

Culture within Culture

Shaping our
Aspirational Culture

Co-evolving with AI
Paper #8



A Common Experience Across Cultures

We have heard this many times. And we have felt it ourselves.

The hierarchy here is too embedded. The risk aversion runs too deep. National culture encourages conformity rather than challenge. People defer. They wait to be told. We have tried. You don't understand what we are working against.

This is the lived experience of practitioners and leaders who have tried to build something different inside systems that seem captive of their country cultures. The weight of national culture is real. The pressure to conform is real. And the exhaustion of working against it, year after year, with limited visible progress, is real.

This paper acknowledges these experiences, and explores what can be done in response.

How national culture influences organisations

National culture shapes the ecosystem within which organisations operate: regulatory environments, labour markets, expectations people bring through the door, behaviours that feel normal, and those that require courage.

In the age of AI, an additional layer of context has emerged. Governments are responding with national strategies, training incentives, regulatory frameworks and investment programmes. These signal priorities and encourage particular forms of activity.

In the United States, individualism and market logic strongly shape employment relationships. In Singapore, hierarchy carries social weight. In China, the relationship between state, collective and individual creates its own constraints. In the Netherlands, institutional regulation strongly shapes healthcare practice.

These conditions matter.

But they do not fully determine what organisations build within them.

Across industries and geographies, organisational cultures have diverged meaningfully from their national context when intention has been sustained over time. The organisations considered here worked carefully with their environments, choosing which elements to work with and which to move beyond.

This paper explores how these companies have progressed and what we can learn from this in the Age of AI.

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response.”

- VIKTOR FRANKL

Case Studies

Southwest Airlines – United States

In a national context shaped by transactional employment relationships, Southwest Airlines built a strong sense of community. Employment was treated as mutual commitment rather than exchange, with profit-sharing linking individual and organisational success. For decades Southwest maintained the lowest employee turnover in the US airline industry and remained profitable through multiple crises that destabilised competitors. The national culture shaped the labour market. The experience of working inside the organisation was a deliberate cultural choice.

DBS Bank – Singapore

Singapore's culture carries strong norms of hierarchy and deference. DBS chose to cultivate a culture in which difficult truths could be spoken and challenge was welcomed. In their language, elephants could be named. This shift supported DBS's transformation into one of the most digitally advanced banks in the world. The willingness to surface difficult realities strengthened the organisation's capacity to learn quickly and adapt. The national culture did not change. The experience inside DBS did.

Haier – China

Haier began as a conventional manufacturer operating within centralised state capitalism. Over time it transformed into an ecosystem of thousands of micro-enterprises, each operating with entrepreneurial autonomy connected through shared purpose and transparent performance. This model emerged within the Chinese context, not outside it. Haier worked with its environment while building something the environment alone would not have predicted.

Buurtzorg – Netherlands

Within one of the most regulated healthcare systems in the world, Buurtzorg created self-managing nursing teams supported by minimal hierarchy. Patient satisfaction increased. Staff satisfaction increased. Costs decreased. What appeared constrained proved capable of supporting a different way of organising when design and intention aligned.

What These Organisations Share

Across very different national contexts, each organisation treated culture as a design choice rather than an inheritance. In each case, the organisation cultivated conditions that enabled people to contribute, learn and adapt beyond what the surrounding National culture might have predicted.

They worked with the realities of their environment without accepting them as limits on what could be created inside the organisation.

Each became a form of cultural microclimate:

Southwest built community inside a transactional labour market.

DBS created permission to challenge hierarchy inside a culture that respects it. **Haier** fostered entrepreneurial autonomy inside a system shaped by centralised authority. **Buurtzorg** created self-management inside a highly regulated healthcare system.

Occasionally, cultures built within organisations influence the wider field through the people they develop and the practices they demonstrate. Toyota provides a well-known example. What began as an internal philosophy of continuous improvement, frontline problem-solving and respect for people evolved into the Toyota Production System, later shaping lean management and the broader lean change movement far beyond manufacturing.

