



WORKPLACE CULTURE AUDIT PAGE 1



When you love what you do, you'll never truly work. Ok, so we're paraphrasing a little, but it rings true; work will end up feeling more like a choice than a burden. But how do you start to love your work? Being passionate about education helps, of course, but the workplace culture in your school or multi-academy trust plays a significant role too, both in the performance of your school or MAT as a whole but also the happiness of those who work there.

It can feel invisible when you're immersed in it and that, in turn, can make it difficult to fully understand your workplace culture and, more importantly, recognise what areas need improvement. At times like this, carrying out a workplace culture audit is a good idea.

Below, we've provided a range of prompts to guide you through carrying out your own workplace culture audit...

ARE THERE LIVED WORKPLACE VALUES?

It's all very well promoting what your school or trust stands for, but sometimes this projection can fall down at the door if the related actions and behaviours are lacking.

If there are a set of communicated values at your company – do you know them? Do you understand why those specific values and how they show up (or are supposed to) day-to-day? Is that what everyone sees? Do both you and your leadership team emanate those values, or are the values gathering dust in a buried policy somewhere?

At a simpler level, how closely aligned is what the school claims to be and the real experience of the people working there? The bigger this gap, the more work there is to do, as this is likely negatively impacting engagement, retention, growth and of course, psychological safety.

DO YOU REWARD WHAT YOU WANT REPEATED?

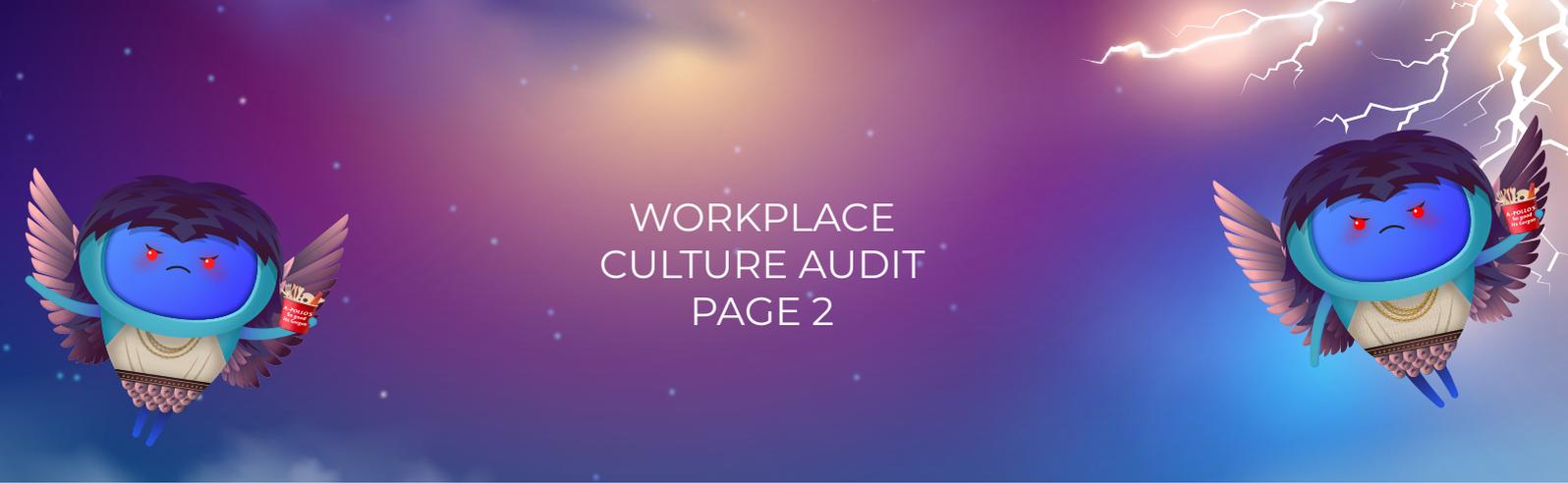
Building on the first point, it's valuable to map out what's currently reinforced and encouraged. This could be informal: shout-outs in team meetings and thank you messages, or more formal: performance metrics, bonus criteria and people policies.

Are there contradictions? For example, if you're telling everyone teamwork is a core value but performance reviews or bonuses focus solely on individual success, then there's a disconnect.

As Jacques Barzun suggests, 'We get the culture we deserve.' We also get the culture we allow. So, it's not just what we champion and hold up as brilliant that sticks. It's also what we turn a blind eye to, what we're aware of but ultimately choose to ignore. By doing nothing to dissuade toxic behaviours, especially as leaders and role models in the business, we're essentially saying, 'That's fine here.'

