

# Habanero guide to building your intentional culture



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# An introduction to this guide

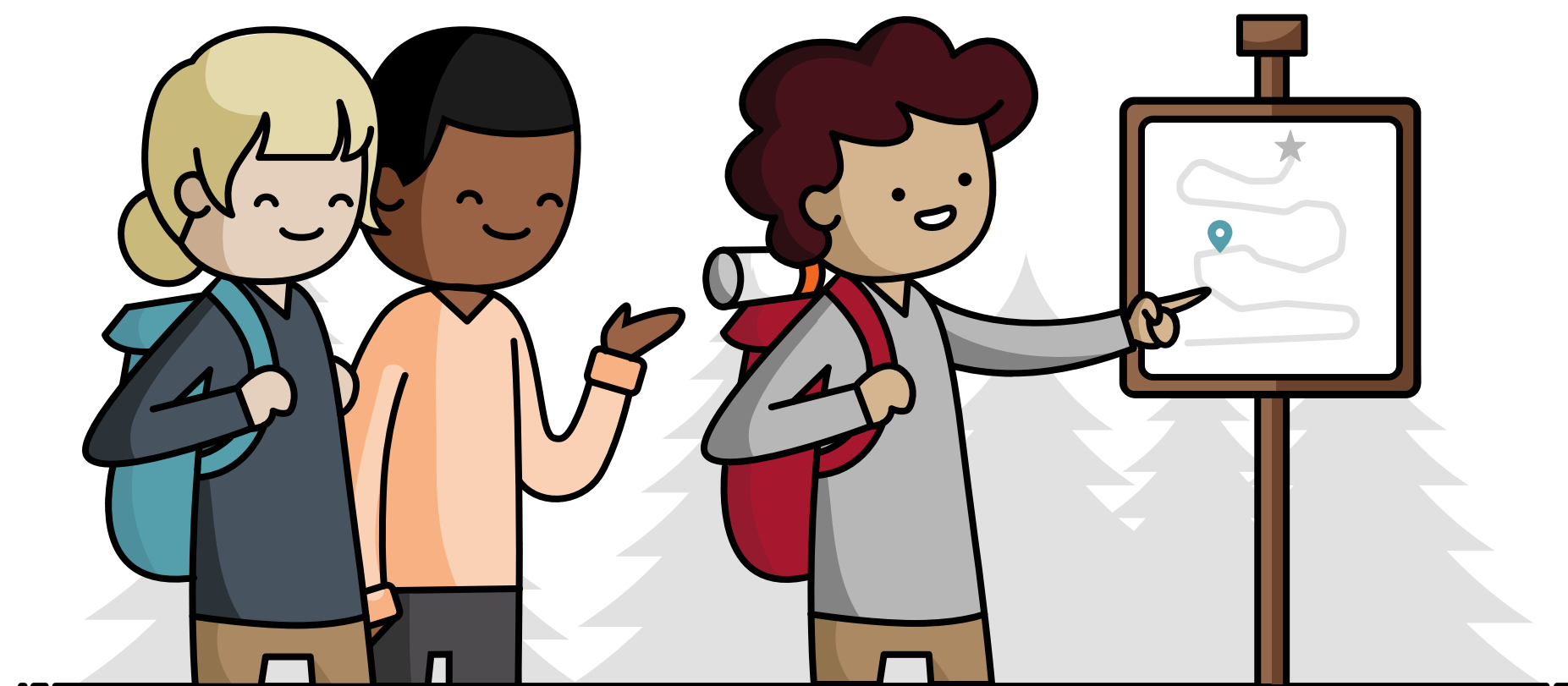
Culture is the sum of everyone's experiences and perceptions in an organization. It is deeply personal and can be hard to articulate. If your strategy, vision, intentions are *what* you're doing, culture is *how* you're going to get it done. The work of transforming culture is gnarly, complicated, awkward – and glorious – work. It requires vulnerability, open-mindedness and commitment.

In this guide, we want to share what organizations who are interested in doing this work need to know in order to engage in this work successfully.

We'll talk about:

- Common challenges some of our clients faced before they embarked on culture transformation
- Signs and symptoms your organization's culture may need help
- How leaders can step up and lean into their critical role
- Our approach to supporting organizations through the journey of culture transformation
- The impact of this work

Along the way, we'll share some stories from clients who leaned into the complex, challenging but ultimately rewarding work of transforming their organization's culture.







CULTURE TRANSFORMATION IS A JOURNEY

# Culture transformation is a journey

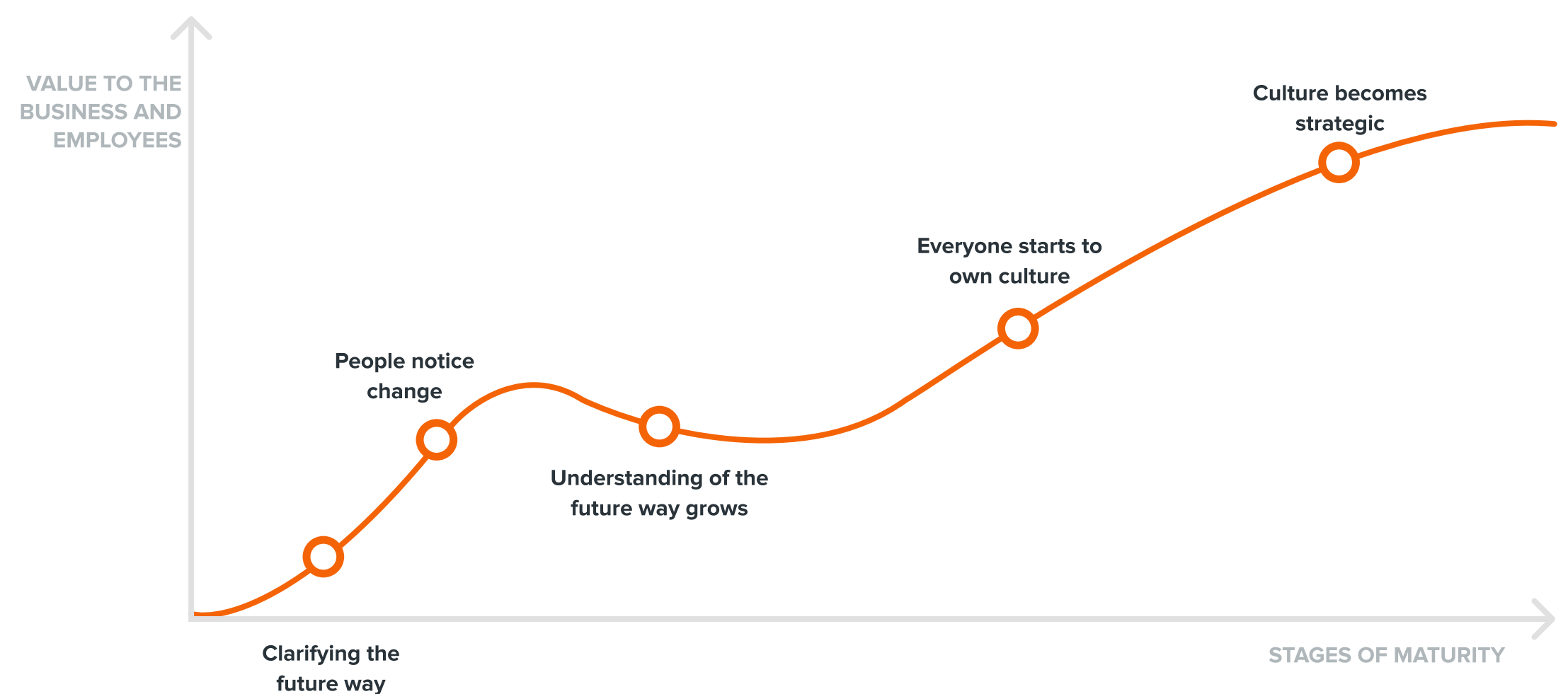
We love helping great companies build great cultures. For us, the work never looks exactly the same, because every organization is unique. There is no single ideal culture that all organizations should aim for; instead, every business model and strategy has one bespoke culture that will best bring it to life.

