CULTURE IS BUILT IN THE CONVERSATIONS THAT DECIDE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Jitske Kramer argues that organisational culture is not a values exercise. It is the system through which groups create meaning, decide who belongs, and turn interaction into consequential choices.



THE ARGUMENT

"Strong organisations are as strong as their mutual relationships."

Formal structures explain where people sit. Culture determines how they interpret events, cross boundaries, speak up, and make decisions. The managerial task is to shape those conditions deliberately.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

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THE REAL ORGANISATION

The organisation chart conceals the organisation

Work moves through relationships, loyalties, and group boundaries long before it moves through formal reporting lines.

Most organisations can describe themselves in boxes and lines. The diagram is useful: it shows positions, reporting relationships, and formal authority. Yet Jitske Kramer suggests that it gives leaders a misleading picture of how work actually happens. People do not act on charts and positions alone. They act on relationships.

A colleague helps because another colleague once helped them. A project gains momentum because someone trusts the person asking. Information travels through friendships, reputations, obligations, and informal brokers. These ties form a second organisational chart - less visible than the first, but often more decisive.

That observation changes the unit of analysis. An organisation is not simply a collection of roles, systems, and spreadsheets. It is a community of people carrying feelings, judgments, ideas, loyalties, and prejudices. Its strength therefore depends on the quality of the relationships through which those human realities are negotiated.

Kramer's claim is not that hierarchy is imaginary. It is that hierarchy operates inside a social field. A formal leader may hold decision rights yet lack trust. A specialist may have no managerial title yet connect groups that would otherwise remain isolated. A project team may look complete on paper while failing because its members have not formed the relationships required to challenge one another or ask for help.

Seen this way, a reorganisation changes less than its new boxes imply. Reporting lines can move overnight while reciprocal obligations, trusted routes, and old suspicions remain intact. Before redrawing the structure, leaders need to understand which relationships carry cooperation, which people connect otherwise separate groups, and where formal authority is compensating for an absence of trust.

Anthropology helps explain why this field is so powerful. Human beings live in groups, and every group creates a boundary. The boundary defines who belongs, what behaviour is expected, and whose interpretation of events can be trusted. Inside an organisation, departments, professions, locations, and leadership teams all develop versions of this logic.

Boundaries can create identity and coordination. They can also produce fragmentation, isolation, and the familiar complaint of 'island cultures.' The critical management question is what happens at the edge: does the group build a wall, open a door, or become curious about the people on the other side?

Belonging also shapes voice. If exclusion is the worst outcome for a group member, a different view becomes socially expensive. An employee may protect membership by withholding a concern, even when that concern would improve the decision. A silent room can therefore look aligned while concealing knowledge that the organisation needs.

For leaders, culture work begins here. It is not primarily about publishing preferred behaviours. It is about understanding the actual relationship network, strengthening the bridges between groups, and reducing the social cost of contributing a dissenting view.

Boundary work is practical. It means identifying the people who already translate between groups, creating reasons for departments to exchange knowledge before a crisis, and modelling curiosity when another group uses a different language or logic. The measure is not the number of cross-functional meetings. It is whether difficult information can cross a boundary without the messenger losing standing.

"We act on relationships."

The informal organisation is not noise around the structure. It is the medium through which the structure becomes real.



HOW CULTURE BECOMES CONCRETE

Culture turns ambiguity into action

People create shared stories about what is good, true, effective, and acceptable - then embed those stories in systems.

Culture solves a basic human problem: events do not arrive with their meaning attached. The same act can be read differently in a boxing ring, a family, or a boardroom. People need stories that distinguish right from wrong, effective from ineffective, and respectful from unacceptable. Groups supply those stories, and their members begin to believe them.

Kramer describes culture as a chain. It begins with values - the things a group considers important. Values become behaviour because importance has to be expressed in action. Repeated behaviour becomes a norm, including the implicit norms enforced through group pressure. Together, those norms form a narrative: this is who we are, what we believe, and how things are done here.

The narrative then hardens into the physical and administrative world. Processes, structures, performance indicators, technology, and even buildings express the group's assumptions. Culture is therefore not the soft layer that remains after strategy and operations have been designed. It is present in the design itself.

