mip
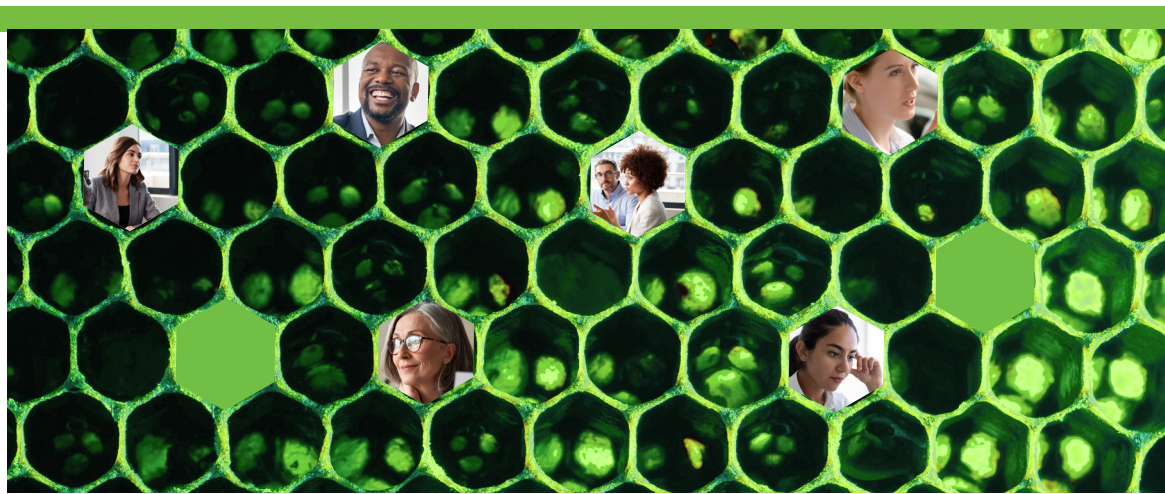## Managers In Partnership

Organisational culture –
creating a healthy workplace

A guide for Managers in Partnership representatives and members

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#managersmatter

About this guide

MiP has produced a series of guides for MiP members. They are intended for MiP members as managers, representatives, and individuals.

The guides are being produced as a series to make the connections between them and allow space for each to be sufficiently explored.

The guides are intended as an introduction to each topic including an overview of key concepts. They will provide signposts to frameworks, resources, and sources of information and advice.

As well as being of practical use in the workplace, it is hoped they will stimulate conversations – both informal and structured – about the issues involved.

Organisational culture in the NHS

- Staff are the NHS's greatest asset and its most precious resource. But a **number of challenges** are taking a significant toll on the workforce.

- There is a widespread view that **systemic change** is needed to enable a more compassionate culture in the NHS. This view has evolved in response to evidence of the challenges faced by NHS staff.

- The King's Fund cites severe **workforce pressures**, including large numbers of staff vacancies. Surveys have shown that staff experiences of working in the NHS can be extremely negative.

- For example, in the **2023 NHS staff survey** (England), over 41 per cent of NHS staff reported feeling unwell as a result of work-related stress in the previous 12 months, over 10 per cent said they had experienced bullying or harassment from managers and 18 per cent from other colleagues.

- These experiences shape and are directly affected by the culture in which staff work on a daily basis. They include inequalities between black and minority ethnic and white staff.

- The Health and Social care staff experience report of 2023 for Scotland found not all staff felt involved in team decisions and some were not confident about how performance was managed.

Collaborative, inclusive, and compassionate leadership is essential to deliver the highest quality care for patients and tackle deep-seated cultural issues in the NHS, including unacceptable levels of work-related stress, bullying and discrimination. **King's Fund**

Organisational culture across the four nations

- Each of the four nations has developed its own approach to the need for culture change:

  > In England, the **NHS Long-Term Plan** has committed to developing and embedding cultures of compassion, inclusion, collaboration, and greater diversity across the NHS.

  > NHS Scotland's **Everyone Matters: 2020 Workforce Vision** has five key commitments, one of which is 'creating a healthy organisational culture in which NHS Scotland values are embedded in everything we do, enabling a healthy, engaged, and empowered workforce.'

  > The Welsh Government's plan for health and social care, **A Healthier Wales**, is being driven by a National Transformation Programme of which improving wellbeing, capability, engagement, and leadership of the workforce is one of four key elements.

  > In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health and Social Care's strategy, **Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together**, includes a key action to 'Develop an HSC-wide leadership strategy, to consider a five-year approach and plan for development of collective leadership behaviours across our system.'

