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## Defining, Assessing, and Improving: A Standardized Approach to Organizational Workplace Culture

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### Abstract

Evolving changes to the modern U.S. workplace have resulted in increased difficulties for businesses and their leaders to meet the needs of their employees and retain top-tier talent. Today's employees are consistently demanding a positive, supportive workplace culture; yet it is difficult to define or assess workplace culture in order to make needed improvements. In order to de-mystify organizational workplace culture, 12 distinct components of workplace culture have been identified and defined. These components, labeled as domains, have varying degrees of weight and interdependency that paint a clear picture of what organizational elements derive workplace culture. Using quantitative, qualitative, and subjective assessments, these domains of workplace culture can be investigated and analyzed, leading to an improved ability for organizations and their leaders in identifying and implementing targeted workplace culture improvement strategies.

### Keywords

organizational behavior, workplace culture

## 1. Introduction

The concept of an organizational workplace culture is difficult to describe for any U.S. business organization. While most employees will state that a positive workplace culture is significantly valued or even required, it is difficult to accurately identify what specific elements are necessary in order to create and sustain a positive workplace culture. Complicating this are external factors that have resulted in shifting employee expectations from 2018 and beyond. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic forced business organizations to make extreme changes to provide safe employee working

conditions as the United States experienced unprecedented rates of unemployment and voluntary employee turnover (Andre, 2025). Throughout the same years, the world experienced rapid technological advancements and increased rates of younger Millennial and Gen Z workers entering the professional workspace, changing the way employees do (and expect to do) work (Page & Schoder, 2019).

With these recent changes, it's become more difficult for U.S. businesses to keep up and continuously adapt to meet the needs of their workforce. Most organizational norms, policies, pro-

cedures, and employee benefits that worked for organizations 20, 10, or even 5 years ago are no longer effective (Lee et al., 2022). More difficult still, the typical U.S. employee in 2024 demands more from the organizations they work for (“The Great Resignation’s ripple effects: reshaping workforce dynamics and business strategies,” 2024). They expect modernized changes in the way they work through technological advancements, flexible schedules, and remote work time. They expect competitive salaries, increased paid time off allotments, and time off benefits like paid parental leave. They expect their leaders to be more effective; to have leaders that support and encourage them. More than anything, modern employees expect positive, supportive workplace cultures in which they feel included, empowered, and proud of their organizations. Lapses in these areas, especially workplace culture, are likely to lead to continuously increasing voluntary employee turnover and subsequent disruptions to organizational productivity.

## 2. What is Workplace Culture?

Though it’s clear that modern-day U.S. employees are expecting more from their organizations in terms of workplace culture, it isn’t easy for organizations to meet those expectations. Every organization’s workplace culture is enigmatic; a tangled web of characteristics that impact the overall culture in multiple, often unpredictable, ways (Hastwell, 2025). To complicate the subject of workplace culture even further, there are very few identifiable “best practices” that work well for every business organization in every U.S. industry. What works well for one organization in one industry may be ineffective or even detrimental for a different organization, even in the same industry.

With that said, how do organizations tackle the concept of workplace culture? How do they make effective improvements in this category to meet the growing expectations of their workforce? The answers are anything but simple, but that doesn’t make the concept a lost cause. Fortunately, a structured methodological approach to workplace culture is effective in defining, identifying, and improving aspects of workplace culture.

Let’s start with defining workplace culture in a general sense. Workplace culture is the character and personality of an organization; the sum of attitudes, norms, values, beliefs, and traditions in the workplace (Keefe, 2024). As these aspects are owned and driven by organizational leaders (Page & Schoder, 2019), a best definition of workplace culture is: the sum of organizational norms, values, and beliefs of an organization as impacted by organizational leaders. While this definition of workplace culture doesn’t provide absolute clarity, it does provide a good starting base.