This is why a values campaign can fail even when its language is compelling. If a company says that collaboration matters but rewards only individual results, the performance system tells the more credible story. If leaders ask for candour but punish inconvenient news, employees learn the actual norm. If a strategy requires cross-functional work while budgets and careers remain locked inside silos, the structure protects the old culture.

The managerial implication is diagnostic. When a system blocks the behaviour an organisation wants, leaders should not treat culture and process as separate problems. They should trace the conflict back through the chain: which story does the system embody, which norm does it reinforce, and which value is truly being protected?

Kramer offers another useful formulation: cultures are unique answers to universal questions. Every group must decide how to handle time, authority, conflict, care, performance, and communication. The questions recur across families, countries, departments, and teams. The answers differ - and people can mistake their own answer for the only legitimate one.

THE CULTURE CHAIN

VALUES → BEHAVIOUR → NORMS → NARRATIVE → SYSTEMS

A culture becomes durable when meaning is translated into the mechanisms that organise everyday life.

TWO MECHANISMS

Interaction and decision-making are the machinery of culture

Groups reproduce culture through whose voices enter the conversation and how the resulting choices acquire authority.

INTERACTION

Interaction is where a group creates meaning. People compare interpretations, tell stories, test boundaries, and decide which behaviour receives approval. The quality of that interaction determines how much knowledge enters the collective view.

A useful dialogue is not one in which everyone speaks for the same amount of time. It is one in which relevant differences can surface without threatening membership. That requires leaders to notice who is absent, who is routinely translated by others, and which topics make the room suddenly careful.

Difference can appear as creativity or conflict depending on how the group receives it. Treating disagreement as disloyalty narrows the culture's intelligence. Treating every disagreement as equally valid avoids responsibility. The task is to make the difference discussable before the group has to act.

DECISION-MAKING

Decision-making turns a conversation into consequences. It determines where money goes, which projects survive, who is hired or dismissed, and which behaviours are reinforced. A culture is shaped not only by what people say but by what the organisation repeatedly chooses.

Kramer condenses the design challenge into two conditions: everyone must be able to add to the dialogue, and it must be clear who decides what. These conditions belong together. Voice without a decision creates frustration. A decision without meaningful voice creates compliance, resistance, or silence.

Clarity does not require that every choice be democratic. It requires that people understand the decision process, the authority involved, and how their contribution will be used. The result is not permanent consensus. It is a legitimate route from plural perspectives to coordinated action.

A CULTURE AUDIT FOR A CONSEQUENTIAL DECISION

1. Which groups will experience the decision differently?
2. Whose interpretation is missing from the dialogue?
3. What social risk does speaking candidly create?
4. Who has the authority to decide, and is that understood?
5. Which system will reinforce the choice after the meeting?

These questions are an editorial synthesis of Kramer's two-process model.

RHYTHM WORLDS

Different groups can answer the same question at a different rhythm

A meeting format that feels efficient to one group may feel abrupt, evasive, or untrustworthy to another.



Jitske Kramer uses rhythm as a practical way to notice differences in how groups work, relate, and interpret communication.

Every group creates a beat for working, living, and being together. Drawing on the work of Richard Lewis, Kramer contrasts three broad rhythm worlds. The point is not to turn people into cultural types. It is to show how the same universal task - discussing a difficult issue - can be organised through very different expectations.

In one rhythm, the agenda is explicit, the task list arrives in advance, attention stays on the work, and eye contact is direct. The body is ready to move from point to point. This rhythm supports focus, sequencing, and task orientation.

In another, contact comes before the agenda. People locate one another socially, conversation moves through several strands, and meaning emerges in the relational space between participants. This rhythm supports brainstorming, responsiveness, and an understanding of where others stand.

A third rhythm is more context-sensitive. Participants scan the situation, allow more time, and attend to what comes before the explicit message. Direct eye contact is less central than sensing the field and preserving harmony. This rhythm can support reflection, cohesion, and a longer view.

Kramer argues that organisations need all three. A sales group may require a different beat from research and development. The goal is not to mix every team into the same tempo. It is to recognise when a difference is functional, when it creates avoidable friction, and when a strategic decision needs more than one rhythm.