What we've learned through it all is that both approach and intention matter. The experience of the project – how it touches your people, opens their minds and creates growth – requires careful design of all the touch points and interactions the project work generates. We deliberately design the overall experience to be psychologically safe, focused on what matters most, engaging, and an opportunity to create receptivity to change and new possibilities.

Through years of helping organizations transform their culture, we've developed an approach that involves three core movements:

- 1. Understand** the current organizational culture, including critical beliefs and behaviours, so that we can define the future we're designing for.
- 2. Design** the foundational elements of the new, to-be culture that the organization will evolve into.
- 3. Act** by mobilizing the culture change engine, led by the culture team and its vision for bringing the new culture to life.

The shape and scale of each movement can differ based on each organization's unique change objectives, internal capacity and expertise. For some organizations, unearthing deep insights might be the key to helping them move forward on the right path while others might need more support developing strategies and capabilities to enable activation of their culture. The art of this work lies partly in our ability to scale it up or down to a place where we're confident about producing the best outcomes.





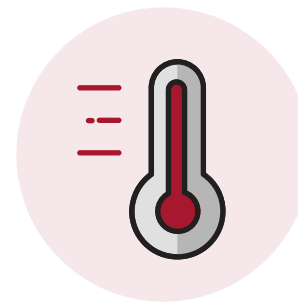
A COMPLEX SET OF CHALLENGES

# A complex set of challenges

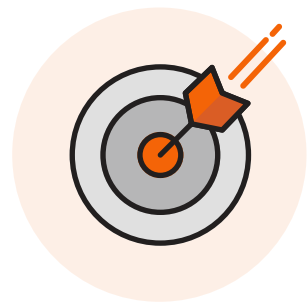
Culture transformation can help organizations that are experiencing pain or a roadblock that is preventing them from accomplishing their goals. Here are some of the challenges faced by organizations we've worked with:



**Mergers and acquisitions  
(M&As)**



**Tensions between unions and  
management**



**Global brand alignment**



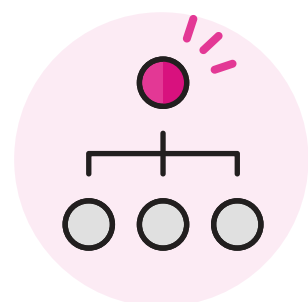
**Rapid growth or success**



**Hybrid work culture**



**Safety risks**



**New operating models**



## A COMPLEX SET OF CHALLENGES

### **Mergers and acquisitions (M&As)**

When two workplace cultures come together during an M&A, people often assume that one culture will just overtake the other. It's akin to thinking that if you combine red and blue paint together, you'll end up with an unchanged red paint. Bringing together two or more cultures requires thought and care for how deeply rooted unspoken beliefs and behaviours will merge (or clash). It's a great opportunity to identify and highlight the unique cultural super-powers and/or challenges both organizations bring.

### **Global brand alignment**

Multi-industry conglomerates can face challenges with overlapping or even competing cultures across their many brands. Employees often feel a strong sense of connection to their business unit but feel disconnected from the culture of the overarching company. There's often a sense of "us" and "them" in large conglomerates; both collaboration and organizational performance suffer as a result.

### **New operating models**

In response to changing markets and customer demands, some organizations are adjusting their products and services. This often ignites organizational change or restructuring and introduces new operating models. The culture must then be reshaped to respect operational performance and innovation.

### **Hybrid work culture**

In 2020, many organizations moved to a 100% remote workforce overnight. Now, some of them are struggling to identify what the next iteration of their work experience, culture and moments of connection should look like.

### **Tensions between unions and management**

Unionized environments can struggle with trust between employees and management, which makes communication and cooperation difficult. Often, the people with a vision for a better future and a genuine commitment to creating change feel caught in the middle.

### **Rapid growth or success**

Organizations can outgrow their culture after periods of rapid growth or success. Sometimes (but not always) this is linked to a natural leadership change where a new CEO is tasked with setting a new course for the future.

### **Safety risks**

In industries where safety is paramount, like resource management, construction, and health care, an organization's culture issues can pose a serious threat. In a workplace culture that lacks psychological safety, employees will be less likely to speak up – either because their concerns will be ignored, or they'll be labelled as troublemakers. They learn to either avoid voicing their concerns at all or they eventually leave the organization. Either way, when potential safety issues go unaddressed, it increases the risk of injury or even incidents that have broader impacts on the community and environment.

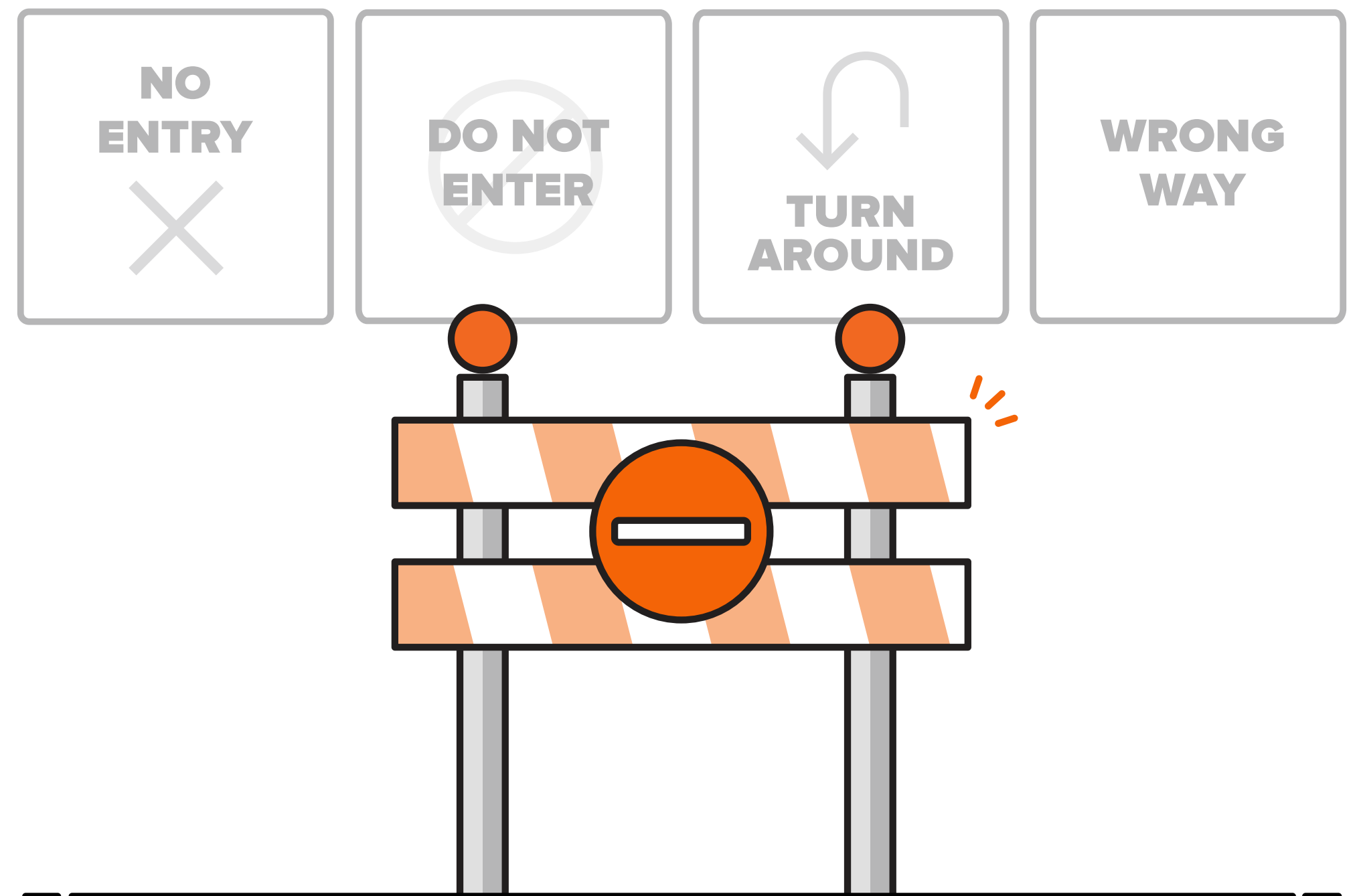


## WARNING SIGNS

# Warning signs

Problems with an organization's culture can show up as:

- Low engagement
- Low trust
- Low productivity
- Increased safety incidents
- Increased reports of harassment or unsafe workplace conditions
- High attrition
- Lack of cohesion or feeling that everyone is working towards one outcome
- Silos





# The role of leadership

A [Gartner survey of HR leaders](#) shows that organizational culture is their second highest priority for 2025, but less than one in three know how to drive change for the culture they want. We often meet leaders who have a vision for culture change but don't have the internal support of or in-house capabilities to make it happen.

And the risks of failure are real.

If not done right, culture transformation can be all disruption, no reward. Big consultancies tend to force employees through their one-size-fits-all approach to culture change; on the other side of it, everyone is left wondering if they're better off – or just different.

Culture transformation requires strong leadership – someone who believes that it's possible to create a future state where employees are engaged, enjoy a high level of trust and have the ability to successfully navigate or even drive change.

In Gartner's 2025 survey, 69% of HR leaders believe that leaders and managers aren't equipped to lead change. There are multiple leadership styles and great leaders need to be able to adopt all of them at the right time. However, when it comes to culture transformation, we've seen two leadership approaches – **authoritative** and **authentic** – that have very different impacts on the success of the project.

## 2<sup>nd</sup>

highest priority for HR leaders in 2025 is organizational culture

## 69%

of HR leaders believe that leaders and managers aren't equipped to lead change

## <1 in 3

leaders know how to drive change for the culture they want





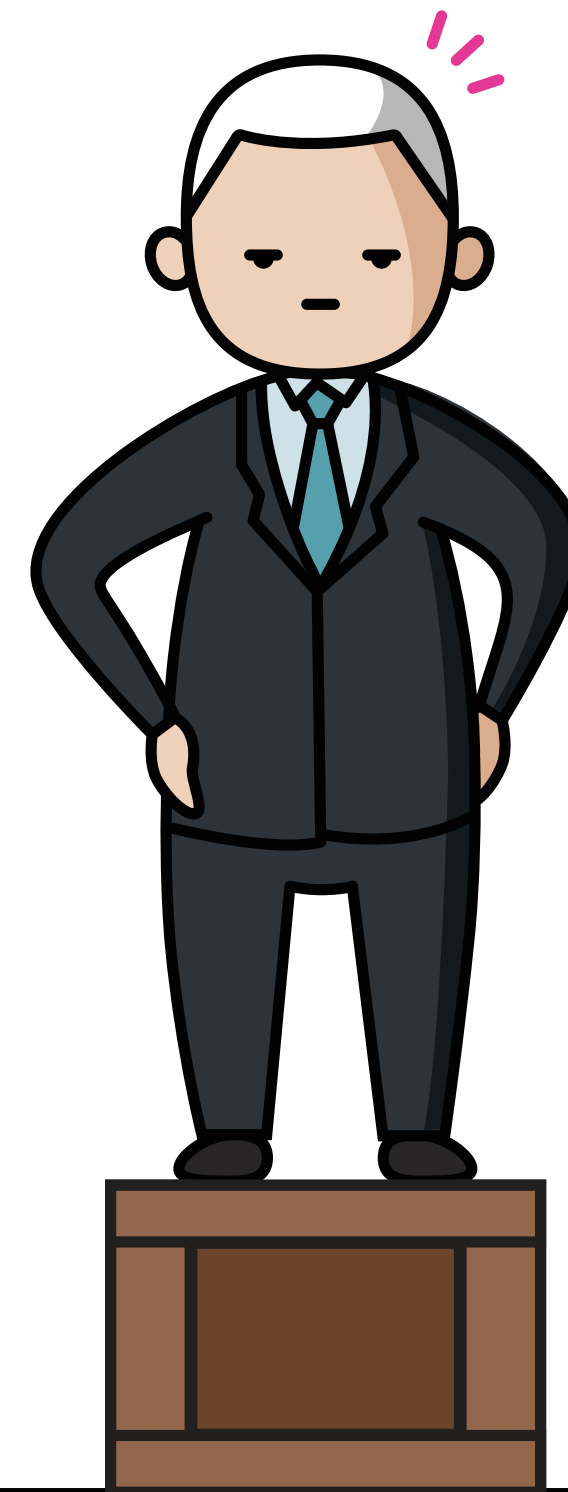
## The authoritative approach

This kind of leader leads from the top down. They locate the culture problem with employees and would prefer not to examine their own leadership skills and the role they may play in the organization's current state. They may know they have some work to do, but it feels too uncomfortable. From their leadership position, they struggle to understand and empathize with employees' experiences.

Habanero Experience Designer Toni Albert calls this an empathy gap.

“It signals a leader's low trust for their employees, which in turn erodes everyone else's trust in the leader. Employees are left feeling undervalued and not understood. What leaders often miss is that building trust with employees leads to better performance. When a leader takes an authoritative approach to culture transformation, often the changes don't stick, because trust is so essential to the journey.

TONI ALBERT, EXPERIENCE DESIGNER





## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

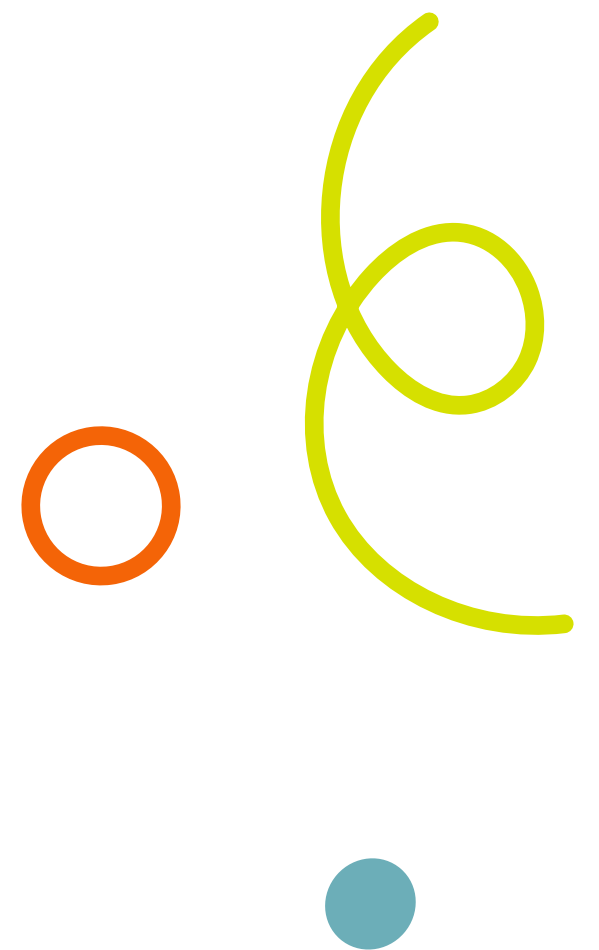
### The authentic approach

This kind of leader is willing to be vulnerable and genuinely curious about the perspectives and experiences of employees. A culture transformation journey can stir up particularly uncomfortable feelings: investment bias, fear of losing control, challenges to their self esteem or entrenched ideas. It would be hard for anyone to put these aside and adopt a true learning mindset.

