



STUFF YOU CAN USE

Hi saoumyaa!

If you've ever gone snorkeling or scuba diving, you know this is true—what you see from the boat is only a small glimpse of the world beneath the surface.

Organizational culture works the same way. What we see in our teams at a glance is only a small part of what is going on and what actually shapes how people behave.

We'll dig deeper into this together in the next [Leadership Labs workshop](#). But for now, let's look at what might be hiding beneath the surface of your team.

Let's go back to the ocean imagery. If you've ever seen a photo of an iceberg, you know the visual. There's a sharp, but relatively small, white peak above the waterline—and a massive, unseen structure beneath the surface.

Ship captains know that it's the part beneath the surface you really have to worry about when navigating these waters. Organizational leaders might need to develop these same instincts.

What's visible to us is usually small:

- The mission statement
- The values poster
- The org chart
- The all-hands meeting

But what actually shapes behavior lives below the surface.

And most teams don't notice culture until they are confronted by it.

A new hire joins the team and says, "Oh... so this is how things really work here."

A high performer leaves unexpectedly.

A meeting goes sideways, and no one can explain why it felt tense.

Culture is rarely announced. Instead, it's experienced.

And if you want to create the kind of culture people don't want to leave, you have to learn to see what's underwater.

Here are some of the most reliable indicators.

1. How Decisions Really Get Made

Officially, decisions may follow a clean process.

Unofficially though:

- Does everything bottleneck at one leader?
- Are decisions reversed privately after public agreement?
- Do people avoid speaking honestly until after the meeting?

Research consistently finds that perceived unfairness and opaque decision-making erode trust faster than disagreement itself.

Next time, pay attention to:

- Who speaks first?
- Who speaks last?
- Whose input actually changes outcomes?

Decision patterns reveal power structures, and power structures reveal culture.

2. What Happens When Someone Makes a Mistake

You don't necessarily learn a team's culture during success. Instead, you're more likely to learn it during failure.

Research identifies psychological safety as the strongest predictor of team effectiveness.

Interestingly, though, psychological safety shows up most clearly in moments of error.

When mistakes happen:

- Is the first response curiosity or blame?
- Do people hide problems or surface them early?
- Is feedback direct or avoided?

If people protect themselves more than they protect the work, you've uncovered something dangerous below the surface.

3. What Gets Rewarded (Not What Gets Preached)

Every organization says it values collaboration, integrity, or innovation. Nearly every organization I've ever worked with claims these values.

But culture is defined by what actually gets rewarded.

Pay attention to:

- Who gets promoted?
- Who gets informal influence?
- Which behaviors get public praise?
- Which behaviors are ignored?

If someone hits numbers while steamrolling over teammates and still advances, the culture has spoken.

If someone raises concerns respectfully and gets sidelined, the culture has spoken.

Incentives clarify values more than front-facing statements ever will.

4. The Emotional Tone of Meetings

Meetings are culture in concentrated form.

The next time you're in a team meeting, ask yourself:

- Is the energy tense or open?
- Do people prepare or improvise?
- Are priorities clear or constantly shifting?
- Do people leave aligned or confused?

Research suggests that unclear expectations are one of the strongest predictors of disengagement.

You can often diagnose expectation clarity simply by observing whether people leave meetings knowing:

- What matters most
- What they own
- What "good" looks like

If meetings create motion without clarity, culture is drifting.

5. How Conflict Is Handled

Conflict itself is neutral. It happens in every organization without exception. However, **when conflict is avoided, that reveals a lot about the culture.**

Watch for:

- Side conversations after formal discussions
- Silence when disagreement is warranted
- Over-politeness masking frustration
- Escalation instead of resolution

Healthy cultures normalize productive tension, but unhealthy cultures personalize it.

6. What New Employees Notice First

New hires see culture clearly—for about 90 days. Then they acclimate.

Pay attention to what they ask, such as:

- "Who actually approves this?"
- "Is it okay to challenge that?"
- "Do we normally respond to emails this late?"

Those questions are sonar pings into the base of the iceberg beneath your culture. They reveal hidden norms.

If you want an honest culture audit, ask a recent hire:

"What surprised you most about how we operate?"

Then listen without defensiveness.

Culture Is Already Forming

Here's the takeaway—you don't create culture once. You reinforce it daily through:

- What you tolerate
- What you correct
- What you explain
- What you ignore

Most teams don't drift toward a healthy culture. They drift toward unspoken rules and unexamined habits.

If you want to create the kind of culture people don't want to leave, start by looking below the surface.

The things that impact organizational culture more than anything else are invisible—until they're not. Instead of letting these things sneak up on us later, let's grow in our ability to discover what's beneath the surface today.

Go Deeper in Leadership Labs!

The leaders who build strong cultures aren't the ones who manage what's visible.

They're the ones who learn to see what's underwater.

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