

Transition in Group Culture



Guide

Prepared by: Root Cuthbertson 2023. Text adapted from Claire Milne 2018.

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What is Group Culture?

The term 'culture' is often understood to mean the more tangible products of culture – things like architecture, art, literature, theatre, and fashion. The term 'group culture' refers to the less visible aspects of culture – attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, behaviours – and how people habitually perceive things.

“Culture is the social heritage of a group, organised community, or society. It is a pattern of responses discovered, developed, or invented during the group's history of handling challenges which arise from interactions among its members, and between them and their environment. These responses are considered the correct way to perceive, feel, think, and act, and are passed on to the new members through immersion, role modelling, and teaching. Culture determines what is acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant, right or wrong, workable or unworkable. It encompasses all learned and shared, explicit or tacit, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, norms, and values, as well as attitudes, behaviour, dress, and language.” – [Business Dictionary](#).

It is common to be mostly unaware of group culture. Just as fish typically do not notice the water they swim in, most group members typically do not notice their group culture. It is simply the way things are, what everyone considers 'normal.' It influences how many things are done – such as running meetings, carrying out activities, and interacting with each other. Group culture usually has a mixture of both unconscious and conscious aspects.

Habitual or Unconscious Aspects

It is common for group culture to develop gradually and unconsciously change over time. For example, in a group that decides to buy a coffee machine, people may develop a habit of chatting informally while making a cup of coffee. Groups may also respond to changes in conditions or situations outside the group. For example, if coffee becomes scarce, or a controlled substance, people may develop a secret or unauthorised market for it.



Habitual patterns, which are typically learned from and reinforced by a dominant society, are likely to be present in both individuals and groups. Some people do not consciously choose such patterns, but may unconsciously repeat them, or may have felt forced into them in order to simply survive. Many group cultures typically involve some unconscious dynamics based on old habits involving ego, fear, trauma, power, or strategies for meeting needs (see [Compassion for Challenging Behaviour](#)).

Whether conscious or not, a group's culture affects how individuals interact and how the group approaches its aims. In some groups, habitual patterns can lead to individuals feeling depleted, stuck, or a lack of direction. Ideally groups can avoid getting stuck in ineffective processes and relationship conflicts, and transition toward a more nourishing group culture which supports both individual well-being and accomplishing the group's tasks, aims, and purpose.

It can be difficult to see or identify unconscious aspects of one's own culture, which can lead to unconscious bias (see [Unconscious Bias](#)). Tema Okun's 1999 article '[White Supremacy Culture](#),' which has grown into a rich and vibrant website, outlines several 'characteristics' that can help anyone raised in a 'dominator' culture to identify key aspects of that culture. She also helpfully suggests 'antidotes' which have been co-developed by collaborative teams of anti-racism activists, including her mentor Kenneth Jones. While she warns against weaponising them, she offers her characteristics as useful tools for identifying the shape and scope of many problematic aspects of group culture (see [Pivoting Away from White Supremacy Culture](#)).

Ideally groups can develop more awareness about unconscious, habitual, or undesirable group dynamics or patterns – so as to better recognise, approach, and address them. A transition in group culture can involve clarifying unhelpful or undesirable patterns, so they can be recognised and adjusted before they result in more problems or greater difficulty. Rather than reverting to default behaviours, individuals can have more choice about making behaviour changes that support well-being and a more regenerative group culture.

Making Culture Conscious

It is possible to consciously design a group culture, or make conscious adjustments to an existing group culture. While this may sound strange at first, it is actually quite common. For example, many schools implement anti-bullying programs to change their culture; more and more businesses aim to create a supportive group culture that encourages productivity and innovation. By introducing new aspects to their group culture, some groups have begun consciously experimenting with changing their group culture.