Habanero Senior Advisor Caterina Sanders recalls one experience of working with an authentic leader – a CEO who was facing tough criticism from different corners of the organization. They weren't afraid to show their vulnerabilities, acknowledge their own shortcomings, and engage whole-heartedly, so that employees could see them not just as a leader but as a human. Habanero worked closely with the leaders and their team to address some of the issues they were facing and introduce new practices to rebuild and nurture trust with employees.

“The whole leadership team were such a special group of leaders who were willing to get vulnerable in a known volatile environment, take accountability and adopt change in a way I haven't seen elsewhere. They digested hard, and sometimes personal, truths about themselves and worked together in a way that was totally new to them. It had a huge impact on employees – they began to open up and engage with leaders in an entirely new way based on trust, respect and a shared sense of humanity.

CATERINA SANDERS, SENIOR ADVISOR, WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES





## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

### TIP

A culture transformation journey offers leaders an opportunity to build a peer network, so they don't have to do the hard work alone. In the organizations we've worked with, we've seen how powerful it can be when leaders meet regularly to appreciate each other and practise their skills together. Not only do they feel seen and heard, but they strengthen relationships with peers who they can go to for support even after the project ends.

”

**The Hab team created space where everyone could be vulnerable. Everyone, including our senior leadership and founders, have changed in a positive way. This process brought people together in a different way than any of us knew how to do.**

MARKETING MANAGER AT A GLOBAL RETAIL COMPANY





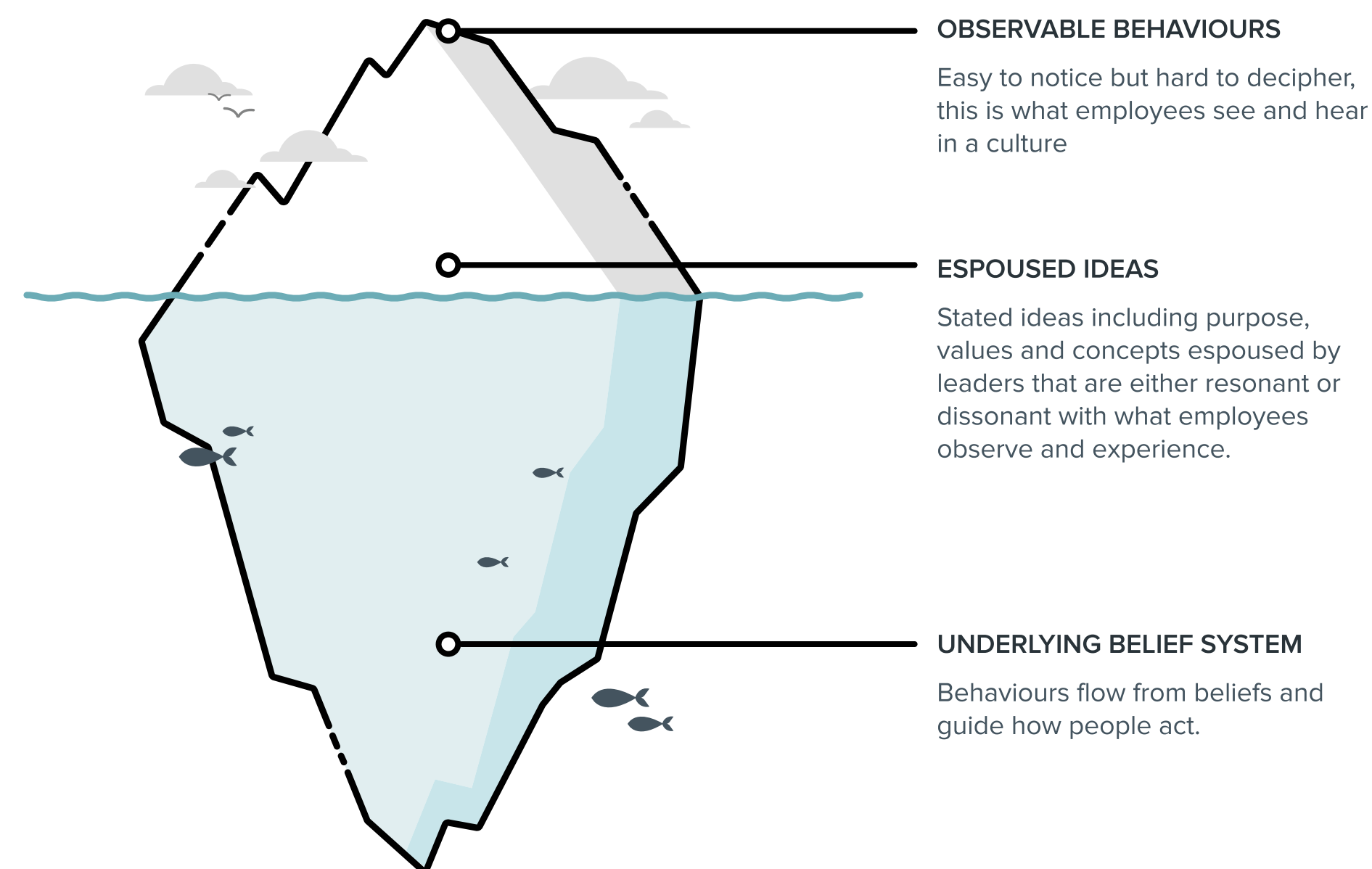
# Understanding your current state

Culture is like an iceberg. At its peak are visible artefacts – the aspects of culture that employees see and feel. Closer to the waterline, we find the espoused parts of culture, including the purpose, values and strategies, which may or may not align with what people experience. Below the surface is the underlying belief system, which gives rise to the behaviours and guides how people act. Intentionally designing culture is about having more control over where and how the beliefs show up and shape behaviours.

The first step in an organization's journey to a new culture is to understand its current state – the core system of beliefs that lies at the bottom of the culture iceberg. The more leaders understand about what's going on in the hearts and minds of employees and how it impacts the real work that they do, the more power they have to impact your organization's overall performance.

“Organizations can often develop assumptions about what makes their organization a great place to work, but it's something that might change over time. That's why it can be so valuable to test and validate long-held beliefs and dig into the real reasons that people enjoy working there.