## 3. Domains of Workplace Culture

Figure 1 outlines 12 distinct domains of workplace culture, identified as the major contributing aspects of any workplace culture in any business organization and industry. The domains have different “weight” depending on the type of organization and industry, and have various levels of interdependency with other domains. For example, an organization that has high levels of employee organizational pride will likely demonstrate a more positive organizational reputation (and vice versa). However, the domain of relationships with peers may only marginally (or not at all) impact the domain of learning and advancement opportunities. To better understand these domains of workplace culture, summarizations are provided below.

### Trust and Support

The domain of trust and support encompasses how employees feel they are treated (as workers) by their organization and organizational leaders. Given the rapid changes in U.S. industries over the last two decades, most modern-day U.S. employees highly value the ability to complete their work in innovative ways free of micromanaging or without destructive levels of oversight that inhibit their creativity. More simply put, employees want to be trusted as individuals to effectively complete their work and receive support from their organizations as they complete their daily responsibilities (Patton, 2023).

Figure 1: Domains of Workplace Culture



### Respect and Fairness

Similar to the trust and support domain, the respect and fairness domain outlines how employees feel they are treated as people by their organizations and organizational leaders. Modern-day employees have placed increased value on being treated fairly and respectfully as individuals (Sepälä & McNichols, 2022). Aspects of bias and favoritism in the workplace such as sexism and hazing, while never “okay” to start with, are now absolutely unacceptable instead of something employees have to deal with until they climb the “corporate ladder” high enough. Furthermore, while a point of contention with older generations of workers, younger workers less frequently demonstrate a willingness to earn respect from their peers and leaders- expecting that respect should be automatic and not impacted by educational/vocational backgrounds, longevity, age, or other factors (Perna, 2021).

### Workplace Safety and Inclusivity

Workplace safety and inclusivity, while hardly mentioned in organizations 25 years ago, are now

at the forefront of employees’ minds when forming attitudes of their organization’s workplace culture. While every job carries its own set of physical health risks, employees expect that their organizations work to mitigate not only physical, but emotional health hazards in the workplace (U.S. Surgeon General Releases New Framework for Mental Health & Well-Being in the Workplace, 2022). Modern-day employees expect that their workplaces are diverse, equitable, and most importantly, inclusive- workplaces that actively build and maintain a healthy, diverse, and empowering environment that values them for all aspects of their demographics, backgrounds, and expertise (Lewis, 2022).

### Alignment and Accountability

The alignment and accountability domain is perhaps the simplest of the domains to understand, yet the hardest to make positive changes in. This domain asks: does the organization and its leaders do what they say they will do? Are the organization’s mission, vision, and core values evident in the work being produced and actions of the

organization? When mistakes happen, does the organization and its leaders own and hold themselves accountable for those mistakes (publicly if necessary)? The answers to those questions significantly impact employee perceptions of the organization, and lapses in this domain can easily hinder an organization's ability to build and maintain a positive, supportive workplace culture (Hastwell, 2025).

### **Relationships with Peers**

Unsurprisingly, relationships with peers can make or break employee perceptions of their organizational workplace culture (Seppälä & McNichols, 2022). While it's not necessary for employees to become personal friends with everyone in their workplace, few (if any) employees view their work as sustainable if they find themselves constantly bickering with or being treated negatively by peers they perceive as untrustworthy and unreliable. More simply put, a "hostile work environment" is a "no-go" work environment.

### **Relationships with Leaders**

By far, this domain carries the most weight of all the workplace culture domains. Employee satisfaction, retention, and productivity rates are vastly more dependent on relationships with leaders and effective leadership than anything else. The moniker "employees don't leave jobs, they leave bad bosses" rings a bit of truth in this domain as modern-day employees expect that their leaders respect them, communicate effectively, and work to find ways to continuously support and uplift them (Narayanan et al., 2019).