A transition in group culture can be a conscious process of introducing, practising, and embedding new and regenerative patterns, and practices. These might include:

- group agreements (see [Group Agreements](#))
- building trusting and connective relationships (see [Connective Activities for Meetings](#), see [Building Trust](#), see [Task-Process-Relationship](#))
- appreciation and gratitude (see [Feedback Culture](#), see [Offering Appreciation and Gratitude](#))



- expressing empathy and compassion (see [Empathy and Compassion](#))
- supporting emotions (see [Supporting Emotions to Flow](#), [Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions](#))
- prioritising self-care (see Self-Care series [01](#) [02](#) [03](#) [04](#) [05](#) [06](#))
- preventing burnout (see [Burnout to Balance](#))
- mentoring and support (see [Guide - Mentoring](#), see [Seeking Support](#))
- time for reflection (see [Personal Reflection](#), see [Action-Reflection Cycle](#))
- allowing emergence
- peace building (see [Peace Principles](#))
- celebrating mistakes (see [Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#))
- asserting boundaries (see [Compassion for Challenging Behaviour](#), see [Respecting 'Yes' and 'No'](#))
- accountability (see [Effective Groups](#))
- shared leadership (see [Leaderfull Groups](#))
- working together well (see [Working Together Well](#))
- empowerment and distributed power-sharing (see [Leaderfull Groups](#), see [Working Together Well](#), see [Decision Making](#), see [Effective Groups](#)).
- raising awareness (see [Unconscious Bias](#), see [Mainstreams / Margins in Groups](#), see [Transition and Social Justice](#))

Embedding such regenerative practices early on in a group's 'forming stage,' can contribute to a strong foundation of group culture. (see [How Groups Develop](#)). And don't worry if your group didn't do this early on. The good news is you still can! So many kinds of transitions are happening all the time, anytime you can get started is a good time to begin. :-)

Benefits

Ideally a transition in group culture can help to build a stronger and more effective group, increasing trust, energy, and skills. One where

- people can work together well (see [Working Together Well](#), see [Leaderfull Groups](#), see [Effective Groups](#))
- there is a balance of doing and being (see [Task-Process-Relationship](#), see [Burnout to Balance](#))
- people build trust and a sense of safety (see [Building Trust](#), see [The Human Nervous System](#))
- people can communicate honestly with each other (see [Re-Framing Conflict](#), see [Feedback Culture](#), see [Offering and Receiving Feedback](#))
- everyone knows their own feelings and can communicate them (see [Knowing What I Feel](#))
- there is a sincere desire to welcome and understand differences between people in the group (see [Respect for Diversity](#), see [Enhancing Cultural Competence](#))
- there is a sincere desire to find solutions that are genuinely satisfactory for everyone (see [Re-Framing Conflict](#), see [Feedback Culture](#), see [Working Together Well](#), see [Effective Groups](#))
- conflicts are re-framed as opportunities to make long-term improvements and positive changes for everyone involved (see [Re-Framing Conflict](#))
- the group has time for reflection, discernment, responding, or adjusting (see [Action-Reflection Cycle](#)).



Though it may not feel easy in the short-term, a transition in group culture can re-frame how people habitually perceive things, focusing on changing specific elements of culture to be more connective and regenerative.

Barriers

There are many reasons why someone might avoid consciously changing group culture. Typically, these are based on a personal history where this was not encouraged, resulting in beliefs like:

- people in general do not deserve or need to change group culture, so neither does any specific individual
- there will be bad consequences for changing group culture
- the basic idea of changing group culture is somehow wrong
- changing group culture may involve too many expensive transactions
- any form of changing group culture, like changes in behaviour, language, rank, status, or power, is either dangerous or best kept to a minimum.

A transition in group culture can involve being willing to engage in courageous conversations. This can feel uncomfortable or scary, may involve facing uncertainty, and may take some time. Try to have compassion for anyone who may be struggling (including yourself), rather than criticising or being impatient. Ideally, Transitioners can learn to turn towards discomfort with compassion, curiosity, and courage, and begin to embody a more regenerative group culture.

Away and Toward

A transition in group culture will likely involve simultaneously increasing certain practices while decreasing others; moving away from one type and toward another. While a transition in group culture may never be 'complete,' it can be helpful to describe preferred starting and ending points – where a group is moving 'away from' and 'toward'.

A transition in group culture is typically a process

- away from a culture that is dysfunctional, destructive, exploitative, unsustainable, exclusionary, addictive, and which increases suffering for all; and...
- toward a culture that is functional, regenerative, collaborative, sustainable, inclusive, resilient, life-enhancing, and increases liberation for all.

Since group culture often includes helpful and unhelpful elements, it can be useful to ask:

- What is the group doing well? What aspects already contribute toward a desirable group culture? What could be amplified or done more?
- What could use a tune-up or adjustment? What small changes would increase a transition toward a more desirable group culture?
- What is unhelpful? What undesirable patterns or aspects of group culture can we transition away from and reduce?