What is organisational culture?

- Organisational culture has been described as 'the way we do things around here' (Balogun and Johnson) or as '*how* things get done' rather than '*what* gets done' (Lewis).

- Organisational culture can be difficult to grasp because it is vague and imprecise. It is not static – it is evolving and continuous. It can, and does, change over time.

- The management scholar, Peter Drucker, famously said *'culture could eat strategy for breakfast.'* The culture of an organisation is how things happen in practice regardless of any formal description it may give itself in its mission statement or organisational strategies.

- Organisational culture is not singular. It is best understood not as a thing, but as the manifestation of many things.

- But what are these things? Because there is no one definition of organisational culture, there is not an agreed list. It is multi-dimensional – a set of variables rather than a single variable.

The components of organisational culture

- Although there are many definitions of organisational culture, many of the same core components feature across them – *values, behaviours, practices, traditions, perspectives, attitudes, beliefs.*

- These are the things that make up culture in the everyday life of an organisation – in workplaces, between colleagues, and between employees and customers, clients, and users of services.

- In practice an organisation's culture may be in keeping with its stated values or contradict them – or more likely somewhere in between. Equally it may underpin an organisation's structures, systems, and processes – or be a product of them.

- It can therefore be both cause and effect. The interplay – or the push and pull – between the different components of culture in any one organisation, is complex and uneven. The boundaries between them are blurred.

- For example, beliefs and perspectives can reinforce old ways of doing things or be a catalyst for change. And they can influence culture in different ways across different departments of the same organisation or even different floors of the same building.

Some definitions of organisational culture

'The pattern of shared basic assumption – invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relationship to those problems.' **Schien**

'The underlying values, beliefs and principles that serve as a foundation for an organisation's management system as well as the set of management practices that both exemplify and reinforce those basic principles.' **Denison**

'Culture is a multidimensional variable which exists not simply as a consequence of an organisation's structures, processes and its people, but also acts of commitment, engagement, motivation, management and leadership.' **Lewis**

The 'culture web' – Johnson and Scholes
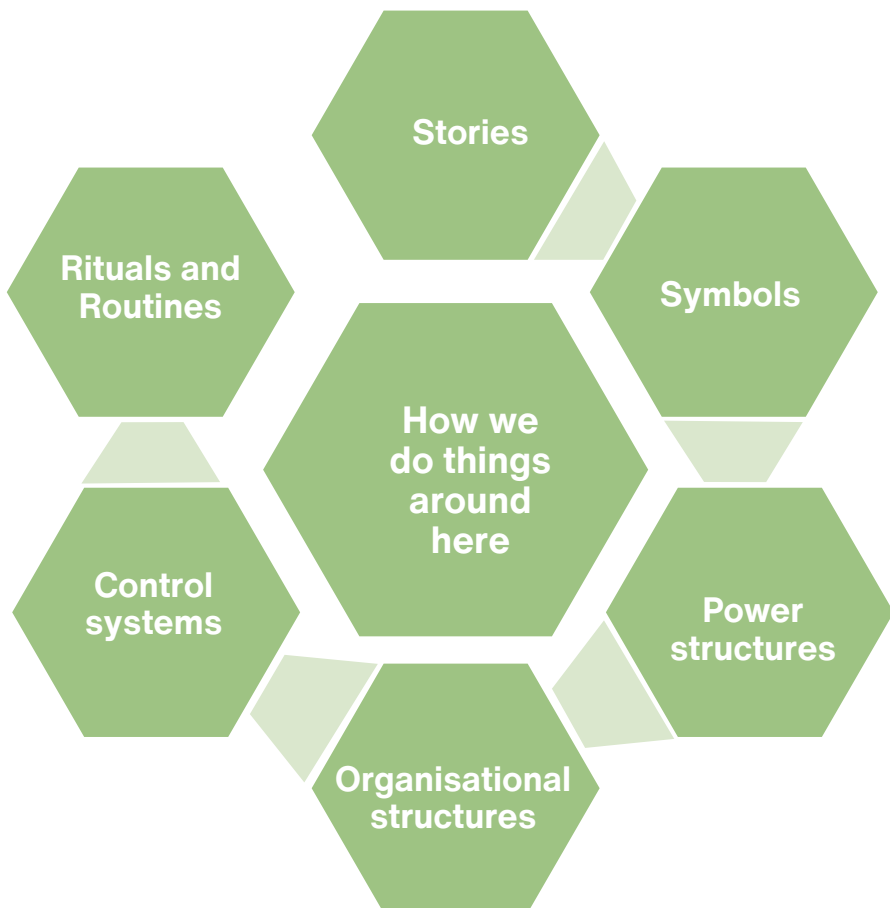
What drives and shapes organisational culture?