### **Leadership Attributes**

Very similar to the relationships with leaders domain, the leadership attributes domain focuses on how effective organizational leaders are in their roles. Gone are the days (if they ever truly existed at all), where managers can get away with hiding in their offices, propping their feet up on their desks, and occasionally giving guidance or discipline when needed. Similarly, more and more modern-day employees are simply refusing to work for managers that belittle them and actively make their work responsibilities more diffi-

cult than they already would be. While it is never the job of a manager to make their employees happy, effective leadership is now a centralized requirement of managerial responsibilities (at least in the eyes of employees). Organizational leaders need to learn and consistently demonstrate effective skills and attributes, such as authenticity, positive executive presence, and emotional intelligence in order to motivate and empower their employees (Heimann, 2020).

### **Learning and Advancement Opportunities**

While this domain may not present as immediately obvious in regards to workplace culture, aspects of continuous learning and professional development are crucial for organizations in providing a positive, supportive workplace culture. While there will always be certain employees who have no interest in professional development or continuous training ("let me just do my job and go home"), younger generations of workers are demonstrating an increasing desire for organization-provided professional development and training (Moore & Training, 2023). This isn't limited to job-specific training (such as enhanced network security training for an IT specialist), but applies to "soft" or secondary skills as well (leadership development, communication training, secondary language skills, etc.). This may be due to the shrinking value of (yet increasing demand for) minimum post-secondary education job requirements, but modern-day workers appear to more often value and show interest in continuous professional development and training. And, they expect that those opportunities are consistently provided by their organization.

### **Organizational Pride**

Pride (or lack thereof), for better or worse can significantly impact employee perceptions of their organization. Though the existence or absence of pride in their organizations can be the result of a subconscious reflex for employees, it is an aspect of workplace culture that organizations should value and pay attention to. Employees who take pride in their organizations are not only more likely to be retained at their organization, they are more likely to produce excellent-level work in pro-

ductive, meaningful ways as well as recommend their organization as a good place to work to their friends and peers (Hastwell, 2025). Additionally, a strong presence of organizational pride in an organization can be infectious- enhancing employee solidarity, unification, and teamwork that continuously benefits the organization (Seppälä & McNichols, 2022).

Just as employee pride in their organizations impact workplace culture, organizational pride in employees equally impacts workplace culture. Organizations who make time and effort to appreciate and recognize their employees, publicly and otherwise, are more likely to have employees who take pride in the organization. Organizations who do not make these efforts are more likely to have low or non-existent amounts of employees who take pride in the organization.

### **Organizational Reputation**

Perhaps a surprising domain of workplace culture, an organization's reputation impacts multiple aspects of workplace culture. An organization with a positive reputation, both from within and outside of the organization, can help positively motivate employees and work in a synergistic manner with organizational pride. Conversely, a negative internal and/or external organizational reputation will have ripple effects that inhibit employee recruitment, retention, relationships, and productivity (Hastwell, 2025).

### **Employee Benefits**

Let's first address the elephant in the room when speaking about employee benefits: employee salary/pay. Little to no evidence concretely supports that increased employee pay (above competitive market standards) equals increased satisfaction and retention (Sullivan, 2014) as employees appear more likely to stay at jobs if they are underpaid as long as they perceive their work as meaningful and have supportive, positive workplace cultures (Hu & Hirsh, 2017). However, it is important for employee pay to be competitive (in deference to the requirements of the job, as well as in deference to similar positions in the industry and regional location). Competitive pay, in this aspect, does thus impact workplace culture,

as noncompetitive pay will quickly and loudly signal to employees that their organization does not value them (Chamberlain, 2017). And, more than likely, employees who feel undervalued by their organization will continuously exhibit behaviors that negatively impact the workplace culture (negative peer-to-peer and/or leader-follower relationships, reduced organizational pride, etc.). This aspect and perception of being valued by an organization is consistent through other areas of employee benefits: paid time off, retirement, healthcare packages, and flexible working schedules. Weaknesses in these areas (such as less than 120 hours of annual vacation time/less than 200 combined hours of annual time off, no paid parental leave benefits, weak retirement matching rates of 3% or less, costly healthcare packages, etc.) will correlate with employee perceptions of being undervalued. Additionally, weaknesses in paid time off benefits and healthcare packages negatively impact employee health and resilience, leading to increased rates of burnout, decreased productivity, and decreased satisfaction (Davison & Blackburn, 2023).

