

Culture Under Pressure

Why culture matters most when it is tested

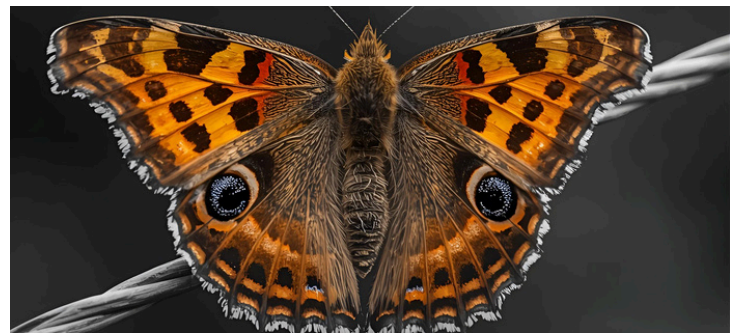
Every organisation talks about culture. Fewer can describe it clearly. Fewer still can sustain it when pressure hits.

In my work as a psychotherapist and consultant, I've seen the same truth play out under strain. We don't always rise to our aspirations, instead we fall back on our ingrained, patterned behaviours. Culture is, in many ways, the muscle memory of an organisation.

This is not theoretical. In today's environment of economic and political volatility, technological disruption, heightened employee expectations, culture often proves decisive in whether an organisation adapts and finds growth.

I was recently invited to discuss exactly this at a webinar hosted by Broadley Speaking, alongside Justin Featherstone, a Leadership Consultant and Expedition Leader. As Justin so aptly put it, *strategy may set the direction, but culture determines whether you can walk the path.*

It was a vibrant and thought-provoking discussion, and I've captured my own key reflections to share with you here.



What culture really is

Culture isn't what's written on the walls, it is what happens when no one is watching. It is both everything and everywhere and yet it is very hard to pin down or describe all at the same time. What we know for sure is that it lives in the actions and decisions we all take.

It shows up in moments like these:

- When people **challenge authority**
- **How** is conflict handled
- When there is a **failure or crisis**

A reflection I often pose to leaders is: Think of the last difficult decision your organisation made. What truly drove it? Values, Revenue, or Convenience? That was your culture in action.

The Human Principles That Hold Culture Together

During this recent webinar on Culture Under Pressure, three principles emerged repeatedly within our discussions.

These are not “soft skills”, they are **operational necessities**. The writing may be warm, but the discipline is hard. That is very much the Muuto way, and the red thread of our work on leadership and culture under pressure.

- **Trust** - Without trust, no strategy survives contact with reality. Trust is the currency that allows truth to surface early, work to flow across boundaries and risk to be managed rather than avoided.
- **Humility** - This is the courage for leaders to hear uncomfortable truths about their own impact and adapt when their behaviour may be undermining culture. Real humility is not simply listening but changing behaviour when necessary.
- **Kindness** – Too often kindness is dismissed as softness, kindness is, in practice, the glue of resilience. When people are treated as expendable, no transformation can truly embed. When people are treated with dignity, they bring their best judgement to the work that matters.

The ‘how’ of making or communicating any change or decision within an organisation, no matter how tough, will determine your culture in the future. It leaves a mark.

My work as a leadership coach and psychotherapist support these very points. The most effective leaders are grounded and deeply self-aware. They lead with humanity and authenticity, not by pretending to have all the answers but by facing the tough questions head on.

When leaders create space for risk taking, missteps, and experimentation, they shift from a “know it all” mindset to a “learn it all” one. Practiced consistently, transparently, and with genuine presence, this approach builds lasting trust.



Pressure reveals resilience

When organisations face crisis, their true culture is exposed. In our webinar discussions we brought ideas about how to build organisational resilience through the culture of an organisation.

• Psychological safety is the antidote to fear:

Fear has always existed at work. Today it is amplified by uncertainty and disruption. Teams without psychological safety default to silence, compliance or blame. Psychological safety is not a luxury. It is a strategic asset. When people feel safe to question assumptions and surface risk early, learning accelerates, and delivery improves.

Teams with psychological safety raise risks early, debate with respect and course correct quickly. For more information on this see our recent [paper](#).

