

## Beware of when culture crosses the line into "cult"

Tuesday, 19 April 2022 12:54pm

The desire to create a strong, healthy culture can sometimes lead to unhealthy cult-like behaviours, but simple strategies can ensure that line is never crossed, according to a workplace specialist.

At its best, culture is empowering, inclusive, and attractive, but at its extreme and when used the wrong way, it can become controlling, isolating, divisive and destructive, says **Shane Michael Hatton** in his forthcoming book, [Let's Talk Culture](#).

Employers can rely on four pillars to ensure they avoid the dark side of culture, he says.

The first is that **culture is iterative, not sacred**, "which means it doesn't need to look the same today as it did a year ago or even a month ago".

HR can and should work to shift culture that no longer serves the best interests of the business, and 'that's just how we do things' is not a valid justification for sustaining culture, he notes.



Shane Michael Hatton

Cults focus on replicating sameness, but culture is about fostering oneness. You don't need to agree with everything in a team, but you can align around a core set of shared expectations.

*Shane Michael Hatton*

"There is nothing wrong with [upholding a set of values or expectations](#) that you are proud of and your team is committed to, as long as you can recognise that these are just a way of doing things and not necessarily *the way*."

Culture can be re-evaluated by examining long-held traditions, rituals or norms; creating a safe space to challenge ways of thinking and upheld beliefs; and regularly reminding people that there is room for different perspectives, beliefs and ideas.

The next pillar is that **culture is resilient, not fragile**, and can handle scrutiny, Hatton says.

"When you're [building culture](#), welcome questions and robust discussion, knowing that the culture you are building can stand up to it. Reward critical thinking and value informed commitment from your people. Healthy discussion and dialogue are critical to building a resilient culture.

"When it comes to challenging the way things get done, it's important not just to seek input from people on your team but to go further and [invite people into the conversation](#) from outside your context and give them permission to challenge it."

To gain an external perspective, Hatton recommends inviting employees to ask questions and challenge the culture; providing formal and informal channels that allow honest feedback; celebrating critical thinking; and considering how leaders respond when culture is challenged.

This flows into the next element, which is that **culture is oneness, not sameness**, and organisations can have alignment without agreement.

"Building a culture means [placing value on diversity](#) (in all its forms), not trying to eradicate it. Culture is about finding unity in diversity. We can think, feel and act differently while aligning around and sharing a common purpose, direction and vision.

"Cults focus on replicating sameness, but culture is about fostering oneness. You don't need to agree with everything in a team, but you can align around a core set of shared expectations."

This sense of unity and oneness comes from creating a compelling shared purpose and experience, says Hatton.

This can be achieved by celebrating differences; helping employees feel comfortable to share their perspectives and uncovering unconscious biases.

The final pillar is that **culture is shared, not forced**. "In a cult, members are told what to value, and the rules and expectations come from above. Those rules and expectations seek to control.

"Great cultures, on the other hand, create a shared ownership of what the team values and expects of one another. They invite people into the conversation and do not exclude them from it. When people miss the mark, they are supported and reminded of the shared aspiration and their potential, and not publicly shamed or put through extreme punishment."

In a practical sense, this can be achieved by empowering employees to "call out" cultural misalignment; promoting [shared accountability](#) of the culture; and ensuring that nobody (including leaders) is above the rules.

**Do you have news to share about your workplace? [Email the HR Daily team](#) with your comments, information or tips.**

## Related links

- [Webcast: Uncovering workplace culture trouble spots](#)
- ["Golden rituals" improve culture, boost productivity](#)
- [Five traits shift culture beyond "annoying" to toxic](#)
- [How IBM confronted its "aggressive" culture](#)
- [New 'must haves' emerging in culture-focused workspaces](#)
- [What HR can learn from Rio Tinto's damning culture review](#)
- [Cultures shifting with hybrid work; time for HR to step in](#)

© Copyright 2022 HR Daily