

# THE CULTURE QUESTION

HOW TO CREATE A WORKPLACE  
WHERE PEOPLE LIKE TO WORK



RANDY GRIESER, ERIC STUTZMAN, WENDY LOEWEN, MICHAEL LABUN

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership

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*To our staff, colleagues, and clients,  
who have taught us so much.  
This book would not exist without you.*

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# Introduction

## **LIKING WHERE WE WORK**

We believe that people should be able to like where they work. When employees like the places they work, it's not only good for their mental health and well-being, it's also good for their organizations – both financially and otherwise. When a workplace culture is purposefully created to be respectful and inspiring, employees are happier, more productive, and more engaged.

Unfortunately, far too many people don't like where they work. Some organizations are unhealthy and full of disrespectful behavior. Other workplaces are simply uninspiring. For various reasons, countless people feel trapped, indifferent, or bored at work.

Our organization, ACHIEVE, provides training and resources that give people insights and tools for creating, cultivating, and sustaining workplaces that are respectful, engaging, and meaningful. To teach others effectively, we have needed to consistently nurture an environment in our workplace that reflects the principles we speak about. When clients walk into our office, we want them to see that we actually “walk the talk” and our belief in the value of a healthy and likable workplace culture is authentic.

We have worked hard to create a healthy culture, choosing to learn from our mistakes and from the wisdom of others. We are now passionate about helping people create great workplaces, and that is why we've written this book – to help create workplaces where people like to work.

The title of this book, *The Culture Question*, may have led you to ask, “What’s the question?” In short, the fundamental question has two parts: “How does your organization’s culture impact how much people like where they work?” and “What can you do to make it better?” In this book, we help you answer these questions by focusing on the elements that make up a healthy workplace culture.

## **WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR**

If you’ve picked up *The Culture Question*, there’s a good chance that you are not happy with your organization’s culture, or perhaps you think it could at least be better than it is now.

If you know deep down that there is a better way, that things don’t have to stay the same, this book is for you.

If you see glimpses of what might be, but you’re not sure how to influence culture change in your workplace, this book is for you.

If you are one of those fortunate individuals who works in an organization that has a strong culture, but you are unsure how to maintain that strength as you grow, change, and face the future, this book is for you.

If you are a leader who wants to consciously cultivate a healthy organizational culture, this book is for you.

Leadership bears much responsibility for the health of an organization’s culture, but everyone in the organization has a role in impacting and sustaining that culture. Throughout this book, we use “leaders” in an inclusive sense to refer to all of those who influence others in the workplace. This book will be applicable for supervisors, managers, human resources personnel, union representatives, executives, and others who provide leadership in an organization.

## WHAT LIES AHEAD

The insights found in this book have emerged out of the learning opportunities we have had within our own workplace and alongside the countless other organizations we have supported and worked with.

As well as drawing on these experiences and other research, we have also conducted “The Culture Question Survey,” which includes perspectives from over 2,400 participants about what does and does not make a great place to work.<sup>1</sup> We asked both employees and leaders to identify whether they like where they work, and then correlated their responses to a series of statements about workplace culture. We were amazed by the survey results and are thankful for the number of people who took the time to thoughtfully provide their opinions and perspectives. Results, insights, and quotes from the survey are woven into the following chapters and provide additional depth to the book. A more detailed analysis can be found in the Survey Analysis section on page 182.

The first chapter of this book makes the case that organizational culture should be a priority for every workplace. The remaining chapters are each about a particular aspect of creating, transforming, and sustaining a healthy workplace culture. At the end of each chapter, we’ve included questions you can use either for personal reflection or for larger group discussions. The Resources section at the end of the book provides additional examples and actionable tools you can use within your own organization.

We are aware that not every aspect of this book will apply directly to every reader. Our goal is not so much to provide a “cookie cutter” blueprint, but rather to give you guidelines and inspiration as you work toward creating and sustaining a culture where people like to work.

Ultimately, our goal in writing this book is to reduce the suffering that so many people experience at work and thus increase our collective well-being. We want to do our part to create a world in which everyone has the opportunity to experience the joy of liking where they work.



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# The Case for Caring About Culture



## **FOCUS ON CULTURE, NOT FOOSBALL**

Most of us are familiar with stories from some of the “best” places to work – the Googles of the world, with their complimentary food courts, fancy buildings, free massages, and foosball tables. Decision makers at many of these companies likely feel that these extra perks help make their organizations great places to work and that they will attract and retain talented, motivated, and productive employees as a result.

These initiatives sound great, and they may indeed help create more fun and productive organizations. However, the reality is that most of our workplaces do not have the resources to implement these sorts of programs. The good news is that, while these types of perks may be nice, they aren’t actually necessary for attracting productive and committed employees who enjoy their work and are loyal to their organizations. Instead, the key is building a healthy workplace culture.