Values aside for a moment then, what's the actual experience like for people at your workplace? What's brushed under the rug? What's illuminated as 'above and beyond'? And what are the consequences, limitations and ongoing impact of these choices?





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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE DISAGREES?

Study the meetings you're in to see what types of interactions take place. See if you can be a fly on the wall in others. Does everyone agree with each other? Are there healthy discussions, or when certain people put forward ideas, does everyone get in line without question or get rapidly shut down? If someone puts forward a different point of view, or challenges an idea, what happens next?

Do people feel comfortable to disagree? In our annual engagement survey, we ask people to anonymously report on their experience of disagreeing with one another – how safe and respected they feel. It's handy (if you can) to understand where the specific problems are (if they exist at all) – managers, teams, departments, meetings or across the culture as a whole?

ARE THERE ECHO CHAMBERS?

Sometimes, if we let decision-making groups gather organically, we can end up with the same people driving everything. They might have great ideas and confidently put themselves forward – all good things – but if it's only ever certain voices in the mix or this intimidates others, we can lose diverse perspectives and create an 'us and them' culture.

Do senior teams tend to include people with the same problem-solving style? Are there opportunities for everyone or different people to get involved? If you don't work within an echo chamber, can you pinpoint how the workplace culture encourages people to challenge ideas? Could teams become even more empowered to disagree and collaborate? If so, how?

Think of a time that you or someone else raised a valid challenge and was ignored or shut down. What were the repercussions? Was it ever acknowledged that the challenge should have been explored? Did it discourage you or others from speaking up in the future? If this happened in a workplace you no longer work in, was it part of why you left?

IS THERE A BLAME CULTURE?

Schools and multi-academy trusts shine brightest when things are going well – it's much easier to get along when the pressure's off and there are lots of wins to celebrate. The real endurance test is when things aren't as shiny or when things feel tense due to stress, deadlines and mistakes.

When things go wrong, how is it handled? Do people hold up their hands, take responsibility for their part, and get cracking on a solution, learning something important for the next time? Or is it blame pass-the-parcel, a series of excuses – always someone else and something else?

Leaders, more than anyone, set the tone here. So much of culture starts (or is killed off) at the top. Are your leaders open to sharing their misstep stories, or are they keen to elude perfection? Is your school or multi-academy trust more stick than carrot?





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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LEADERS DON'T LOVE THE FEEDBACK?

So, your annual engagement survey runs like clockwork and the data is there. 360 feedback is alive and well regardless of seniority and there's a culture of questioning. But when something is raised which isn't positive, or is sensitive or feels personal, how is the message received?

Does your school publicise the acclaim and shy away from criticisms or suggestions that change is needed? Does it paint over the cracks?

When a problem does emerge – is it talked about with gusto for a few weeks, but ultimately no action plan is put in place and it gradually drifts off the agenda? If people start believing that though they're asked to share their opinions, there's only one correct opinion, and it's really just a tick-box exercise, they'll likely stop sharing (or worse – leave for somewhere that actually listens). Look at your sources of feedback in the organisation and see how many times follow-up happens, and if next steps are set in motion. Is anything communicated at all?

It's not expected that you'll act on every single point of view, but it is vital that you're transparent about the purpose of asking for feedback and clear on what you're going to do (or not going to do) with the information you get back.

ARE PEOPLE CELEBRATED FOR BEING ROBOTS?

There's a real spectrum of perspectives circling on how much responsibility you should take for personal wellbeing. Rather than weigh in on this debate here (which we do in many of our blogs!), we've got some great questions to help you consider your current and future approach.

A great place to start is understanding what's happened historically when someone isn't well – mentally or physically? What series of events does that admission (or someone spotting warning signs) trigger? Are there resources, training, support or guidance available? Is caring for and helping others integral to management development? Are people encouraged to take sick leave when they need it or is it really perceived as 'slacking' or assuming the individual is lying? On the flipside of this, is endless stoicism or putting a happy face on it encouraged and celebrated? Is it seen as a strong move to admit or show vulnerability or is it seen as weakness and worse still, penalised?

Your policies towards people also tell a story about your culture – they might be ignored or different to the lived experience but in theory, they represent the the school or trust's stance on people. So, what do they say? Do they sync up with the company values? Do they reflect how people managers behave? Are they empathetic and relevant? How do you feel, as a person when you review them?

FINAL THOUGHTS...

The answers to these questions will provide you with a snapshot of the workplace culture that exists within your organisation and will help you to identify areas that can be improved. Having a positive workplace culture where people feel psychologically safe is an important factor in attracting and retaining the right people, and ultimately, will contribute to a more inclusive place to be. We hope you found this audit guide helpful!

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