



CULTURE SHOCKS OR CULTURE RISE?

15
Inclusion
Trends
2026



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CULTURE AND CHANGE

Are cultures clashing, or are we seeing the rise of inclusive cultures where differences are understood, celebrated, and included?

Workplace culture is more fragile than many leaders think.

Pressure is rising. Trust is shifting. Employees are watching what leaders do, not what they say. Are you moving forwards? Or falling back? Sharing power, or protecting it? Is your culture one where everyone can belong, or environments where only a few can thrive?

Budgets are being questioned. Statements are being scrutinised. Younger employees are pushing harder. AI is accelerating bias faster than most workplaces can manage.

Belonging is becoming a performance issue, not a wellbeing one. And people are tired of being told to care without seeing progress. This is what we are seeing as we head into 2026. The story is not about who is represented any more. It's about who holds influence, power, who gets access, who is listened to, and who is left out. What happens when culture is tested and put under pressure? Does that lead to clashes or does it lead to a rise in inclusion?



CULTURE CAN CLASH OR RISE

Some will respond by tightening control. Others will open up, share power, and redesign how they work.

Your actions will determine if culture clashes or rises in your teams.

HERE ARE THE 15 TRENDS WE SEE...



CULTURE CLASH OR CULTURE RISE?

With global conflicts, and different opinions, we have seen employees clash. Employers want to create inclusive cultures. What happens when your employees have very different opinions on things outside your control? Allyship is key, and showing those under pressure that they have support.

This can lead to the rise of a more inclusive culture if you can work out how to navigate the clashes. Enabling people to work with people who are different and think differently can lead to people talking more, and sharing more.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

The concept of inclusion has been weaponised by political parties and other leaders in the UK and overseas. People read and share different things, and believe different things. There are divisions, and people are not usually ready to talk to those they disagree with.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Work on inclusive communication
- ✓ Training on disagreements
- ✓ Show people you are listening
- ✓ Be clear on guidelines
- ✓ Communicate about tolerances

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ALGORITHMIC BIASES

With AI tools being adopted everywhere, what are the impacts of the biases? When AI is being used for people processes, recruitment systems, promotions, and pay, what are the impacts? There are legal and ethical risks to consider. Relying on biased AI tools can impact your reputation, but more importantly, it can influence your decisions.

If there are biases in society, AI will mirror them at scale. Decisions around what tools you use, how your employees engage and whether you have any policies will be the key ways in which you can mitigate the biases.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Ethical AI governance is a big topic for most organisations. The advantages of using AI are clear to many. With faster data and ideas processing, content generation and triaging of decisions, the appeal is there. Understanding the biases is key. And considering what you use AI for, and where the people are needed will help you as a leader.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Engage people on where to use AI
- ✓ Consider policies and ethics
- ✓ Talk to people about job roles
- ✓ Understand the risks involved
- ✓ Measure how 'AI aware' people are

GEN Z CAREER REBELLION

Gen Z is not disengaged. They are disinterested in the version of work that has been handed to them. The promise of stability, progression and rewards has not matched reality. So they are building careers on their own terms. Side gigs, freelance-first, portfolios, values-based projects. They are choosing autonomy over loyalty, and purpose over management.

This is about a value-shift and different motivations. Clinging to rigid career paths and outdated ways of working will lose this generation fast. If you want Gen Z to work with you, you have to change your offer.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

This generation has been through the pandemic, structural and societal inequalities, and a world facing wars, climate crisis, and instabilities. The old ways of working are simply not appealing. This generation prefers to rebuild and create for themselves. Work has to be purposeful to engage them.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Listen, and show you're listening
- ✓ Share power and responsibilities
- ✓ Be clear on purpose and values
- ✓ Adapt to different ways of working
- ✓ Inter-generational work training

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THE FEEDBACK VOID

Employees have been surveyed, pulse-checked and questioned again. Yet many do not believe anything will change. The gap between what people are asked and resulting actions is widening. So response rates fall. Trust erodes. Engagement becomes performative.

This is about accountability. If employees do not see decisions, behaviour or culture shifts, they stop speaking. Surveys and feedback need to lead to action, and power shifting. The annual survey needs to switch to regular pulse-checking, quicker feedback, updates on commitments and clear owners for actions.

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Employee engagement remains at around 62% in the UK, showing no post-pandemic recovery. The UK is behind other countries in motivation, engagement, and productivity. If people are asked to give their responses and feedback, they need to see actions. Without this, people disengage, 'quiet quit' or look for other jobs.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Look at data and feedback
- ✓ Ensure leaders listen and respond
- ✓ Address inequities in responses
- ✓ Show clear actions and timelines
- ✓ Engage people with ideas

A man with glasses and a light blue shirt is sitting on a grey sofa, smiling while using a laptop. A smartphone is on the sofa next to him. The background shows a large window with a view of a city.

THE RETURN TO CONTROL

After the flexibility that we saw adopted during the pandemic, many companies are now pulling people back into offices. Leaders are seeking control. Removing flexibility affects trust, wellbeing, parents and carers, access to work, and how comfortable people feel in their roles.

