

Culture Shift: Aligning values and behaviours in UK organisations

Executive summary

A recent large-scale survey by Nottingham Business School at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) reveals a significant disconnect between the stated values and actual behaviours within UK organisations.

This misalignment undermines employee engagement, inclusivity, ethical practices, and performance. This white paper integrates the findings of the NTU study with other leading academic and industry research to explore the implications of cultural misalignment and outline evidence-based strategies for fostering a coherent organisational culture.

Understanding the cultural disconnect

The NTU survey (Whysall et al., 2025), involving over 1,170 managers and employees across various sectors, reported:

- **Only 18% of employees believe their organisation's stated values or external image align closely with actual workplace culture.**

- **25% say their leaders' behaviour contradicts publicly stated values.**
- **49% feel that day-to-day behaviours do not reflect diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) policies.**
- **38% believe their organisation's culture fails to promote wellbeing, and 31% feel it does not promote ethical decision-making.**

These findings align with earlier research by Schein (2010), who noted that culture is often described by leaders but rarely enacted unless reinforced behaviourally. Similarly, the CIPD (2020) highlighted that cultural disconnects erode trust and reduce the effectiveness of

organisational policies on inclusion and engagement.

The importance of behavioural alignment

Organisational culture is not defined solely by mission statements or policy documents but by behaviours, norms, and unwritten rules (Schein & Schein, 2017). As Whysall et al. (2025)

argue, **"Writing mission statements, creating sets of corporate values, policies and procedures does not influence or reflect culture unless these aspirations are embedded into behaviours."**

Without behavioural alignment:

- Employee trust and engagement decline (Gallup, 2023).
- DEI efforts lack credibility (Thomas et al., 2022).
- Ethical decision-making becomes inconsistent (Kaptein, 2008).
- Strategic goals fail to materialise (Denison, 2000).

Evidenced-based strategies for cultural realignment

Leadership modelling

Research shows that leadership behaviour significantly influences cultural norms (Yukl, 2013). Leaders must visibly and consistently demonstrate the values they want to embed. Microsoft's culture shift under Satya Nadella offers a high-profile example, where leadership modelling around collaboration and learning helped transform internal dynamics (George, 2016).

Employee Involvement

Employee voice and participation are essential to sustainable culture change (Detert & Burris, 2007). Engaging staff in co-creating values

and identifying gaps creates ownership and psychological safety.

Integration of policy into practice

DEI, wellbeing, and ethics policies must be translated into practical, measurable behaviours. According to a McKinsey (2020) study, companies that take a behaviour-first approach to inclusion see higher employee retention and engagement.

Ongoing assessment and feedback loops

Culture is dynamic. Regular cultural diagnostics (e.g. Denison Culture Model) and employee feedback mechanisms enable continuous alignment and adjustment (Denison, 2000; Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

Case studies



Aetna: Embedding ethical practices

Facing cultural fragmentation, Aetna redefined its organisational values and implemented leader-led ethical engagement training. This resulted in improved employee morale and measurable improvements in ethical reporting (Kaptein, 2008).



Microsoft: Culture of learning

Microsoft's cultural pivot from internal competition to collaboration and learning is credited with reinvigorating innovation and engagement. This involved leadership development, revised behavioural expectations, and new learning incentives (George, 2016).



Volvo IT: Sustained culture change

Volvo IT spent over a decade aligning leadership behaviours with strategic and cultural goals. Their model emphasised behavioural coaching and employee-led initiatives to embed new ways of working (SweetRush, 2022).

Conclusion

Cultural misalignment remains one of the most pressing challenges facing UK organisations in 2025. The NTU study affirms a widespread gap between values and behaviours, echoing findings from decades of organisational research. By combining leadership alignment, employee involvement, policy integration, and continuous learning,

organisations can close this gap and build a culture that is truly lived, not just stated.

Let's talk about making culture change work for your business

If you'd like to explore how our practical, people-first approach can help shape your business culture, we'd love to chat.

Get in touch with one of our organisational development specialists for an initial conversation:

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