• Courage is everyday practice:

Courage is not a grand gesture. It is the daily choice to make values-led decisions under strain. It balances boldness with care. Undoubtedly our teams look for this in their leaders, especially when times are tough. Leaders who are vocal and open about what it takes to lead, and when courage is needed will also breed trust across the organisation and give permission for others to do the same.

In my work and in the voices of leaders I interviewed for ‘Holding the Line: : Leading Through Uncertainty’, **the most respected leaders did not pretend to have all the answers**. They showed up, named the hard questions, and modelled grounded self-awareness. When they did not know, they said so and then set out how they would find out. The effect was steadying.



- **Subcultures are real:**

Teams, functions, regions and geographic locations carry their own micro cultures. The role of leadership is not to homogenise them but to anchor each of them in the organisational DNA so that difference becomes a source of strength, not confusion. These microcultures develop for a reason, and can work with the prevailing culture if they are acknowledged.

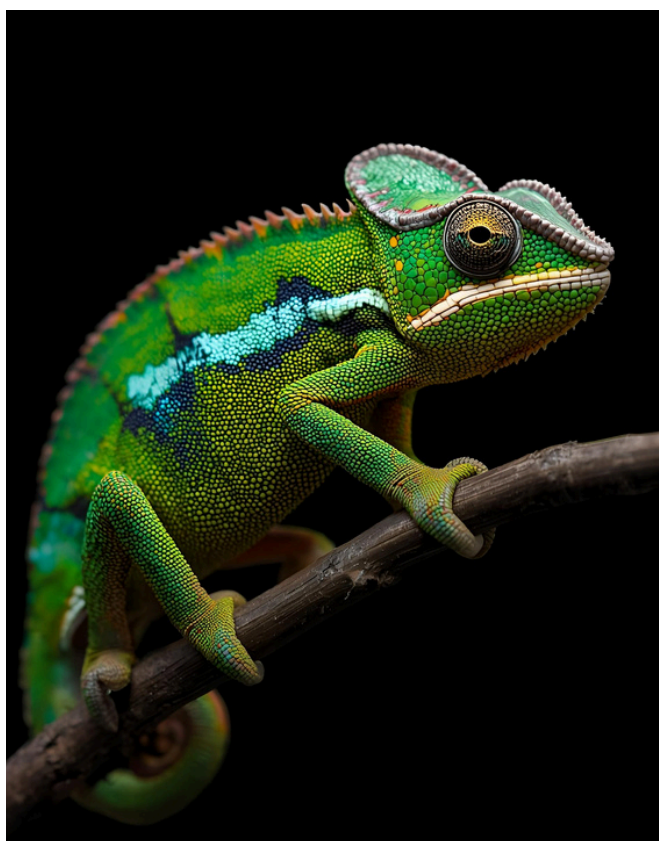
For example, a procurement team which may have found itself isolated at some point in the organisation's evolution may have evolved to be highly critical and focussed or even siloed. Could this be a strength? Could this team or function still align to an empowered and collaborative culture? The answer is yes. What is for certain is that ignoring this micro culture and wishing it different will not bring about value.

In summary, building a culture that is resilient takes focus and work but is essential, especially in this time of rapid change and disruption.

A simple way to approach this is to pressure test your culture in action. Ask of every decision:

1. Does this **reflect** our stated values?
2. Would we act the same way **under pressure**?
3. Would we be **proud** if this became public?

If the answer is "no", it would be advisable to focus hard on developing and deepening organisational culture work, to build organisational resilience before the next crisis arrives.



Make culture tangible

Culture is often called intangible, even I alluded to that at the start of this article, calling it "**everywhere and nowhere**". That only remains true if leaders treat it that way. There are three practical anchors that help make it real:

- **Symbolic acts**

Small actions, repeated consistently, build cultural memory. A leader who spends time with the night shift. A team meeting that starts with a check against values before diving into delivery. These moments signal what matters, much more than we realise and even more when done consistently.

- **Embedded systems**

Recruitment, performance and reward must reinforce what you say that the organisation and the leadership team value. If you claim collaboration matters but reward only individual output, the system will expose this very quickly and it will be confusing and inconsistent.