Culture must be your highest priority if you want to make your organization a great place to work. Even if game rooms and free gourmet food are options for your organization, perks alone will not create a healthy culture if you do not also consider the priorities we outline in the next six chapters:

- **Communicating your purpose and values.** Employees are inspired when they work in organizations whose purpose and values resonate with them.
- **Providing meaningful work.** Most employees want to work on projects that inspire them, align with what they are good at, and allow them to grow.
- **Focusing your leadership team on people.** How leaders relate to their employees plays a major role in how everyone feels about their workplace.
- **Building meaningful relationships.** When employees like the people they work with and for, they are more satisfied and more engaged in their work.
- **Creating peak performing teams.** People are energized when they work together effectively because teams achieve things that no one person could do on their own.
- **Practicing constructive conflict management.** When leaders don't handle conflict promptly and well, it quickly sours the workplace.

The chapters that follow will explore each of these areas in more depth. We will demonstrate the importance of directing your energy toward each key area, and we will offer some practical ways for your organization to build these six priorities into your workplace culture.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

Workplace culture is the most significant factor that influences happiness, work relationships, and job satisfaction. Having a clear understanding of what workplace culture is, and what your own organization's culture is, will help you more easily identify problems and develop strategies to create a better culture and capitalize on its positive energy.

In their *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article “The Leader’s Guide to Corporate Culture,” Boris Groysberg and others write:

Culture is the tacit social order of an organization: It shapes attitudes and behaviors in wide-ranging and durable ways. Cultural norms define what is encouraged, discouraged, accepted, or rejected within a group. When properly aligned with personal values, drives, and needs, culture can unleash tremendous amounts of energy toward a shared purpose and foster an organization's capacity to thrive.<sup>1</sup>

Though organizational culture isn't a physical thing, you feel it every day in the ways you work and engage with others. Culture is represented in the language you use, the stories you tell, and your daily work practices. Simple things, like the objects hanging on an office wall, can tell you a lot about an organization's culture. Whether you are walking to get a coffee, attending a meeting, or eating lunch, culture is present.

Workplace cultures include elements such as values, mission statements, leadership styles, and expectations for how employees treat customers, clients, and each other. Culture is visible through the ways in which people interact with each other – *their behaviors*. It is reflected in how things get done. It is made up of the principles and rituals that hold an organization together.

Each organization has its own distinct “personality.” Much like an individual's personality, it is related to the collective values, beliefs, and attitudes of its members. No two workplace cultures are the same. In fact, culture is the one thing that makes each organization unique. Products and strategies can be replicated, but a culture is as distinct as a fingerprint.

For simplicity, we often refer to organizational culture as “unhealthy” or “healthy.” However, workplaces are almost never all good or all bad. Instead, they exist on a spectrum of *less* healthy to *more* healthy.

In organizations on the unhealthy end of the spectrum, people are usually less motivated and may be influenced by an element of fear that can drag down their productivity. In healthier cultures, people have a sense of empowerment that energizes and inspires them to perform at a higher level. Healthy cultures create a sense of belonging, purpose, and engagement, which ultimately drives desired behaviors and results.

Two of our survey participants summarized their workplace cultures in the following ways:

- “We have a great team and a strong vision. Our manager is amazing and gives us freedom to try new things. I feel like I am making a difference in the lives of the people I work with. I am able to use my gifts and talents in ways that make me feel valuable and useful. I love my job, my boss, and my coworkers!”
- “My coworkers are kind and caring people. I have autonomy in what I do but receive enough direction that it’s not overwhelming. There is clear purpose to the mundane tasks and enough exciting tasks to keep me engaged. Overall, it’s the best work environment I’ve had the chance to be in.”

These two statements highlight key elements found in many healthy workplaces. Although these survey participants may wish to improve some aspects of their workplaces, they clearly work in organizations on the healthier end of the culture spectrum.

## WHY CULTURE MATTERS

Focusing on creating a workplace culture where people *want* to work is simply the right thing to do. But there are also practical and financial reasons for investing energy into organizational culture. In a survey conducted by Duke’s Fuqua School of Business, and completed by 1,400 North American CEOs, executives overwhelmingly indicated that a healthy corporate culture is essential if an organization is to thrive.<sup>2</sup>

During the Industrial Revolution, it was likely more feasible to build a profitable business without taking culture into account. Standardizing tasks and eliminating errors were usually enough to make a company profitable. How employees felt about their workplace was less important to an organization’s sustainability than the ability to get work done in a timely and efficient manner. However, when we consider the social unrest of the industrial societies of the past, it is clear that many

people were profoundly unhappy.

