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Why We Can't Shift the Dial on Institutional Culture. By Nagina Khan

Posted on May 11, 2026 by nwelch

When long-term staff become part of the furniture

I often hear the same frustration: 'why can't we change the culture, no matter how many initiatives we launch?' New values are drafted, consultants are brought in, workshops delivered but day-to-day reality barely shifts.

Often, the answer is in plain sight: those who have been there longest quietly shape the culture the most, not always in ways that help the organisation evolve. Over years or decades, people accumulate informal authority. They know which rules matter, which can be ignored and employees watch them closely, learning 'how things really work.'

As organisational culture scholar Edgar H. Schein explains, culture is reinforced through shared assumptions and everyday behaviours, especially those modelled by influential insiders. Employees follow what experienced colleagues do, not what documents say.

When familiarity becomes immovable

Long-serving staff carry institutional memory and provide continuity, stabilising organisations during change. But over time, familiarity can become permanence. Roles become identities, behaviours go unchallenged and individuals become part of the organisational landscape. Influential insiders acting as they always have signal: 'the new culture might be talked about, but the old one still runs the show.'

Organisational theorist Rosabeth Moss Kanter notes that resistance often comes from those most successful under the current system. The very structures and behaviours enabling their success are often what change initiatives aim to reshape.

The problem isn't tenure, it's unchecked influence

Resistance is rarely malicious it often reflects comfort with familiar patterns. Longevity isn't the issue; unexamined influence is. Common patterns include:

- Gatekeeping knowledge: 'We tried that before' blocks innovation.
- Normalising mediocrity: Outdated practices persist because challenging them feels uncomfortable.
- Informal power structures: Influence shifts from formal leadership to those who 'know how things work.'
- Resistance as wisdom: Pushback is framed as experience, even when it blocks change.

These behaviours don't just persist; they define the culture.

Why leadership struggles to act

Leaders see these dynamics but feel stuck. Addressing them risks morale issues, grievances, or reputational fallout. Dependency on long-serving staff and misplaced loyalty further complicate action. As a result, organisations layer new initiatives atop old behaviours, wondering why nothing changes.

Culture change doesn't fail; it gets absorbed

Change efforts rarely fail outright they get absorbed. Workshops happen, new language is introduced, posters go up but underlying norms, shaped by long-standing behaviours, remain. Organisations learn to 'talk' differently without 'being' different.

Scholars such as Meyer, John W. and Rowan, Brian describe this as decoupling: formal structures change, but everyday practices remain. Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell describe how organisations often conform to widely accepted management practices for legitimacy, even when those practices are not deeply implemented.

The result is a form of symbolic compliance in which the organisation appears aligned with new expectations while internal routines remain stable. Michael Beer and Nitin Nohria note that change programmes frequently emphasise communication and training while failing to address the structural conditions that sustain existing behaviours.

Empirical research shows initiatives often generate surface-level adjustments, not deep behavioural shifts, especially when existing power structures persist. With time, employees signal compliance without expecting substantive change, creating 'change fatigue.'

Culture follows behaviour, not messaging

Culture is shaped by behaviour, not workshops or values statements. If credible insiders continue acting according to old norms, the organisation follows them. John P. Kotter emphasises that transformation depends on visible behavioural shifts from influential figures. Without these, change efforts stall.

What actually moves the dial

Real cultural change requires focusing on people and behaviours, not programmes:

Re-examine influence, not tenure: Who really shapes day-to-day decisions?

- Make the implicit explicit: Challenge 'how things are done' with curiosity.

- Hold everyone to the same standard: Longevity should raise, not lower, expectations.
- Address behaviour early and directly: Avoiding difficult conversations allows unhelpful norms to calcify.
- Value contribution over comfort: Cultural health depends on actions, not years served.

A necessary discomfort

Shifting culture often means confronting a difficult reality: some of the biggest barriers are also the most familiar faces. Influence must be recognised, expectations clarified, and accountability applied. Many experienced employees adapt well when the path forward is clear. Without clarity, even well-intentioned individuals anchor the organisation to the past and culture change quietly stalls, not because people refuse to change but because the most influential behaviours never do.

Final thoughts

Organisations don’t drift into strong cultures; they maintain them. Unchallenged behaviours persist and become the culture itself. Shifting the dial requires looking beyond strategies to the everyday dynamics that truly shape how work gets done. Sometimes, the hardest thing to move isn’t the system, it’s the ‘furniture.’

Author



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Nagina is a Senior Clinical Research Fellow at the University of Kent’s Centre for Health Services Studies (CHSS). She has extensive experience working in multidisciplinary teams and contributing to research outputs across primary care, mental health and health inequalities. Dr. Khan has worked in healthcare institutions as a registered nurse and held doctoral and postdoctoral research positions at the University of Oxford, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH, Canada) and the NIHR School for Primary Care Research, University of Manchester. Her work focuses on research inclusion, patient perspectives, culturally sensitive interventions and improving equity in healthcare systems globally.

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