If returning to the office becomes a culture of surveillance over connection, it will push out people with disabilities, parents, carers, those who do not live in cities and those who find offices uncomfortable. Culture is not proximity. Culture is how people feel when they work. The choice is control versus trust.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

To attract and retain people, culture is key to people's decisions and motivations. Leaders need to consider *why* they are taking away flexible approaches that have worked. Parents expect flexibility, for many others, this way of working has led to improved lives. Why do leaders want control and surveillance instead of trusting people?

ACTIONS

- ✓ Work on cultures of trust
- ✓ Be clear about expectations
- ✓ Ask employees what they want
- ✓ Create systems that work flexibly
- ✓ Question why you want surveillance

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ONE SIZE FITS NO-ONE

The era of generic work perks is over. Employees do not want ping-pong tables, doughnuts on Thursdays or a branded water bottle. People want benefits that recognise who they are and what they need. Some will want flexible hours. For others, it's parental leave, professional development, menopause support or cycle to work schemes.

The offer needs to be personalised and offer choices and equity. Benefits are no longer about treats, they are about belonging. The opportunity is to build benefits around choice, relevance and dignity. Showing people they matter.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Just one quarter of UK employees say their benefits meet their personal needs, it's time to re-think these perks. Pizza, beer and ping-pong only suit some people. Others want the things that matter to them. With rising needs for healthcare support, mental health support and family support, employers need to show they care.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Ask people what they want
- ✓ Research employee benefits
- ✓ Offer choices to people
- ✓ Survey for suggestions
- ✓ Keep track of uptake

PURPOSE OR PASS

Sustainability statements or glossy reports are not impressing people. Companies need to prove how they are reducing harm, investing in communities and acting responsibly. The expectation has shifted from marketing to evidence.

This matters for recruitment, retention and reputation. People are choosing employers based on values alignment. If you can't show how decisions connect to the future of the planet and society, people switch off.

This is about being honest, transparent, and accountable. Sustainability has become a company culture signal. Is your workplace worth belonging to?



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Showing people what you stand for has many impacts. Attracting and retaining employees depends on this. Certifications and reports are one thing, actions are another. Consider how you show people what the purpose and values of the organisation are. And engage people in the actions.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Review purpose and values
- ✓ Set sustainability goals
- ✓ Involve employees in actions
- ✓ Review suppliers and partners
- ✓ Connect with communities

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THE RISE OF EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM

People are not waiting for employers to act. When they see inequity, silence or injustice, they mobilise. They organise open letters, petitions and coordinated walkouts. They speak publicly on social platforms. They push leaders to be clear about what they stand for.

This is not a fringe behaviour. It is becoming a cultural norm. Silence is viewed as an act. Influence is collective, not hierarchical.

Employees now hold leaders accountable. Employee activism is not a threat to manage, it is feedback and a factor in creating your culture.

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Younger generations have a lot to be angry and feel injustice about. The difference now is that people do something about it. This can create conflict with conflicting opinions on societal issues. People are looking to see how their leaders act and whether the company takes a stance.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Listen to people
- ✓ Train people on disagreeing
- ✓ Create guidelines on activism
- ✓ Consider what you stand for
- ✓ Advise on what you support



THE DATA MIRAGE

Employers keep collecting data. Dashboards, scorecards, heatmaps and engagement metrics are multiplying. But data alone does not create change. Many are reporting numbers without context, meaning or accountability. Employees are noticing.

When data is collected but nothing shifts, you lose trust. People stop sharing. Marginalised groups become wary of how their identity is being recorded and used. The story becomes one of monitoring, not progress. The real value of data is not in the numbers. It is in what you do next. Data needs interpretation. Insight. Story. Connection. What do metrics say about power, culture and belonging?



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Data without reasons and actions deepens mistrust. By contrast, data with context, stories and actions, creates trust. How are you using the data you have? Tell people why you are asking for data, how and when it is stored, and what the resulting actions are. Without this, people will stop sharing.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Explain why you need data
- ✓ Review data storage and actions
- ✓ Show what has changed
- ✓ Ask who wants to be involved
- ✓ Be clear about what data is shared



NO SKILLS, NO FUTURE

AI is stripping out the entry-level work that once taught people how to learn, collaborate and grow. Tasks that used to build confidence and experience are now automated. The ladder has fewer rungs. And people know it.

This is creating a new pressure on skills and training. Employees want real development, not online training libraries collecting dust. They want skills that transfer across roles, sectors and futures. Skills that build influence, problem solving, creativity and strategic thinking. If organisations cannot offer growth, employees will find it elsewhere.

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Do employers treat skills as optional or essential? The companies that invest in genuine learning will attract and keep talent. The ones that do not will watch talent plateau, disengage and leave. People will stay in roles where they see a future. Three-quarters of UK employees would stay with an employer who invests in their learning and development.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Allocate training budget
- ✓ Develop career plans
- ✓ Create talent programmes
- ✓ Ask people what their needs are
- ✓ Set up mentoring programmes

THE BELONGING REBRAND

Belonging used to be framed as comfort. Feeling welcome. Feeling included. Feeling like you fit. But comfort is not enough. In 2026, belonging is being redefined as contribution. It is not about being invited into the room. It is about being valued once you are there. With the backlash against inclusion, belonging has become more powerful.