- In his culture review of Surrey Heartlands Clinical Commissioning Group, Professor Duncan Lewis suggests that defining an organisation's culture relates to a fundamental question – *'what is the glue that holds it together?'* That glue, he says, *'is often silent/invisible/white noise.'*

- While an organisation's formal commitments may suggest one kind of culture, the prevailing culture within it may be quite different. This is what Professor Ken Young has described as the *'space between words'* – a *'constellation of images, beliefs, judgements and values.'*

- How things are done can involve unspoken values and unwritten rules. Dr Judith Bell argues that 'organisational culture runs deep and may not be explicit or even always consciously determined.'

- In practice, the dynamics of organisational culture may be a complex web of behavioural and structural elements which shape how things are done as described by Johnson and Scholes (see diagram opposite).

- In his report Lewis points to a checklist of things to consider in understanding how an organisation's culture is shaped which was developed by the American Society of Human Resource Management.

Organisational culture checklist

- **Values**
    - **>** Is the culture outcome orientated?
    - **>** Is there a culture of dignity, fairness, and respect in operation?
    - **>** Is there a culture of collaboration?
    - **>** Is innovation and risk encouraged?
    - **>** Is the culture competitive?

- **Degrees of hierarchy**
    - **>** How hierarchical is the organisation?
    - **>** Are people able to work outside of the hierarchy?

- **People or task orientation**
    - **>** Is decision making focused on people or on tasks and processes?

- **Functional orientation**
    - **>** Is the organisation structured by function?
    - **>** Is the functional structure aligned to the organisation's purpose?

- **Subcultures**
    - **>** Are there subcultures?
    - **>** How do subcultures interact with the overall culture?

American Society of Human Resource Management

Barriers to effective organisational culture

- The CIPD has identified a number of barriers to leading effective organisational culture.

    > **Hierarchical and bureaucratic structures** – top-down communication which does not support learning.

    > **Short-termism and financial constraints** – focusing on targets, firefighting at the expense of long-term development.

    > **Individualism** – people led by reward and accountability leading to low trust and blame cultures.

    > **Us and them mentalities** – creating barriers, leading to unfairness and even discrimination.

Key Leadership behaviours for building trust – CIPD

- **Behaviour consistency** – behaving consistently over time and situations to create predictability.

- **Behaviour integrity –** walking the talk to support leadership claims.

- **Sharing and delegation of control** – being participatory in decision-making to build followers.

- **Communication** – communicating in an accurate, explanatory, and open way.

- **Demonstration of concern** – showing consideration and compassion for employee interests and not exploiting others.

- **Consultation in making decisions** – allowing debate, enabling perspectives to be shared between everyone involved.

- **Communicating a collective vision** – sharing plans, providing for collective input to build consensus for a shared vision.

- **Exhibiting shared values** – behaving in ways that embody shared values and beliefs.

How is organisational culture measured?

It is important to monitor and continually assess organisational culture. However, just as there is no one definition of organisational culture, there is no single set of measures either. But there are a variety of tools and frameworks.

The **Dennison Culture Index** measures four key dimensions of organisational culture – a clearly defined mission, effective employee engagement, internal consistency, and adaptability and openness.

The **Competing Values Framework** uses 16 measures including training and development, evaluation, and readiness.

The **Organisational Culture Inventory** uses 10 themes and 120 questions to measure two key concepts relating to people and tasks.

Why does organisational culture matter?

- Organisational culture is important for several reasons.

  > It influences external and internal identity – how do people talk about the organisation?

  > It impacts on recruitment and retention – is this a place people want to work?

  > It affects alignment with organisational purpose – do people live its values and advocate for it?

  > It plays a part in team working – do people work well together?

- Organisational culture and climate are not the same thing. But because climate is about how people feel within an organisation the two are related – do I feel included, motivated, and valued?

- Evidence about the impact of culture on performance is mixed but fostering a healthy culture is increasingly seen as central to good governance and management practice.

In the NHS we are looking for organisational cultures that put patients first, promote trust, respect and equality and are sufficiently open and transparent such that staff feel able to challenge each other robustly, regardless of status, without fear and are encouraged to come forward when difficulties arise. **Bell**

Why is organisational culture a trade union issue?