- **Practical exercises**

Audit your last crisis. What patterns did you see in how people behaved?

Map your subcultures. What strengths do they bring and where are the risks?

Provide the structure and opportunity for teams and individuals to align their purpose and daily actions to the prevailing culture, facilitated by their leaders – have a 'culture day' once a year that focusses on this?

Add one culture metric into leadership appraisals. Trust. Humility. Kindness? Choose one or more and measure it overtly.

These are not gestures. They are the discipline of making culture operational, integrated and a critical lever for performance.





Secure the anchor, then focus

In uncertainty, people **need coherence and predictability**. As I set out in a recent article, 'Holding the Line: Leading Through Uncertainty', stabilisation is the first leadership act. Do people have the tools to do their jobs? Is your licence to operate intact legally, socially and ethically? Is there a golden thread of purpose that connects strategy, culture and delivery. Once secured, focus becomes possible, and noise falls away.

This is not about grand statements. It is about a shared sense of 'why' that holds people together when everything else is moving. Leaders who can say not now as clearly as they say yes protect their teams from strategic fatigue. That balance of pace and pause is a hallmark of credible leadership in difficult conditions.

Who owns culture

Culture belongs to everyone, but leaders set the tone. As Justin Featherstone reminded us all on the webinar **"the standard you walk past is the standard you accept."**

That means:

- If someone delivers results but undermines culture, it cannot be tolerated
- If culture is not visible in how you hire, promote, measure and reward, it will not stick
- If leaders excuse breaches under pressure, culture fractures

Here are some great examples of this in action. In early 2017, allegations of a 'toxic' workplace at Uber triggered an external investigation that sparked reforms to its 'growth at all costs' culture. Confronted with high employee turnover, a damaged brand, and mounting legal challenges, the company ultimately was forced into undertaking a full reset. Uber's early success came at the expense of sustainability, showing that culture ignored today becomes crisis tomorrow. Uber's early culture of growth at all costs eventually required a total reset.

By contrast, Southwest Airlines leaned on an employee first culture through the 2008-09 financial crisis and came through with coherence and commitment intact. While competitors turned to layoffs, Southwest doubled down on supporting and retaining its people. That commitment paid off, even amid industry turmoil. The airline remained profitable, marking its 36th and 37th consecutive years of profitability. Their example shows how a strong, consistent culture doesn't just survive pressure, it thrives through it.





Culture as strategic advantage

Culture is not soft. It is the hardest and **most essential work of leadership** and of the whole organisation. It determines whether your strategy stands a chance, whether your teams have the resilience to adapt, and whether the organisation emerges from pressure stronger or weaker.

For leadership teams, the real question is not whether culture matters, I think we all fundamentally like to believe that. It is whether you are prepared to treat it with the same seriousness as financial performance, technology adoption and stakeholder expectations.

That starts with the anchor of strategy that is enabled by purpose and values. It continues with visible and human leadership and becomes realised through every day actions and decisions made across the organisation. It is then cemented in the systems that measure and reward what you say your value. This is how you hold the line when pressure rises.

"Culture isn't what's written on the walls, it is what happens when no one is watching...what we know for sure is that it lives in the actions and decisions we all take." - Helen Kewell

About the Author



Helen Kewell is a Client Partner at Muuto and has over 25 years' experience gained at a top tier global consultancy, specialising in complex business transformation, culture change and change management. She is also a leadership development and DE&I expert and has previously held operational leadership roles at Carbon Search and C Squared.

Known for her ability to unravel complexity, inspire creative solutions, provide cultural guidance and an excellent motivator of teams. To talk to Helen about leading through uncertainty, or for any coaching on the topic please email helen.kewell@muuto.co.uk.

References:

- Muuto Consulting: [Psychological Safety; Holding the Line: Leading Through Uncertainty](#)
- Broadly Speaking: [Culture Under Pressure Webinar](#)
- Uber Case Study: [Sam Gental: Uber Pays the Price](#)
- Southwestern Airlines Case Study: [The Great Recession: Challenges and Triumphs](#)