LAURA NUGENT, EXPERIENCE DESIGNER





## UNDERSTANDING YOUR CURRENT STATE

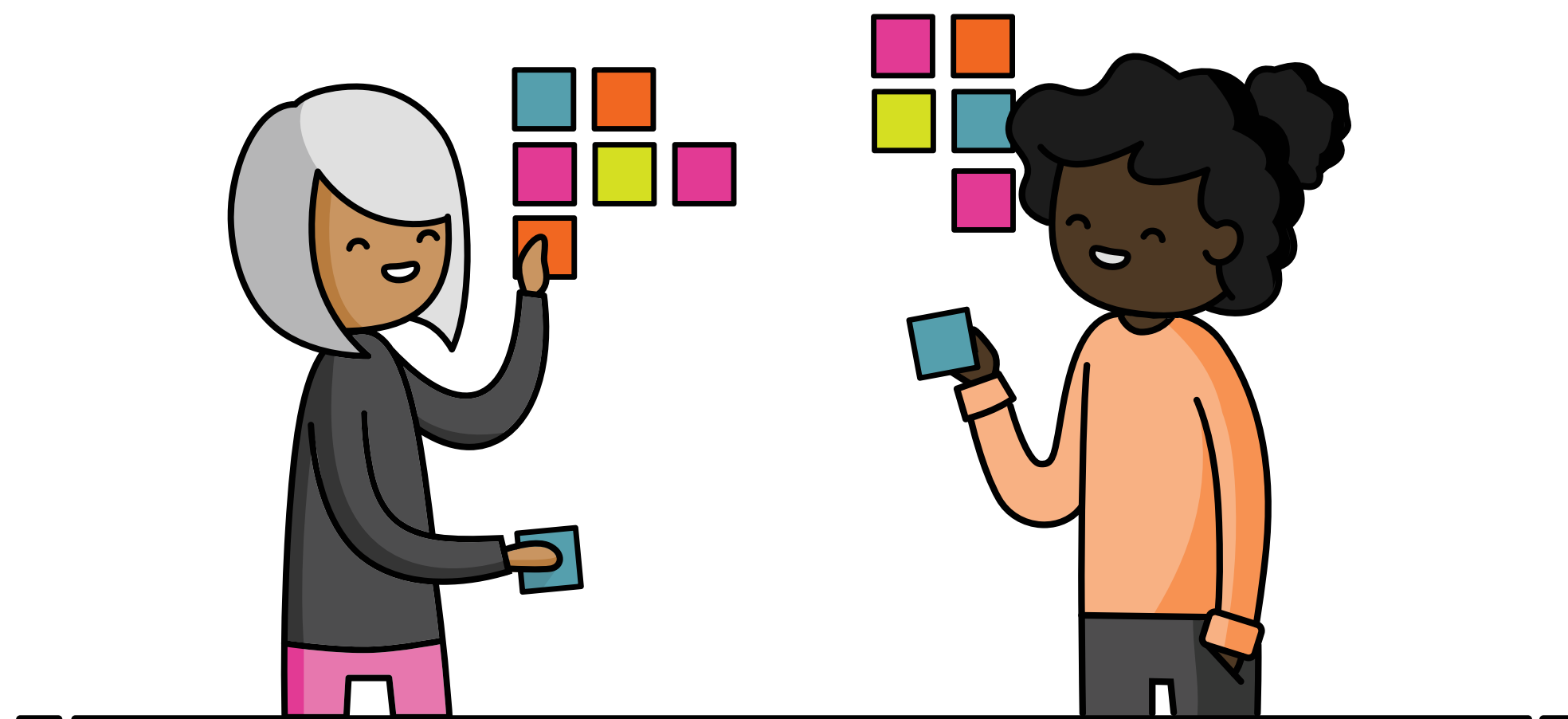
At Habanero, we use empathetic research to explore people’s lived experiences, uncover insights about their journey, and seek meaning, patterns and actions from them.

Empathetic research is an observational-oriented approach that gets to the truth of an organization’s culture. To do it well, you need to create a mental model that gives people the opportunity to talk through their world. The focus is on their personal experiences and feelings rather than their expertise or opinions. A skilled researcher can pull themes from these observational sessions and use them to understand what’s going on in people’s hearts and minds.

Hearing employees describe their experiences in their own words is powerful. Personal stories lend credibility to the data and help leaders truly understand what employees are experiencing.

The organizations we work with employ thousands of people, so we can’t possibly engage every employee in interviews and workshops. In fact, if we engage too many people, we eventually hit a saturation point where we stop hearing new information.

Instead, we develop intentional research plans that engage all employees at differing altitudes and touch points. This ensures that employees have the opportunity to be heard and that we are doing the “right” amount of research. Methods like surveys allow us to stretch our reach wide and gain broad insights, while collaborative workshops allow us to go deep and explore the “why” behind experiences.





## CLIENT STORY

### Workshops designed to build trust

Caterina Sanders and Toni Albert have been in some tense situations. As Habanero consultants, they've helped organizations activate change and supported leaders and their teams through large-scale cultural transformation. It's the kind of work that opens wounds, touches people's vulnerabilities, and asks people to acknowledge uncomfortable truths.

One recent cultural transformation stands out for them. It was a global, vertically oriented organization with a largely field-based, unionized workforce and operations in over 20 countries. From the outset, it was clear just how emotionally risky the project was for everyone involved. There were deep rifts between employees and leadership, exacerbated by an acquisition and the pandemic.

“In one of our first workshops, an employee told us bluntly, ‘You seem like nice ladies, but nothing is going to change here.’ People strongly believed this was going to be another management session where they'd hear a lot of promises that would never be met. They were furious and they didn't trust anything that came from the senior leadership team.

TONI ALBERT, EXPERIENCE DESIGNER

“You could feel the tension. We immediately realized how high the stakes were if the leadership didn't take measurable action, or if we failed to gain employee trust.

CATERINA SANDERS, SENIOR ADVISOR, WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

With trust at such a low level, it was important to carefully plan the workshops to establish a safe environment so that employees could freely share. Employees were walking into the room as skeptics, sensitive to the tiniest details.

“In one of our first sessions, one of the employees noticed that there were no glasses provided for water (there was a water cooler in the room). They assumed that it was an intentional choice by management – a sign that they don't respect or care about them. This idea was based on past experiences they'd had where management hadn't provided them with snacks or coffee. We had to go to great lengths to assure them that was just an oversight on our part.

CATERINA SANDERS, SENIOR ADVISOR, WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES





UNDERSTANDING YOUR CURRENT STATE | CLIENT STORY

“We make sure everything is intentional – from how we use stickies to take notes to ensuring there aren’t people in the room who will compromise psychological safety with a power imbalance. It signals to employees that the organization is taking their issues seriously and they’re ready to approach it differently than they have in the past.

TONI ALBERT, EXPERIENCE DESIGNER

### The importance of sharing back

It’s crucial to create a sense of safety and trust during the empathetic research phase of culture transformation, because what employees divulge can be raw and brutally honest. It’s just as important to share a synthesis of the findings – along with people’s real comments – with research participants or even the broader organization.

For many employees, seeing their feedback documented clearly and honestly is validating and confirms that the process will drive real organizational change. Sharing research findings in an all-hands meeting sparks open, vulnerable discussion about the challenges the organization is facing and the work ahead of them.



**It’s never easy hearing those things, but Habanero’s consultants gave us time and space to mentally prepare for what we were going to experience and supported us through it. That helped us get comfortable with being vulnerable, so we could acknowledge and address the issues. They created the right conditions for folks to rise to the occasion and be courageous.**