What earlier papers described as the Regenerative Commons – cultures characterised by adaptability and shared responsibility for how technology and capability shape the future we build together – is a practice, not a destination.

What This Means in the Age of AI

Across this series, a consistent observation is that the most consequential choices in the age of AI are cultural. Technology is the catalyst. Culture shapes what the technology becomes in practice.

Governments are investing heavily in AI capability through training programmes, infrastructure and regulation. These investments are valuable. They signal importance and lower barriers to entry.

They are not sufficient.

AI tends to amplify patterns already present in the organisations that deploy it. Where hierarchy dominates, AI may accelerate compliance. Where inquiry is welcomed, AI can strengthen collective thinking. Where governance is already loose, or systems have multiple vulnerabilities, AI will expose these at an unprecedented rate and scale.

Culture is created through daily interaction: what is questioned, what is left unspoken, what is encouraged, what is ignored. AI will scale those patterns.

Organisation Culture may be influenced or tested by country culture, but it is shaped by how the organisation chooses to respond to its broader National culture, its strategic aspirations and its market context.



*“There is a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in..”*

- LEONARD COHEN

Closing Reflection

We began with a familiar voice.

The hierarchy is too embedded. The risk aversion runs too deep. You don’t understand what we are working against.

We hear it. We respect it. The difficulty is real.

What the evidence suggests is that the difficulty is rarely final.

Southwest did not have an easy context. DBS did not have a permissive one. Haier did not have a simple one. Buurtzorg did not have a flexible one.

Each built something different anyway.

They did so through sustained choice about what to cultivate inside the container available to them, working with cultural realities without being defined entirely by them.

That choice remains available.

It will be harder in some contexts than others. It will require different forms of courage in different places. It requires sustained attention over time. Training programmes will evolve. Regulation will develop. National strategies will continue to unfold.

Alongside these developments, we invite you to continuously build the internal culture that determines what you can make possible through how you respond.

Questions for Reflection



In shaping our own organisational culture, these reflective questions can support you in identifying what actions are possible:

1. Where have you felt the weight of national or institutional culture most strongly, and where have you seen someone build something different within it?
2. How much of what feels fixed is constraint, and how much is assumption?
3. Which aspects of your context are you consciously working with, and which are you reproducing without examination?
4. Where are people already experiencing something different from what the surrounding culture would predict?
5. How is your AI deployment shaping the culture you are building?
6. If Southwest, DBS, Haier and Buurtzorg built what they built in the contexts they faced, what is your organisation’s equivalent?
7. What would it mean to begin building the culture you want now, with what you have?

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the following people for their valuable feedback in reviewing the paper. While the paper has been significantly improved through their collective wisdom and insights, all remaining errors and omissions are our sole responsibility.

Andrew Brown, Teresa Collis, Andrew Gerken, and Gareth Thomas.

We also acknowledge the role of generative AI systems — including *ChatGPT*, *Claude*, *Gemini* and *Perplexity* — in the development of this series. These systems were engaged as thinking partners to test ideas, surface patterns, challenge assumptions, and support the articulation of emerging insights. The quality of what emerged was shaped as much by the questions brought to these systems as by the systems themselves. All interpretation, judgement and final authorship remain our own.

A note about imagery:

The imagery in this series continues our long-standing use of nature to reflect the patterns and dynamics of living systems. In this instance, some images have been created or refined with the support of generative AI — a natural extension of the inquiry itself, as we explore what it means to co-evolve with these technologies.

Adaptive Cultures exists to enable cultural evolution for the good of people and planet. Working alongside WDHB, we partner with organisations to evolve culture, leadership and collective impact in ways that are grounded, practical and responsive to a rapidly changing world.

We work with leaders, teams and internal practitioners to understand how culture is really created and sustained: through patterns of thinking, relating and working that shape everyday decisions and outcomes, especially under conditions of uncertainty and change. We support intentional shifts that align purpose, strategy and systems with the culture required to thrive.

Our approach combines deep diagnostic insight with developmental practice, building the adaptive capacity needed to navigate complexity and create meaningful, lasting change.