It is worth noting that it isn't easy for organizations to make improvements in this domain. Providing excellent employee benefits is costly for an organization, and this investment may seem detrimental to the organization's financial health. However, an investment in employee benefits is not a risky investment. Let's remind ourselves that the costs of employee turnover have significant tangible and intangible effects- costing the organizations thousands of dollars every year to recruit, hire, and train new employees while having negative effects in organizational pride, peer-to-peer relationships, and relationships with leaders (Bengfort, 2024). At the end of the day, it's a simple calculus: investing in excellent employee benefits equals improved workplace culture, equals improved employee satisfaction and retention, equals decreased employee turnover and costs associated with employee turnover.

### **Annual Employee Turnover**

Annual employee turnover is a cyclical domain. Increased employee turnover weakens the orga-

nization's workplace culture, just as weaknesses in workplace culture contribute to increased employee turnover. And round and round we go, until there's hardly anything left.

We've talked about how weaknesses in workplace culture contribute to increased employee turnover, but let's describe the effect of increased turnover on workplace culture. In any organization, it is natural for employees to form some positive relationships with other employees in the workplace. When an employee leaves the organization and that positive working relationship is no longer present, employees often feel as if they've lost a lifeline. Work, at least temporarily, isn't as enjoyable or fulfilling as it was when they had those positive relationships (Korducki, 2023). As more and more employees leave the organization and those positive working relationships disappear, negative emotions towards the organizations for the employees left behind start to build. Even if they themselves never noticed or experienced them before, they start to see and experience the reasons that caused other employees to leave. They start to speak out, to their peers and possibly their leaders, about all the reasons why the organization is "bad" and employees leave for employment elsewhere. If they don't feel heard, and if those reasons or problems contributing to turnover aren't addressed (and addressed rather quickly), the resentment towards the organization builds significantly over time. Those employees form less positive working relationships with others (out of concern they're going to leave soon anyways), take less pride in the organization, and are less productive until they themselves eventually leave the organization too. It's a spiraling situation that has only one clear solution: improve workplace culture.

It is also worth noting that not all types of employee turnover have the negative effects described above. Inevitably, employees age and retire. Changes in family situations, such as moving to a different regional location, can contribute to employee turnover that is not based on anything wrong with the organization and its culture. Furthermore, not all employee turnover is voluntary. Terminating employees, while seemingly a nega-

tive thing, is healthy when utilized with employees who are not good fits for the organization and consistently violate policies and procedures. Employee turnover is inevitable to a certain extent. But as long as the turnover rates are nearly entirely due to retirements, turnover due to external factors, and justifiable terminations, the turnover will not detrimentally affect the workplace culture.

#### 4. Welcome to the Matrix

Now that we've defined and explored what it is that makes up a workplace culture, there's more good news: the 12 domains are quantifiable. Using a developed rubric and different modes of assessment, all 12 workplace culture domains can be scored. The sums of these scores derive an overall score of the workplace culture. Dubbed the "Workplace Culture Matrix," this in-depth workplace culture assessment is a standardized assessment composed of quantitative, qualitative, and subjective measurements that can apply to any organization in any U.S. business industry.