External and Internal

Ideally, for a transition in group culture to have longevity and continuity, groups can give attention to both external aspects – behaviours, actions, accomplishments, projects – and internal aspects – beliefs, values, purpose, and processes.



For example:

A balanced ecosystem will degrade if it is polluted, depleted, and suffers from losses in biodiversity. This is similar for groups. A group might start out full of energy, shared vision, and good intentions. And that group won't last long if its group culture is unsupportive and extractive, using people's energy and resources faster than they can replenish. This is common in groups that value action more than reflection, tasks more than relationships, external aspects more than internal aspects (see [Action-Reflection Cycle](#), see [Task-Process-Relationship](#), see [Burnout to Balance](#)).

Conversely, if a group starts with people who feel largely tired and depleted, introducing a few regenerative practices can help to support everyone to feel nourished and replenished. The more a group has practices supporting the well-being and empowerment of group members, the greater that group's chances of succeeding in its efforts.

Normalising New Practices

A transition in group culture may involve learning something new – exercising the 'muscles' needed, and practising to become better at it. As a group culture develops, it can involve new practices like: cultivating compassion for self and others, respect for differences, honesty about preferences, and building trust. For example, Brené Brown aims to transition away from a 'culture of shame' toward a 'culture of empathy,' where expressing empathy is much more common. (see [Empathy and Compassion](#), see [Building Trust](#)).

Ideally, a transition in group culture can involve practices that feel appropriate for people from diverse backgrounds. This can be somewhat easier for groups whose members are mostly from the same background. If your group seeks to include people from different backgrounds, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be helpful.

While transitioning toward any new aspect of culture, that aspect eventually becomes normalised as part of the group culture, rather than feeling uncomfortable, separate, or scary. Ideally that aspect will eventually come to be viewed as welcome, easy, and no big deal.

Transitioning any aspect of group culture can feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Regular opportunities to practise can increase familiarity and confidence, while supporting group agreements to try new things. Some groups make time and space to practise new cultural elements together. This supports normalising a new cultural element as part of the group culture.

Making Mistakes

A transition in group culture typically involves disrupting habitual behaviour patterns, which can feel uncomfortable at first. It can be easy to make mistakes or to get new practices wrong. There is often a learning curve. New practices can feel awkward, since there is a lack of experience in knowing how to do them 'well'.

Try allowing people some time to practise and get familiar with new patterns -- not getting it quite right and trying again. During a transition in group culture, a bit of patience, kindness, and compassion can help to reduce the shame commonly associated with failure (see



[Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#), see [Task-Process-Relationship](#), see [Empathy and Compassion](#), see [Feedback Culture](#)).

Try to invite an attitude of what John Maxwell calls 'failing forward' - forgiving each other easily and often; sharing and celebrating mistakes and failures, even learning to laugh at mistakes together. This can include re-framing mistakes as normal, something that can easily happen to anyone. While things may never be 'perfect,' such practices can reduce shame, increase group resilience, and support a transition toward a group culture of empathy and mutual support.

Asserting Boundaries

A transition in group culture can involve empowering group members to approach unwelcome or unhelpful behaviours differently. Ideally such behaviours can be identified, understood, and adjusted. This can be a form of asserting boundaries, ideally done with kindness and compassion for everyone involved. Sometimes asking someone to change a challenging behaviour is best for everyone. Instead of this being an individual responsibility, the group can support well-being by normalising this as everyone's responsibility (see [Feedback Culture](#), see [Effective Groups](#), see [Building Trust](#), see [Compassion for Challenging Behaviour](#) see [Group Agreements](#), see [Respecting 'Yes' and 'No'](#)).

Cultural Dimensions

Anthropologist Geert Hofstede has described important cultural dimensions in communication practices. These dimensions represent a continuum of similarities and differences among cultural groups, rather than fixed positions. No culture is purely one-dimensional; certain situations may highlight one dimension or another. Regardless of the dominant culture, variations typically exist depending on subculture, context, or individual. The six Dimension Maps of the World demonstrate these cultural dimensions by region, broadly observing the dominant culture of each.

| | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Collectivist - Individualist | Long-term - Short-term | Power Distributed - Power Distant |
| High Context - Low Context | Indulgence - Restraint | Uncertainty Tolerant - Uncertainty Avoidant |

Collectivist - Individualist

A collectivist culture places the needs and interests of the group above the individual's desires or motivations. By contrast, an individualist culture reverses this so that the individual's personal goals have higher priority than those of the group.