Bibliography

Ackerman Anderson, L., & Anderson, D. (2010). *The change leader's roadmap* (2nd ed.). Pfeiffer.

Amodei, Dario. *The Adolescence of Technology: Confronting and Overcoming the Risks of Powerful AI* (2026).
<https://www.darioamodei.com/essay/the-adolescence-of-technology>.

Anderson, B. (2012). *The spirit of leadership*.
<https://leadershipcircle.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Spirit-of-Leadership-Whitepaper-2021-07.pdf>

Anderson, B., & Adams, B. (2015). *Mastering leadership: An integrated framework for breakthrough performance and extraordinary business results*. John Wiley & Sons.

Argyris, C. (1991). *Teaching smart people how to learn*. Harvard Business Review.

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.

Bateson, N. (2023). *Combining*. Triarchy Press.
Brown, A., & Cameron, A. (n.d.). *Developing adaptive organisations through leadership & culture*. Adaptive Cultures.

Burke, R. (2007). *Strategic foresight and organisational preparedness*. Melbourne Business School Executive Education.

Center for Creative Leadership. (2011). *Boundary spanning leadership: Mission critical perspectives from the executive suite*.

Cook-Greuter, S. (2010). *Postautonomous ego development*. Integral Publishers.

Garvey Berger, J. (2012). *Changing on the job: Developing leaders for a complex world*. Stanford University Press.
Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Paulist Press.

Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Harvard University Press.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Harvard Business Press.
Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. (1969). *Management of organizational behavior: Utilizing human resources*. Prentice Hall.

Inayatullah, S. (2008). *Six pillars: Futures thinking for transforming*. Foresight.

Jaworski, J. (1996). *Synchronicity: The inner path of leadership*. Berrett-Koehler.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Harvard University Press.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to change*. Harvard Business Press.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. (2016). *An everyone culture: Becoming a deliberately developmental organization*. Harvard Business Press.

Kofman, F. (2006). *Conscious business: How to build value through values*. Sounds True.

Laloux, F. (2014). *Reinventing organizations*. Nelson Parker.
Meadows, D. (2008). *Thinking in systems: A primer*. Chelsea Green.

Pentland, A. (2025). *Shared wisdom: Cultural evolution in the age of AI*. MIT Press.

Porter, M. E. (2008). *The five competitive forces that shape strategy*. Harvard Business Review.

Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. Chelsea Green.

Scharmer, O. (2009). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. Berrett-Koehler.

Scharmer, O., & Kaufer, K. (2013). *Leading from the emerging future: From ego-system to eco-system economies*. Berrett-Koehler.

Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Schein, E. H. (2016). *Humble consulting*. Berrett-Koehler.
Senge, P. M., Hamilton, H., & Kania, J. (2015). *The dawn of system leadership*. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

Snowden, D. (2010). *The origins of Cynefin*. Cognitive Edge.

Stacey, R. D. (2005). *Experiencing emergence in organizations: Local interaction and the emergence of global pattern*. Routledge.

Taleb, N. N. (2010). *The black swan: The impact of the highly improbable*. Random House.

Torbert, W. R. (2004). *Action inquiry*. Berrett-Koehler.

Valikangas, L. (2010). *The resilient organization*. McGraw-Hill.
Waller, L., & Wels, I. (2014). *From grit to pearl: Enhancing the role and influence of the learning and development professional*. Ashridge Business School.

Wilber, K. (2000). *Integral psychology*. Shambhala.

Woolley, A. W., Chabris, C. F., Pentland, A., Hashmi, N., & Malone, T. W. (2010). *Evidence for a collective intelligence factor in the performance of human groups*. Science.

Joiner, B., & Josephs, J. (2007). *Leadership agility*. Jossey-Bass

Copyright 2026

If you are to reproduce this in any form, please ensure that you acknowledge the intellectual property of © 2026 Adaptive Cultures, part of WDHG Group. All rights reserved.

More information available at:

<https://www.adaptivecultures.co>

First edition July 2026.