The quantitative component of the matrix assessment is made up of 24 quantitative survey questions with binary categorical answer options (agree/disagree, yes/no, etc.) or four categorical answer options (such as always, frequently, sometimes, or never). The survey questions can be administered in a standalone employee survey or combined with a larger employee engagement survey, though only the 24 identified questions will be utilized for the workplace culture matrix assessment. The quantitative data will be analyzed via frequency testing and correlation testing as relevant. The qualitative component of the matrix assessment is composed of 10 open-ended interview questions utilized in one-on-one interviews (virtual utilizing Zoom or other virtual meeting options). 10 to 12 employees will be interviewed on a volunteer basis, in which their demographic information will be kept confidential to protect privacy and anonymity. Utilizing interview transcripts, the qualitative data will be analyzed via Braun and Clarke, 2006's thematic analysis technique using inductive line-by-line and values coding to determine relevant themes used for the qualitative component of the matrix assessment. The

subjective component of the matrix assessment obtains 49 pieces of documented evidence from the organization to analyze 28 elements of workplace culture in a non-biased manner. Supportive evidence (or lack thereof) collected from the organization is compared and contrasted against industry-specific standards, comparable organizations inside and outside of the industry, and best practices identified in current evidence and literature. The component, while conducted in a non-biased manner, is named subjective rather than objective due to the component's dependency on the assessor's individual knowledge and conclusions. The evidence collected within all three components, when analyzed, provide insight into the current state of the 12 domains of workplace culture within an organization.

For example, questions such as "I am treated fairly by my leaders and organization" with agree/disagree answer options in an employee survey will provide some quantitative insight in the respect and fairness domain of workplace culture. An open-ended interview question such as "How would you describe or characterize the working relationships you have with your peers?" will provide some qualitative insight in the relationships with peers domain of workplace culture. Identifying evidence of organizational programs/events designed to appreciate employees will provide some non-biased, subjective insight in the organizational pride domain of workplace culture. Information collected from the quantitative, qualitative, and subjective measurements of the assessment are then analyzed and used to score each domain of an organization's workplace culture. In turn, the domain scores are used to determine a cumulative score of an organization's workplace culture complete with: green flags (keep doing with no or minimal changes to sustain a positive element of workplace culture), yellow flags (change and improve within a year to improve workplace culture), and red flags (change and improve within 3-6 months to significantly improve workplace culture).

As stated above, some identified domains of workplace culture have differing weights and degrees or interdependency with other domains. For ex-

ample, the domain of organizational reputation, while significant enough to be identified as domain of workplace culture, has the least amount of weight compared to the other domains. As such, only three matrix assessment elements are assigned to measure this domain. The three matrix assessment elements, once complete, will provide a score for the organizational reputation domain that will impact the overall workplace culture score. As there are fewer assessment elements for this domain in comparison to other domains, a significantly high or low score for this domain would minimally impact the overall workplace culture score in comparison to more highly weighted domains (such as the leadership attributes domain which is measured with eight matrix assessment elements). Additionally, some matrix assessment elements overlap between multiple domains, meaning that the same assessment element is scored multiple times across assigned domains. Thus, the utilization of developed matrix assessment elements themselves will account for the specific weights and interdependency of the identified domains of workplace culture, in which their specific scores will impact the overall workplace culture score accordingly.

The matrix assessment-provided cumulative score of an organization's workplace culture is then aligned with one of four categories of workplace culture: excellent workplace culture, positive and supportive workplace culture, negative and unsupportive workplace culture, and toxic workplace culture. The cumulative score may also place an organization in one of the three "grey areas" between the categories, in which a small change in either direction can push the organizational culture into a different category. The categories of workplace culture of defined and further explained below.

### **Excellent Workplace Culture**

An excellent workplace culture is a workplace culture that goes above and beyond regarding the elements that make up a positive, supportive workplace culture. An overwhelming majority of employees feel supported, empowered, and trusted by their organization and leaders to complete

their work in innovative ways. Employees feel safe (physically and emotionally) and included in their workplace, and have positive relationships with all or nearly all of their peers and leaders. Employees are offered strong benefits (competitive pay, time off, retirement, medical packages), and are given opportunities to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities through organizational mentorship programs, training and educational opportunities, and opportunities to move linearly or laterally into new positions that interest them. The organization averages an annual turnover rate of 7% or less, with approximately 50% of that turnover being voluntary.