Managers often mistake their preferred rhythm for professionalism itself. They ask for a task list from a group that builds commitment through relationship, or demand open debate from a group that communicates concern through context. Better leadership translates between rhythms and designs a sequence in which task, relationship, and reflection can each contribute.

DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Do not ask which rhythm is best. Ask which rhythm the work requires, which one the group defaults to, and what translation is needed at the boundary.

CAMPFIRE CONVERSATIONS

Bullet points can coordinate work. They rarely transform it.

Change depends on conversations in which people can express doubt, revise a view, and alter the meaning they share.

Kramer distinguishes transactional interaction from transformational interaction. Transactional meetings organise what has already been organised. They distribute information, track tasks, and maintain an existing plan. They are necessary, but the transaction does not change the participants or the assumptions behind the work.

A transformational conversation resembles a campfire. People approach it without complete certainty. They disclose what is worrying them, listen with an open mind, and remain willing to change their interpretation. The test is not whether the room feels warm. It is whether the exchange can change what people think, feel, or choose.

These conversations belong at the centre of strategy. They are needed where an organisation decides how to spend money, which technology to adopt, whom to hire, what to stop, and how to respond to a difficult change. Moving them to an informal coffee corner leaves the official decision process untouched.

The most common objection is time. Leaders are too busy for a slow conversation. Kramer answers by connecting the objection to the disappointing performance of many change programmes. People shape culture by creating meaning together. When transformation is reduced to tasks and communications, leaders remove the process through which a group can reinterpret its world.

Campfire does not mean endless discussion. It is the interaction side of Kramer's model; decision-making must still follow. The discipline lies in protecting a space where the relevant truths can surface, then making the authority and next step explicit.

The quality of the room can be assessed directly. Can people challenge the dominant interpretation? Can they say what they fear losing? Can a leader change their mind without losing status? Can participants leave knowing both what was heard and who will decide? If not, the meeting may be efficient while the transformation remains largely fictional.

TWO MODES OF INTERACTION

BULLET POINT

Coordinate
Clarify tasks
Track delivery
Reduce variation
Maintain the plan

CAMPFIRE

Explore uncertainty
Share concerns
Listen openly
Change meaning
Transform the plan

"Nothing has meaning of itself. We have to create the meaning together."

The practical question

Which of your consequential meetings are designed for transformation - and which only look like it?

THE LEADERSHIP TASK

Strong cultures balance the force to move with the connection to listen

Dissent is not a disruption to culture. It is one of the ways a culture updates itself when the world changes.



Jitske Kramer at HR WEEK Warsaw.

Kramer uses the image of one bird facing the opposite direction to describe the person who sees the situation differently. Groups often answer that person with an instruction to 'act normal,' accompanied by the eye-roll that makes the real norm unmistakable.

The short-term effect is order. The longer-term cost is adaptation. Every significant change begins with a view that does not yet fit the group. When that view cannot be expressed safely, it moves into jokes, excuses, avoidance, sabotage, or resistance. In what Kramer calls tricky times, leaders need enough direction to move while preserving enough relationship to hear what that direction is doing to people.

POWER

Goals, boundaries, performance, and the energy to make choices.

LOVE

Connection, curiosity, care, and the willingness to listen.

Either force becomes dangerous when it operates without the other.

Power gives an organisation goals, boundaries, and a moral compass. It creates the energy to choose and continue when the environment is chaotic. Without connection, however, power becomes exhausting. Love is Kramer's deliberately provocative word for the counterforce: sitting at the campfire, asking how people are doing, and listening for what a responsible response requires. Love without power is also insufficient because the group may avoid the choices reality demands.

A strong culture holds both forces. It connects where possible, fights when necessary, heals when needed, and says goodbye when no other path remains. For HR and organisational leaders, the mandate is concrete: map the relationships that carry work, examine the stories embedded in systems, design dialogue across group boundaries, make decision rights visible, and protect campfire conversations for choices that reshape the organisation. Culture is what the company repeatedly becomes through those choices.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article develops ideas shared by Jitske Kramer at HR WEEK Warsaw in 'Crack the Culture Code: Building a Future Proof Organisation.' It is based on the recorded presentation; claims and examples have not been independently verified.