down and individuals temporarily see one another outside of regular norms and structures.

Actionable, objective insight

Explore these additional complimentary resources and tools for Communications leaders:

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eBook

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