The type of work that many people do today is very different from work that was done in the past. Fewer people produce goods, which can easily be measured in terms of productivity, while more people provide services, which are difficult to quantify. To maintain productivity in most of today's work environments, which require innovation and collaboration, we need healthy work cultures.

In our consulting work, we have seen the very real financial *and* human costs associated with unhealthy workplace cultures. Financially, the costs of an unhealthy organizational culture include high turnover and an unproductive, unengaged work force. When it comes to the human costs, people's mental health and overall well-being suffer. We believe that organizations that don't focus on creating healthy workplace cultures will eventually be replaced by those that do.

## **OUR WORKPLACE CULTURE**

Our organization has two primary divisions: ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership (ACHIEVE), and the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute (CTRI), which provides training and resources in the areas of mental health, counseling skills, and violence prevention. For simplicity, we refer to our organization as ACHIEVE in this book. Though it took us some time to develop a healthy culture, we're proud that our own organization is a place where people like to work. We do great work, we are energized by what we do, and we also laugh and have a lot of fun. Most of the time, invigorating energy permeates our workplace. People are excited about being innovative and productive while doing meaningful work.

If you visit our office, you will find our culture at work. You will see inspirational quotes and pictures on the wall, you will hear energetic bursts of chatter about ideas, and you will smell good coffee – because good coffee makes having a great culture easier, right? If you attend our meetings, you will see employees who are not afraid to speak up or disagree with leaders. You might even notice some frustration from time to

time, often caused because we care when things don't go right.

For this portion of the book, we asked some of the staff at ACHIEVE to identify the things they like about our workplace. These are some of their responses:

- “Mostly the people – I love my coworkers. They make it easy to come to work.”
- “I have freedom and autonomy in how I do my work.”
- “Leadership values my abilities and the work I do.”
- “I find my work meaningful. I love that I get to help people.”
- “I get to do new things, and I am challenged by my work.”
- “Leadership includes me in decisions that impact the organization.”

These responses provide insight into what's important for creating a healthy and vibrant workplace culture. Our staff like the people they work with and the environment they work in. They value communication and teamwork. They appreciate that we, as leaders, value their work and communicate effectively. Our team members find their work challenging and meaningful and, most importantly, they connect with the purpose of our organization.

Our culture has not always been healthy, and we have had to learn some important lessons along the way. There was a time when we didn't communicate our purpose to our staff as clearly as we should have. We hired people who negatively impacted our culture, and we allowed conflict to escalate to the point that it became unhealthy.

Early on in our organization's history, in one of our unhealthier periods, things were bad enough that we needed to make major changes. We were a much smaller organization then, and leadership was focused on the many pressing *operational matters* rather than the health of relationships and the organization's culture. As a result, what started as differences of opinion and conflicting work styles escalated into high levels of distrust and disrespect among staff. Productivity and communication

plummeted, and it soon became clear that *organizational health* was now the pressing matter that demanded our attention.

Over a period of several months, we used many of the approaches we describe in this book. We gathered information using an assessment tool, we met with and listened to staff individually and in focus groups, and provided coaching and mediation. Unfortunately, we had to terminate one employee who wasn't willing to participate in the process, but it was a necessary step as we began building a healthier culture.

These past experiences have taught us to place a high value on our workplace's culture. Because it is so important to us, we ask each employee and manager, during their yearly goal-setting meetings, to comment on how they contribute to a positive workplace culture. We ask potential new hires what they will do to foster a healthy work environment. We see every person as a contributor to our culture, and we see our leaders as curators of our culture who intentionally think about how to keep it healthy.

## **YOUR WORKPLACE CULTURE**

Because of the type of work we do at ACHIEVE, we regularly have the opportunity to walk through a variety of organizations. We've learned how to quickly assess workplace cultures based on the greetings we receive, the stories people tell, and the conversations we hear – or more importantly, don't hear.

Through our experiences, we have observed that most organizations are actually *okay* places to work. Yes, some workplaces are on the extreme ends of the spectrum – some are exceptional organizations that people love to be part of, and others are entirely toxic and dysfunctional. But most workplaces fall somewhere between these two extremes. They are *okay, but not great*. Most workplace cultures have some parts that are healthy and others that aren't as healthy.

When you tell others about your organization, what descriptors come to mind? To what extent is your workplace healthy or unhealthy? What parts of it are engaging and likable, and what parts are not? When

other people walk into your workspace, what do you think they sense about your culture?

## ‘How Do Things Really Work Around Here?’

While working in another organization early in my career, I, Randy, was approached by a new employee a week into his job. He came to me in a private manner, leaned in, and whispered, “So how do things really work around here?” What he was really asking was, “What’s the culture of this place?” He wanted to know what the dos and don’ts were, whether leaders were authentic and what was important to them, whether people were really as nice as they seemed, and what it was he needed to watch out for.