- In the past organisational culture has often been seen primarily as an HR issue. More recently in response to evidence from workplace surveys and independent inquiries it has been recognised as a key issue for leadership teams, both executive and non-executive.

- In practice, for a healthy organisation culture to flourish, organisational culture has to be an issue for everyone. Trade unions therefore have a crucial role to play, both working in partnership where possible and holding leadership teams to account.

- The evidence is clear that a heathy organisational culture is vital for the wellbeing and safety of the workforce.

- The consequences of poor culture can be hugely detrimental to NHS staff. These can include stress and anxiety, bullying and discrimination.

- As Dr Judith Bell points out, unacceptable behaviour, staff burnout, near misses, and 'never incidents' are also symptoms of cultural failure.

- While individual failings do happen, poor culture can lead to individuals being blamed for systemic failure.

- It is often said that no one comes to work to do a bad job. And as Bell says, staff do not come into the NHS to be negligent, brutal, or uncaring to patients – something happens to them. Trade unions have a responsibility ensure members are not scapegoated.

What role can MiP play?

- MiP is in a unique position to promote a healthy organisational culture and to challenge the consequences of poor culture. As a union which represents managers it has an ear to both the top and bottom of the NHS.

- MiP can play a role through both collective action and individual representation:

  > Ensuring that organisational commitments are properly implemented – challenging gaps in delivery

  > Promoting effective communication and employee engagement – ensuring employees have a voice

  > Holding senior leadership to account when things go wrong – challenging blame culture

  > Increasing awareness of the health, safety, and wellbeing of the workforce

  > Tackling discrimination and bullying – through preventative action and effective representation

  > Supporting whistleblowing in relation to unacceptable practices

There needs to be an enabling culture from the top. Culture change needs to be owned by the leaders. That means leaders who are not afraid, who have high self-esteem and a great deal of humanity and compassion. Kindness is a critical component of the leadership which will be needed going forward...Fear cannot be the driver.
**Sturrock**

What can MiP members and representatives do?

- Whatever capacity you are acting in – as a representative or link member, as a manager or colleague – you can help to promote a healthy organisational culture.

- In a variety of ways, MiP members can be **change agents** in the workplace every day:

  > You can be an **advocate** – by promoting best practice and challenging coercive culture

  > You can be a **custodian** – by encouraging collective solutions and supporting individual staff

  > You can be a **mentor** – by demonstrating positive behaviours and supporting colleagues

Custodians

Advocates

Mentors
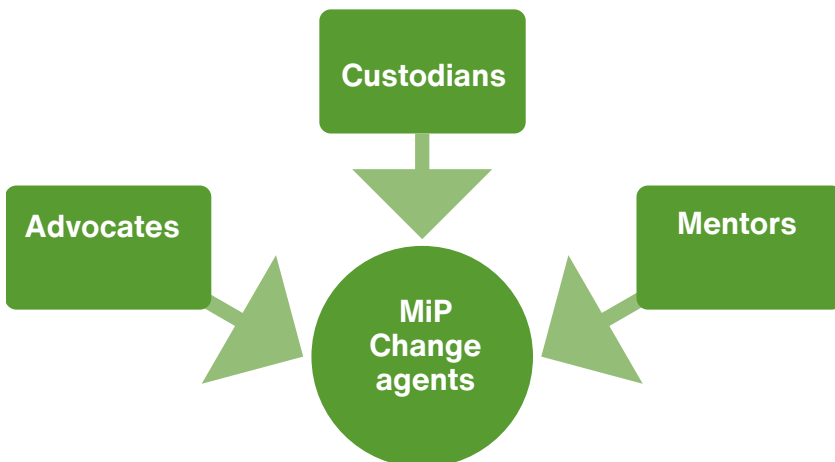
MiP Change agents

Being a culture change agent in practice

- Here are some starting points for conversations about organisational culture in the workplace.

  > **Communications and engagement** – how can managers model effective employee engagement?

  > **Workplace behaviour** – how is appropriate behaviour encouraged and inappropriate behaviour challenged?

  > **Teamworking** – how can effective teamworking be fostered and collaboration with other teams be promoted?

  > **Reflective practice** – how can staff be encouraged and enabled to speak about their experiences?

  > **People centred management** – how can managers best draw on the strengths and capabilities of staff?

  > **Effective feedback** – how can good performance be appreciated, and poor performance appropriately dealt with?

  > **Learning** – how can staff be empowered to learn from mistakes when things go wrong?

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