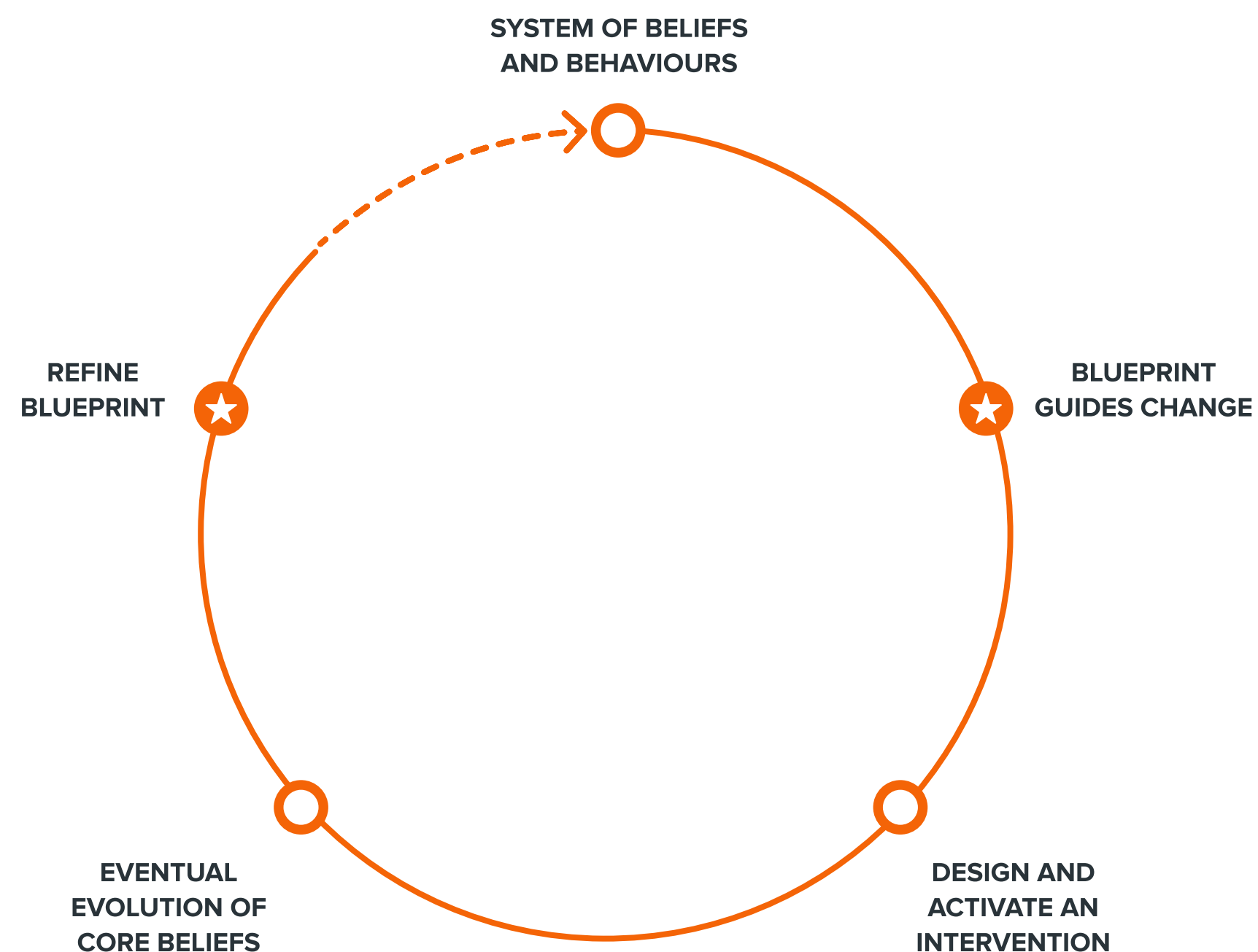
CEO OF A GLOBAL ENERGY COMPANY



## UNDERSTANDING YOUR CURRENT STATE | CLIENT STORY

The findings we share highlight the behaviours that we're currently seeing in the organization and the impact they're having on the culture and employee experience. Then we dig deeper to uncover the belief system that is driving the behaviours. This system may comprise many beliefs, which aren't inherently good or bad.

During these sessions, employees have an opportunity to consider how each belief serves the organization and how it limits them. This allows us to identify top culture priorities. These are the areas where there is the greatest opportunity and need for change, making them important levers for intentional culture transformation. The remaining beliefs are still an important part of the system, as they help support the future culture.

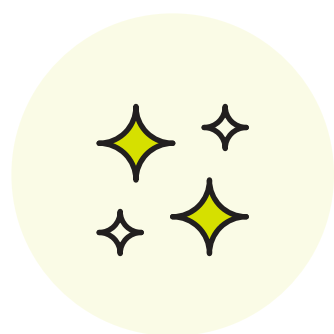




# Designing your future

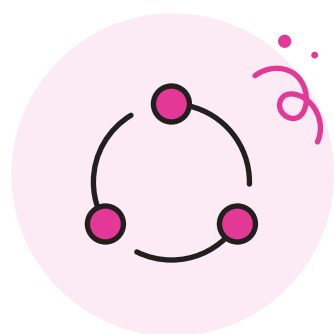
Culture is a complex journey; not a linear set of tasks to be completed and filed away. It's made up of people's consistent, everyday behaviours, interactions and experiences. To design a new culture, we need a blueprint – something that lays out the shapes and dimensions of what we're building.

## The culture blueprint is made up of three components:



### Top culture priorities

The biggest opportunities for intentionally support the future way



### System of beliefs

The core beliefs to evolve to support the new culture



### Culture metaphor

A concept that helps people envision and connect to the desired new culture in a positive way

The culture blueprint can be used as a lens when organizations are designing any new initiative. It can be used as a gut check when you're deciding on a new direction, making a decision or communicating with employees. It helps organizations stay grounded, inspired and energized so they can stay on track as they intentionally transform their culture.



## CLIENT STORY

### Using generative metaphors

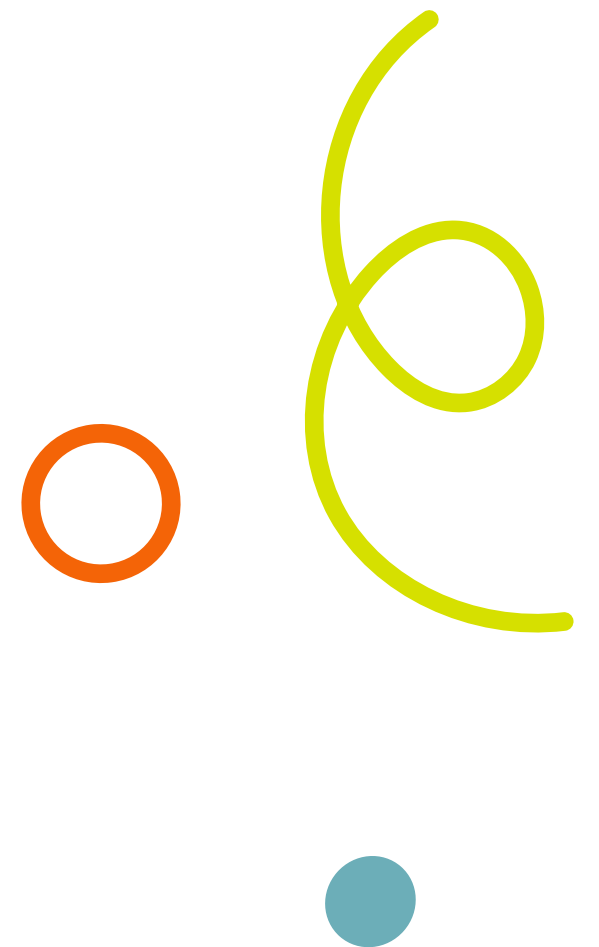
Metaphors are a great change practice and a powerful tool. We use generative metaphors to guide and focus teams on a future that they understand, care about, and want to see come to life. They empower the people who are the targets of change themselves to articulate their wants in a future-focused, possibility-centric way. They're broad enough to allow people to continually interpret, adapt and move towards them in meaningful ways.

Working with generative metaphors was a powerful experience for one of our clients, a public utility company. Employees shared a sense that the organization needed to become more adaptive, agile and responsive to industry and environmental changes. The current organizational culture didn't support who they wanted to be; a reluctance and fear of making mistakes was limiting their ability to be open and explore new ways of working.

Together, they explored metaphors for their new culture. Was their organization like a barge? Steady, stable, dependable. Or could they imagine that is more like starlings in flight? Dynamic, and nimble, coordinated and purposeful in its movement.

“Metaphors help people think in new ways and provoke new conversations. People discuss what works and what doesn't – and why. The right metaphor can help them build a compelling story about the new culture. It's something they can own and evolve themselves.

LAURA NUGENT, EXPERIENCE DESIGNER





# Activating culture

Organizations need to grow into their new way of being, not impose or dictate it. People need to find their own ways to give culture expression in the context of their unique environments. Bringing culture transformation to life is a combination of identifying, rallying and recruiting accountability. This can often take the form of a backlog (a term borrowed from Agile software development). If the blueprint describes the new culture of an organization – the future state they’re moving towards – the backlog articulates how they’ll get there.

Much more than a detailed task list, the backlog is a dynamic mechanism for expressing current and potential future culture priorities, ownership and measurement of their impact. It helps organizations ensure they’re investing effort in the most important, highest leverage areas, which are always a moving target when it comes to complex change.