High Context - Low Context

In high-context communication, the relationships between people affect and can add to meaning; communication and meaning do not solely rely on words. Low-context communication relies mostly on the translation of words to decipher meaning. In nations like the USA, Germany, and Sweden a low-context culture is considered dominant; while in Japan and China a high-context culture is considered dominant.



Long-term - Short-term

A long-term orientation includes thrift, persistence, having a sense of shame, dedication, motivation, responsibility. Such cultures value ordering relationships, work dynamism, commitment, loyalty, and organisational identity. A short-term orientation reverses most of these.

Indulgence - Restraint

Indulgence cultures tend to allow relatively free gratification of natural human desires, enjoying life, and having fun. These cultures value individual happiness, well-being, leisure time, personal freedom and control. Restraint cultures believe gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict norms. Positive emotions are less freely expressed; happiness, freedom, and leisure are not valued so highly.

Power Distributed - Power Distant

Power-distance refers to the extent to which societal power, prestige, and wealth are distributed within a culture. Cultures with high power distance have societal power and influence concentrated in the hands of a few rather than distributed throughout the population. These cultures tend to be more authoritarian, and people are expected to display respect for those of higher status. For example: children are expected to be obedient toward parents; they are not treated as equals. Communication may limit interactions and reinforce the differences between people. 'Superiors' and 'subordinates' consider each other existentially unequal. Power-distributed cultures are more egalitarian and social stratification less pronounced.

Collaborative - Competitive

Competitive cultures strive for the maximum possible distinction between polarised social roles -- men vs. women, winners vs. losers, insiders vs. outsiders. Such cultures place a high value on assertiveness, competition, and material success. Collaborative cultures permit more overlapping of social roles, placing a high value on quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and concern for others.

Uncertainty Tolerant - Uncertainty Avoidant

Some cultures feel more or less threatened by uncertainty, with greater or lesser need for predictability, written or unwritten rules. Uncertainty-avoidant cultures maintain strict codes of behaviour; have a belief in absolute truths, precision, and punctuality; are active, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, intolerant, and security seeking. Leaders are expected to be experts who have all the answers. Uncertainty-tolerant cultures are contemplative, less aggressive, less emotional, more relaxed, accepting of personal risks, and relativistic. Leaders are admired for humility and not knowing all the answers. People work hard only when needed, and there are no more rules than necessary.



Activity

How might these descriptions help a transition in your group culture? Try considering some of these questions on your own, or discussing them with your group:

- How would you describe the kind of culture your group is transitioning 'away from'? Is it more collaborative or competitive? collectivist or individualist? uncertainty avoidant or uncertainty tolerant?
- How would you describe the kind of culture your group is ideally transitioning 'toward'?
- What is your ideal vision for your group's culture? What would be different from how it is now? What specific steps might help your group's culture transition toward your ideal vision?
- Consider a few of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Which of these do you think are most important for your group to focus on? Why?
- In the present, where on the spectrum of each dimension would you place your group's culture? Closer to what you're ideally transitioning away from? or transitioning toward?
- In the past, what specific changes have helped your group to transition its group culture? In the future, what kinds of changes do you think would be helpful?

Summary

A transition in group culture will ideally help groups to increase resilience, develop stronger and more honest relationships, be more effective, have more fun, and be more creative.

Related Resources

Self-Care series [01](#) [02](#) [03](#) [04](#) [05](#) [06](#)
[The Human Nervous System](#)
[Seeking Support](#)
[Compassion for Challenging Behaviour](#)
[Empathy and Compassion](#)
[Burnout to Balance](#)
[Respecting 'Yes' and 'No'](#)
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[Action-Reflection Cycle](#)
[Guide – Mentoring](#)
[Transition and Social Justice](#)
[Respect for Diversity](#)
[Enhancing Cultural Competence](#)
[Unconscious Bias](#)
[Mainstreams / Margins in Groups](#)



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