Employees want to feel that their perspective matters. That their identity is not something to manage, soften or hide. That they are shaping decisions, not just sitting in the audience. Belonging becomes visible in voice, influence and impact.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

There is a risk that belonging becomes the new tick-box ineffective initiative. Posters, slogans and warm words with no change in power or behaviour. Get this wrong and there will be a culture of surface-level positivity and quiet disengagement. This needs to feel meaningful, and not yet another re-brand.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Acknowledge inequalities
- ✓ Sit with uncomfortable feedback
- ✓ Look at engagement
- ✓ Check all voices are heard
- ✓ Share power and decision-making



THE POWER DIVIDE

Inclusion conversations have focused on representation for years. Who is in the room. Who gets hired. Who is visible. But in 2026, the question shifts from who is present to who has power. Because power has moved. It now sits in data, algorithms and digital influence.

The systems deciding who is promoted, who is recognised, who is a 'top performer' and who gets access to opportunity are increasingly automated and invisible. If those systems are designed by a narrow group, the power imbalance deepens. Representation without influence changes very little.

The new inclusion battleground is ownership. Who owns actions, power and makes decisions.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Representation alone does not fix inclusion. If people are hired as tokens, but power is not shared then then work is not started. The organisations that understand this will redesign decision-making with transparency and shared governance. The ones that do not will reinforce exclusion at scale.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Review decision-making
- ✓ Look at new leadership models
- ✓ Take a critical look at power
- ✓ Engage people in decisions
- ✓ Help people to influence

INCLUSION FATIGUE

People are tired of talking about inclusion without seeing change. Training has increased. Statements have multiplied. But many employees say their day-to-day experience has stayed the same. In some organisations, the language of inclusion now feels overused, unresolved and disconnected from reality.

This is not resistance to inclusion. It is resistance to performative inclusion. When employees do not see action, transparency or accountability, cynicism spreads. Fast. And once trust erodes, it is difficult to rebuild. We are beyond awareness days and cupcakes. It's time for action.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

There is a shift from messaging to meaning. People want to see measurable change over logo changes and social media posts. Be open about whether progress has stalled or you are out of ideas. Consider who can re-energise, and be honest, with clear commitments.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Address where you are on inclusion
- ✓ Move away from performative
- ✓ Be honest with people
- ✓ Re-energise with involvement
- ✓ Create purposeful plans



THE TRANSPARENCY TEST

Employees now expect clarity on pay, promotion criteria, performance decisions and leadership intentions. Hidden processes are no longer tolerated. If employees cannot see how decisions are made, they assume the system is unfair.

Trust is built or broken in how transparent leaders are willing to be. Companies that share how pay bands work, how performance is evaluated, how opportunities are allocated and how decisions are reached create psychological safety and reduce anxiety. Those that keep systems opaque will see rumours, mistrust and disengagement grow.



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Consider what you are afraid of revealing and why. Two-thirds of employees believe promotions are influenced more by relationships than performance. The things that are important to people are career progression, pay and opportunities. If these things are hidden, people become mistrustful of their employers.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Share pay and performance data
- ✓ Explain career paths
- ✓ Share mistakes and learning
- ✓ Create cultures of safety
- ✓ Explain performance factors

THE INVISIBLE WORKLOAD

In every organisation there is work that keeps culture alive: mentoring, emotional support, community building, onboarding, organising initiatives, shaping team cohesion. This work is overwhelmingly done by women, people of colour, and those with marginalised identities. And it is rarely recognised, rewarded or measured.

Confront the inequity in who carries the emotional labour of inclusion. If invisible work is not valued, those who do it burn out. Are the same people expected to take on the extra tasks over others? How are these things shared?



KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

Working on your culture is real work. It takes time, effort and mental load. If work on inclusion always falls to the same people, who have their own lived experiences, are you sharing the load? Employees doing high levels of 'unseen support work' are 2.5 times more likely to report burnout.

ACTIONS

- ✓ Review who is working on inclusion
- ✓ Offer support and budget
- ✓ Ask others to get involved
- ✓ Look at who is not involved
- ✓ Which leaders are supporting?

HOW CAN WE HELP?

If this has sparked thoughts about areas you need help with, we are here!

Training

We run a range of programmes designed to help you and your teams on all the issues raised by these trends.

Employee Engagement

Whether you run a survey already, or you are not sure how to act on the results, we can help you set goals and measure progress.

Defining values

Clarify your organisational values, and how they translate into action.

Future Leaders programme

Training and coaching to develop a more diverse and inclusive leadership team.

Team Away Days

Energise and bring people together in a day customised for your team.

NEXT STEPS

- [Book a call with us to discuss your plans](#)
- [Follow us on social media](#)
- [Visit our website](#)
- [Buy The Inclusion Journey Book](#)



GET STARTED

Same World, Different Perspectives

A thought-provoking half-day or full-day interactive workshop designed to get people thinking and re-energised about inclusion. With practical ideas and actions to take. A great way to get started for 2026.