As organizations get clearer about their new culture, they start to develop an organizational capability to live and continually evolve it. Culture is shared across an organization, so the backlog draws in and relies on employees from diverse roles and functions to make it succeed.

There are a few critical elements to that capability:

- Use an agile, adaptive and responsive approach
- Focus on high-value and high-impact actions
- Ensure the experience and journey are collaborative and co-creative
- Create the change in the *future* way

## TIP

As you work on the backlog, you may notice employee experience touchpoints, artefacts or activities that are being approached in the old way. This will work against your intentional culture transformation and signal to employees that the change isn’t real. It’s very important to use the new behaviours and approaches to design your future culture.





## CLIENT STORY

### Developing new capabilities

Organizations need to be ready to evolve their culture beyond the roadmap. For one of our clients, this involved developing dynamic, responsive listening capabilities. Working with Habanero, they created an employee research cohort, a group of over 60 volunteer employees from every department and all levels of experience.

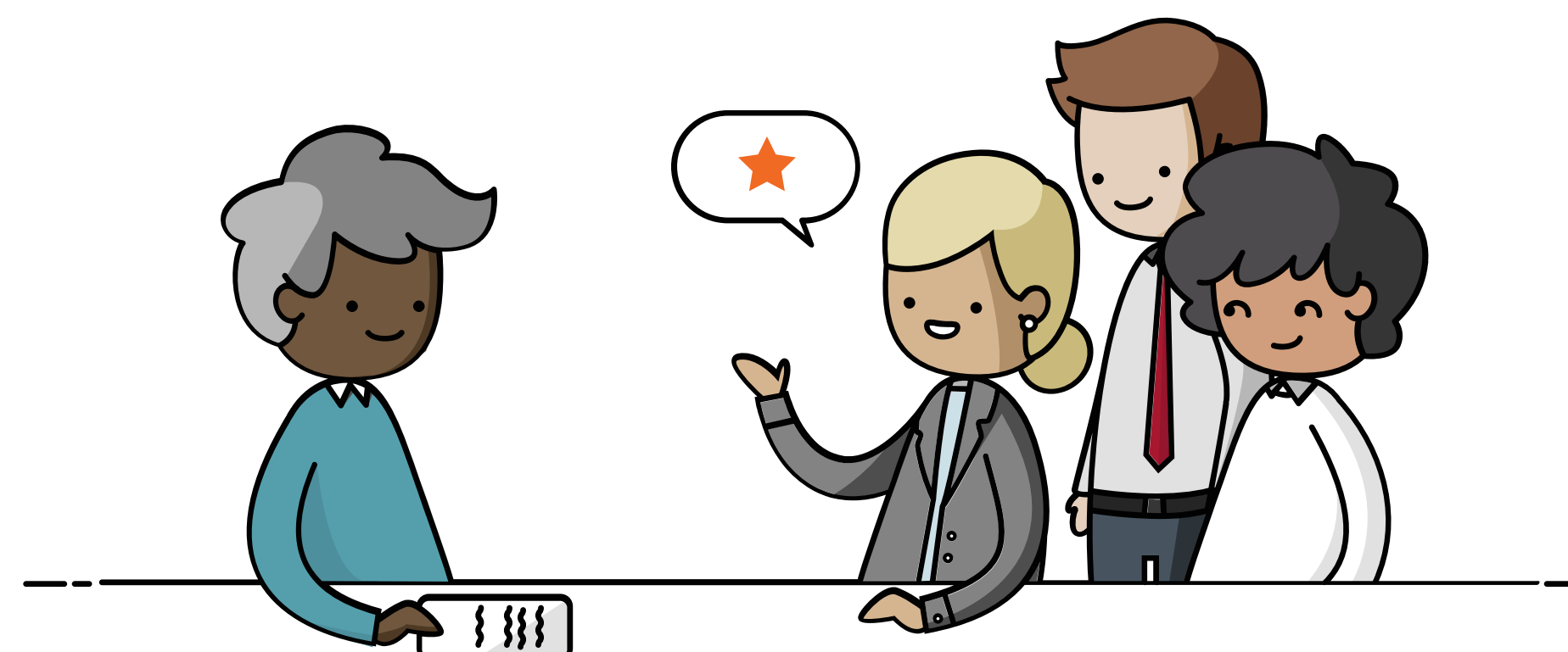
Members of the cohort participated in regular research activities – including surveys, focus groups and interviews – to share constructive feedback, ask questions, and help with decision making. They directly impacted the organization’s culture initiatives, shaping its direction and ensuring accountability of owners to drive results. The cohort was able to reach people who were dissatisfied or disgruntled before they fully tuned out or turned away from the organization. Even if participants weren’t happy with a decision, they were still engaged and passionate.

“We were focused on helping the organization establish an approach to employee listening customized to their need. Now they can engage directly with their field-based workforce to answer their questions, understand their needs and identify things that need attention and push them forward. It opens the door for employees to share constructive feedback.

CATERINA SANDERS, SENIOR ADVISOR, WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

“Sometimes when organizations do this kind of work, they feel like they’ve gone through all the pain, made significant changes and now they’re done. With this organization, it was so amazing to see how leaders and employees alike were fired up and wanted to generate momentum. They were thinking deeply about how they could continue to nurture the culture they developed and use the capabilities they learned more broadly within the company.

TONI ALBERT, EXPERIENCE DESIGNER





## SIGNS OF SUCCESS

# Signs of success

The benefits of culture transformation work are clear. As Gartner reports, successful culture activation aligns culture to organizational priorities, which benefits business outcomes. It also positively impacts employee outcomes, including 35% higher performance, 63% higher engagement and 25% higher intent to stay.

For one of our clients, their annual, company-wide survey provided compelling proof of their success. After the culture transformation project, employee engagement increased by 20%. According to their survey provider, an annual increase in engagement of 3 to 6% is considered to be good to great.

Their leaders noticed a palpable difference while in the office or on-site, too. They noted that employees were more likely to approach them to talk about the issues – whether great or challenging, because they feel safe to say what’s on their mind.

### TIP

Create genuine relationships with known influencers within the organization to stay plugged into how employees are doing and why, instead of relying solely on infrequent surveys. This holistic approach to employee listening will help build organizational empathy.

# 35%

higher performance

# 63%

higher engagement

# 25%

higher intent to stay

*Data from Gartner’s webinar, “The Top Priorities for HR Leaders in 2025.”*



SIGNS OF SUCCESS | CLIENT STORY

## CLIENT STORY

### Purpose, values and vision in action

After partnering with Habanero to refresh their purpose, values and vision statements, a global retail company held a team summit to activate their culture. Over two full days, employees explored the new statements individually and collectively through roundtable discussions, breakout sessions, a collaborative art workshop and even an Amazing Race-style team competition. The summit capped off with a big party that gave everyone the opportunity to reconnect and celebrate in-person.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The director of retail marketing counted it among the best two days they'd ever had working at the company:

“People felt a renewed sense of purpose. It confirmed for us that this is the work we want to be doing, and these are the people we want to work with. There was a palpable feeling in the room that I had never experienced at another organization before.

The purpose, values and vision are now embedded in their organization – they show up in everything from the way they design their recognition program to everyday conversations. They're also helping them attract and retain talent aligned with who they are and where they're headed.

habanero



I'm seeing [our values] show up in coaching conversations often. Before, these ideas were a little nebulous. Now, we have a shared language that's weaving its way into the conversations that we have on a daily basis. It's changed the way we relate to one another. There's a sense of consistency and togetherness that exists now that did not exist before.

