

# Changing Cultures

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 5 min read · May 2026

*People are far more willing to embrace change when they're reminded of what will stay the same.*

*That single insight changes everything about how you approach cultural transformation — in an organisation, a team, or even yourself.*

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## What Is Culture, and Why Does It Resist Change?

Culture is shared. It's implicit, ingrained, and often invisible. What makes it so binding is also what makes it so difficult to shift.

A Harvard Business Review article put it well: culture is not about the questions asked — it's about the questions not even considered.

Take a moment with that. What's silent, habitual, and unquestioned in your organisation? What governs how things get done, yet is never openly discussed? These are the cultural elements that can serve as both a strength and a barrier — often at the same time.

History is full of examples. From French knights at the Battle of Crécy to entire industries disrupted by technology, the pattern repeats: change usually begins when the current system is no longer sustainable. And the instinctive response in those moments of crisis is almost always to double down on what's familiar — regardless of whether it's working.

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## The Paradox of Changing Cultures

Here lies the central challenge. People gravitate toward familiarity, especially when the stakes are high. This is why the most successful change initiatives don't focus solely on what's new — they acknowledge and respect what will remain.

Think of change as a bridge. It connects where you are to where you're going, but it isn't built in a vacuum. Even as you move toward what's next, the foundations of that bridge are anchored in the present. Offering people reassurance about what stays the same gives them the stability to take the first steps forward.

Without that, even well-intentioned change meets resistance — not because people are obstinate, but because uncertainty is genuinely uncomfortable.

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## Practical Approaches for Organisations

When introducing new systems, processes, or ways of working, three approaches consistently make the difference:

- Acknowledge the Familiar**  
Show appreciation for what has worked. This reinforces an emotional connection to the organisation and prevents change from feeling like a dismissal of people's past efforts. People defend what they helped build — so honour it, even as you evolve it.
- Communicate What Stays the Same**  
Beyond explaining what's changing, be explicit about what isn't. Clarity about continuity reduces anxiety more than any change management framework.
- Learn Openly from the Past**  
Use past challenges as learning opportunities rather than sources of blame. Acknowledging what didn't work — without attributing fault — creates the psychological safety people need to engage honestly with what comes next.

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## Culture and Time

True cultural change takes time. Shifting what's deeply ingrained requires consistent effort, and it rarely moves in a straight line.

It's easy to look at organisations from the outside and wonder why they didn't adapt sooner. But as anyone who has worked inside an organisation knows, the closer you are to something, the harder it is to see clearly. Familiarity has its own gravity.

The same is true for us as individuals. The willingness to ask hard questions about our own habits and assumptions — and to genuinely listen to the answers — is what separates growth from stagnation.

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## A Final Thought

Changing culture is not about leaving everything behind. It's about building deliberately on the continuity that already exists — reimagining what works while ensuring the core remains intact.

*The organisations that change well are not those that move fastest — they're the ones that bring their people with them.*

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