We should really *all* be asking that question, not just new hires.  
*How do things really work around here?*

## PRIORITIZING CULTURE

Although some organizations continuously prioritize workplace culture, many only give it occasional attention, if any at all. In our view, building and sustaining a great workplace culture requires intention, time, and effort.

The challenge is that most of us are already working at full capacity in our other areas of responsibility. Working on culture often takes a back seat to things like strategic planning or marketing. It is something we think we will get to when these other tasks are taken care of. Ironically, when organizations put too much energy into products and profit at the expense of culture, their bottom line usually suffers. But if we take time to develop a healthy workplace culture *first*, we can capitalize on the energy it creates, and our other tasks become easier as a result.



The good news is that culture is something we can influence. We have little control over factors like government policy, demographics, or the economy, but we can influence our own workplaces in significant ways.

It is paramount that you recognize that culture is the essential ingredient in the glue holding your organization together. Culture is what determines whether your organization will succeed – or even survive. It has profound effects both on the quality of the products or services you provide and on the lives of those who work in your organization.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Does your organization have a culture where people like to work? How do you know?
2. What would someone think about your culture if they could observe it unnoticed? What would a visitor walking through your workspace see and hear? What would this tell them about your culture?
3. When you and your colleagues describe your organization, what words and stories do you use? What does this tell you about your culture?

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## Speaking and Training

For your next conference, convention, or leadership retreat, consider having Randy, Eric, Wendy, or Michael as your speaker. Each of them provides engaging, inspirational, and humorous keynotes as well as workshops and retreats.

ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership provides workshops on over 40 topics in the areas of leadership development and workplace performance. The Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute offers more than 50 workshop topics in the areas of counseling, mental health, and violence prevention. Options for accessing training include:

### **Online Training**

No matter where you live, you can easily access one-hour webinars and workshops right from your desk. When you attend live virtual workshops and webinars, you can actively engage with trainers and other participants. Alternatively, you can purchase previously recorded on-demand workshops and webinars.

### **In-Person Workshops**

We offer workshops throughout the year in various locations that are open to anyone who wants to attend. Visit our website to find out which workshops are being offered near you.

### **Private/On-Location Training**

Training offered just for your group – virtually or on-location, right where you are. If you have a group of people to train, private training is often the most cost-effective and convenient way to obtain training. Our workshops can be customized and tailored to meet your specific needs.

For more information:



[www.achievecentre.com](http://www.achievecentre.com)  
[info@achievecentre.com](mailto:info@achievecentre.com)  
877-270-9776



[www.ctrinstitute.com](http://www.ctrinstitute.com)  
[info@ctrinstitute.com](mailto:info@ctrinstitute.com)  
877-353-3205

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## About the Authors



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Randy, Wendy, Michael, and Eric

**Randy Grieser, Eric Stutzman, Wendy Loewen, and Michael Labun** are co-authors of *The Culture Question: How to Create a Workplace Where People Like to Work*, upon which this book is based. They are leaders and consultants with ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership. At the heart of their work is a belief that everyone should be able to like where they work. They are passionate about inspiring learning and improving lives.

Find the authors' latest thoughts on leadership and organizational culture on their blogs at:

ACHIEVECENTRE.COM

THEORDINARYLEADER.COM

**Workplace culture is the most significant factor** that influences employee engagement, work relationships, and job satisfaction. Culture determines whether your organization will succeed – or even survive. It profoundly affects both the quality of the products or services you provide and the lives of those who work in your organization. The good news is that culture is something we can influence.

The authors of this book believe that people should be able to like where they work. When employees like the places they work, it's not only good for their mental health and well-being, it's also good for their organizations – both financially and otherwise. When we purposefully create respectful and inspiring workplace cultures, employees are happier, more productive, and more engaged.

By exploring six key elements that make up a healthy workplace culture, *The Culture Question* answers two fundamental questions: “How does your organization’s culture impact how much people like where they work?” and “What can you do to make it better?”



*“The Culture Question is an insightful guide for creating a healthy and sustainable culture.”*

—DR. TASHA EURICH, *New York Times* best-selling author,  
*Insight and Bankable Leadership*

*“Wow! I love this book. It hits the mark on balancing theory with practical strategies and real stories. The emphasis on empowering people at all levels in a values-based organization inspires me as a leader to pursue the ongoing development of our work culture.”*

—SHERRY BAUM, Executive Director,  
Community Living Dryden-Sioux Lookout

*“Step one: put down your management theory textbook. Step two: read *The Culture Question*.*

*Step three: become a better leader.”*

—DALE TOEWS, Chief Administrative  
Officer, Rural Municipality of Stanley

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