### **Positive, Supportive Workplace Culture**

A positive, supportive workplace culture is a workplace culture that maintains strong elements of positivity and support, but does not go above and beyond regarding these elements. A majority of employees feel supported, empowered, and trusted by their organization and leaders to complete their work, but may not often be empowered to complete work in innovative ways. Employees feel safe (physically and emotionally) and included in their workplace, and have positive relationships with most of their peers and leaders. Employees are offered good benefits (competitive pay, time off, retirement, medical packages) that are stronger than the majority of other comparable organizations but not all, and are given at least some opportunities to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities through organizational mentorship programs, training and educational opportunities, and opportunities to move linearly or laterally into new positions that interest them. There may be some existing elements of favoritism, unfairness, and/or disrespect in the organization, but not enough to damage the organization's overall reputation. The organization averages an annual turnover rate of 8- 13%, with approximately 50-65% of that turnover being voluntary.

### **Negative, Unsupportive Workplace Culture**

A negative, unsupportive workplace culture is a workplace culture that has some attributes of positivity and support, but is overshadowed by majority attributes of negativity, lacking trust, and

lack of support. A majority of employees feel that they are not supported, empowered, or trusted to do their work in innovative ways, and some may feel that are not supported or trusted to complete their work at all. Employees may feel safe physically in their workplace, but often report feeling a lack of emotional safety and inclusivity. Employees report a relatively equal balance of positive and negative relationships with their peers and leaders. Employees are offered subpar benefits (competitive/non-competitive pay, time off, retirement, medical packages) that are weaker than most, but not all, comparable organizations. Few employees are given opportunities to learn new skills or take on new responsibilities through organizational programs (mentorship, training and education, and opportunities for advancement), which are impacted by elements of favoritism, bias, and disrespect. The organization overall maintains a reputation of a "bad" workplace culture, with 15-30% of employees reporting the existence of a toxic workplace culture. The organization maintains an annual turnover rate of 14- 22%, with approximately 65- 80% of turnover being voluntary.

### **Toxic Workplace Culture**

A toxic workplace culture is a workplace culture that has no visible elements of positivity or support. Most employees feel they are not trusted to do their work, and are often disrespected, micro-managed, and/or unsupported in carrying work responsibilities that often extend beyond their job descriptions. Some employees may not feel safe physically in their workspace, and most report feeling a lack of emotional safety and inclusivity. Employees report that most relationships with peers and managers are negative, and often experience instances of workplace bullying and incivility. Employees are offered weak benefits (non-competitive pay, limited time off, weak retirement packages, weak medical packages) that are weaker than all or mostly all other comparable organizations. Elements of favoritism, disrespect, and lacking trust are extremely evident among the organization, and few employees are offered opportunities to gain new skills and take on new

responsibilities through organizational programs (mentorship, training and education, and opportunities for advancement). The organization likely has elements of bias or discrimination towards employees on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity or orientation, age, religious affiliation, country of origin, disability status, or veteran status. The organization overall maintains a reputation of a “bad” workplace culture, with 30% or more of employees reporting the existence of a toxic workplace culture. The organization maintains an annual turnover rate of 23% or higher, with approximately 80- 90% of turnover being voluntary.

## 5. Putting it all Together: Why it Matters

As said above, an organizational workplace culture is an enigmatic web, impacted by several workplace characteristics. Addressing and improving aspects of workplace culture can seem a daunting task. However, by utilizing the workplace culture matrix, it is possible for organizations to measure and identify strengths and weaknesses within the 12 domains of their workplace culture in an organized, standardized manner. In doing so, organizations then have opportunities to improve their workplace culture and thus improve employee satisfaction and retention rates, productivity and revenue, and overall internal operations.

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