DIRECTOR OF A RETAIL MARKETING COMPANY

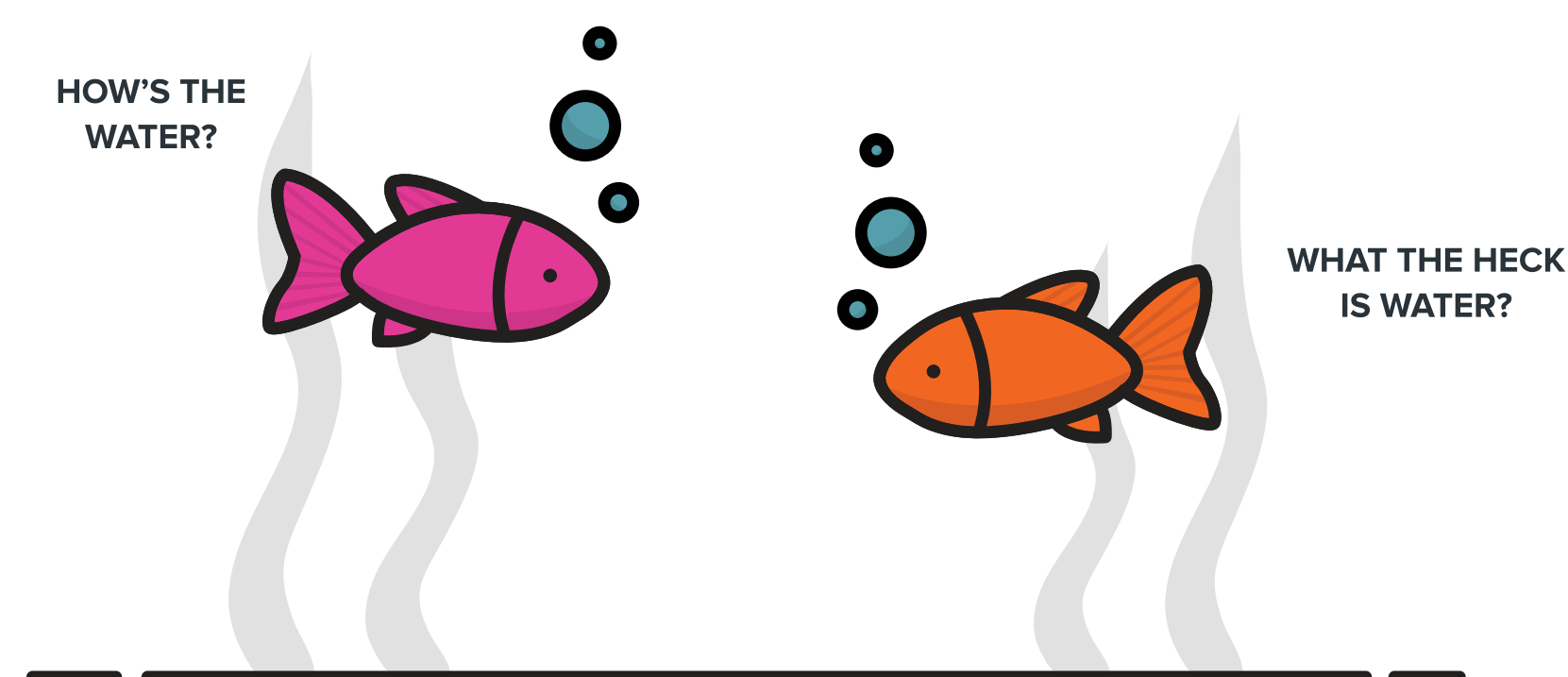


WHAT IT TAKES TO BE SUCCESSFUL WITH THIS WORK

# What it takes to be successful with this work

There's an old proverb that says, "A fish doesn't know it's in water; a fish doesn't see water." The same is true of culture. It's hard to see, let alone change, your culture when you're in it (and its current ways).

To intentionally transform your culture, it helps to have an objective lens – someone who can ask probing questions and introduce different perspectives in a psychologically safe environment where employees trust that they can share their authentic experiences, be vulnerable and think in new ways.



“From the very first meeting with the Habanero team, I knew they were different than other consulting firms. They were willing to be candid with us and push us to think differently about what these values were going to mean, and the level of effort it would take to make them real within the organization. I immediately had a lot of confidence in their experience and their ability to help us.

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC PEOPLE PROGRAMS AT A PROVINCIAL CROWN CORPORATION





## WHAT IT TAKES TO BE SUCCESSFUL WITH THIS WORK

**“Habanero consultants were so collaborative and approachable. They customized their approach to what worked for our company, recognizing the complexity of our organization and the amount of change we’d gone through.**

**MANAGER OF ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN AT A CONSTRUCTION COMPANY**

Be prepared for resistance and know that it’s okay. There are many reasons that people struggle with change. Some have a natural tendency to stick with the status quo; for others, the perceived effort required might be overwhelming. Change brings up all sorts of emotions that could hinder adoption. You’ll find greater success if you acknowledge these responses, create space for them to be aired out and build mitigation strategies around them to help people navigate change.

### TIP

To learn more about what it takes to get change right (and to make it stick), read Mallory O’Connor’s insight post on [leading successful change activation](#).

Organizations embarking on this journey are taking a brave step into something new. We are honoured at the level of trust we share with our clients. They share their highs and lows with our consultants and open themselves up to new perspectives and approaches. Together we help them design and move towards a new culture. The process itself offers transformative and enriching career experiences for project sponsors, reconnecting them to what motivates and inspires them to do the work they do.

# Get in touch

We have big ideas, but let's start with hello. If you have questions or want to learn more about how you can turn deep insight into action, let us know. We'd love to talk.

**1-866-841-6201**

[habaneroconsulting.com](https://habaneroconsulting.com)

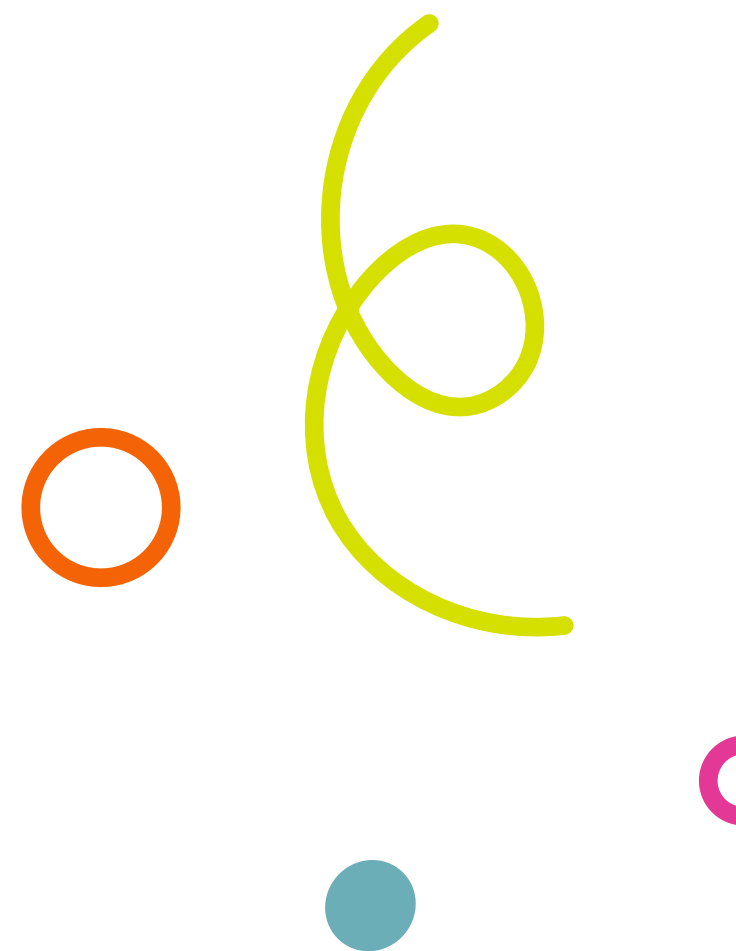
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