

Workplace Culture

KEY TOPICS

acculturation
alignment
assimilation
climate
culture change
engagement
firm structure
goals
harassment
patterns
policies
practices
sexual harassment
transparency
values

Workplace culture affects every aspect of the work we do, and everyone is responsible for it. Questioning why things are “just the way we do things in our firm” or “just the way we do things in architecture” brings change to ways of thinking and doing, and, ultimately, to systems that advantage some individuals and groups while disadvantaging others.

This guide outlines the importance of understanding and managing workplace culture and offers strategies for how to start the process, establish goals, and bring about change.



The University of Minnesota for the American Institute of Architects Equity and the Future of Architecture Committee

What is workplace culture?

Workplace culture is the tacit—unspoken—social order of an organization, the shared patterns that determine what is viewed as appropriate behavior of individuals and the group and help us make meaning of our collective environment. Its implicit and explicit systems define how an organization works in practice, regardless of what is written policy or stated intent. (For more on culture, see the *Intercultural Competence* guide.)

The concept of culture in organizational contexts arose in the late-nineteenth century and expanded in the mid- and late-twentieth century with the recognition of group behaviors that develop around shared work.¹ Societal changes require that workplace cultures evolve for businesses to thrive, and how a workplace chooses to do so, in turn, impacts societal trends. What is understood as *workplace* today is becoming more complex with the expanding number of physical and virtual environments where people work, as well as the increase in the number of diverse types of people with often ambiguous or quickly changing roles.

Overall, the ideal workplace culture is both *strong* and *healthy*. Building a *strong* culture depends on two things: one, having a *clear* culture that everyone can articulate; two, continually *aligning* staff and processes with that culture. Building a *healthy* workplace culture depends on the *engagement* of its people, which deepens when diverse needs and thoughts are recognized, included, and influence decision-making. Factors in a workplace interact in such complex ways that it can be hard to track the effects of any one change—think of creating a *clear*, *aligned*, and *engaged* culture as incrementally designing those factors into a parametric system. Relationships between elements become intentional, so that when something in the workplace is changed, other related factors shift appropriately. Otherwise, without a *strong* workplace culture, changes in a business are difficult and tedious to implement. Additionally, without a *healthy* culture, changes are more likely to have an inequitable

impact across the group and could inadvertently advantage those with dominant identities (e.g., men and white people) at the expense of others.

ARCHITECTURE WORKPLACE CULTURE

There is no single ideal workplace culture: the place, people, and goals of every firm are different, and consequently, the culture of every firm is different. Since the ways in which diversity, inclusion, and equity are addressed within a workplace are directly tied to its goals and culture, it is vital for firm leaders and employees to both understand their goals and become more aware of current objective and subjective cultural patterns driving perception and behavior in their firm.

How do we begin to discuss workplace culture in architecture? Building off of the cultural iceberg model introduced in the *Intercultural Competence* guide, we can start with what is easily seen above the surface (objective culture) and then explore patterns that are most often developed and reinforced below the surface (subjective culture).

“Listen and be aware of your team because ‘it’s always been done this way’ is dangerous.”

Principal and Owner, White, Male, 45–50

Because there are so many cultural elements that are “just the way things are in architecture,” discussing them only generally across the profession can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes. Yet for the purpose of spurring further thinking and discourse, we will detail some examples of dominant culture patterns as they are currently understood within the field—formed and perpetuated by architectural education, publications, workplaces, professional groups, and the everyday language and behaviors of many architects.

Like the tip of the iceberg, patterns of objective dominant culture are relatively discernible: when asked to picture a stereotypical architect, many people will think of an affluent white male, dressed in black, perhaps with interesting glasses; when asked to picture a stereotypical architecture workplace, people with some familiarity with architecture will envision an open studio with workstations and a pinup space where words like *fenestration* or *typology* are used and long hours are the norm. Like the submerged portion of the iceberg, patterns of subjective dominant architecture culture are numerous, more difficult to discern, and vary considerably according to person and place: when asked what the architect's attitudes are toward service, some will answer "client driven" and others "society driven" or "environment driven," etc.; when asked about the architect's attitudes toward control, some might unconsciously sense that the architect values individual influence more than teamwork or vice versa.

The examples of objective and subjective dominant culture in the following *Architecture's Cultural Iceberg* diagram will not be the same for most firms, and there will be many other cultural patterns not listed that are specific to particular offices. Consider the ways you might categorize and define a practice and what each signals to you in terms of who works there, how they work, what they believe in, what work they do: sole practitioner, collaborative studio, partnership, research consultancy, design office, atelier, boutique, small practice, large firm, minority owned, A&E, corporate, three letter, local/national/international, multidisciplinary.

You can use the *Architecture's Cultural Iceberg* diagram as a starting point for recognizing and naming patterns and associated meanings within your current workplace practices. It can help to consider a point of view from outside the firm—what kind of culture would you expect from your firm's name and how it presents itself to the public? And how might your message be received differently by people based on their vantage points and expectations? It can also help to look at instances when people were reprimanded for their behavior—what did they do that was deemed "inappropriate" and how could that evaluation change based on a different cultural expectation? (For additional questions, see the "Assess" section of this guide.)

Workplace culture affects every way we think and act in relation to our work, which is why it is important to know what it is and to manage it. Culture merits the same attention we give to core aspects of our business, such as design and accounting. As architects, we know that building and maintaining something requires the integration and coordination of many things. A workplace is no different, and attending to culture is like designing and operating a building with regard for its inhabitants.

"When do people feel relaxed and calm in a working environment, and when are they pretending to be someone their boss or client wants them to be?"

CEO and Owner, White, Female, 59

STEREOTYPE: a preconceived and oversimplified idea about a group that attributes characteristics to all members of that group without acknowledging their differences; to fix or perpetuate in an unchanging form

OBJECTIVE

seen shared culture
(you can see or point to...)

artifacts we produce · sketches, models, drawing sets

behaviors we recognize as valuable · critique, working long hours, moonlighting

common dress · in black, with interesting glasses

language we often employ · façade, massing, jury

tools we use · X-ACTO knife, modeling software, 3-D printer

spaces we inhabit · arrays of desks and usable wall surfaces, open storage for books and materials

narratives we share · famous architects being odd or difficult

traditions we continue · pinups, competitions, awards

SUBJECTIVE

unseen shared culture
(attitudes, expectations,
assumptions toward...)

age · the young are inexhaustible and do not know very much; the middle aged gain responsibility after years of hard work and paying dues; older architects are repositories of knowledge to be respected

authorship · individuals are the creative force on projects; teamwork is used for production

body language · attention is directed toward the artifacts of architectural representation in the room; projecting confidence and authority means you can work on job sites and with clients

class · architects distinguish themselves from working-class laborers (e.g., contractors/builders); privilege or lack of privilege is not overtly addressed

commitment · staff members have to be available when needed; staff who take advantage of flexible workplace options are less interested in advancement

core values · the work of the profession is important; positive change can occur through the built environment

education · higher education is necessary and valued; status is attached to program and degree type

ethnicity · most architects are white; architects from underrepresented groups are different

gender roles · men are ambitious and assertive; women are supportive and nurturing

money · opportunity and achievement are more important than income; fees are too low to do good work and compensate people well

parenthood · nonparents can work late hours; fathers are dependable, mothers struggle

personality · a person's personality determines their role; self-promotion is necessary to advance

types of work · part-time work has lower status than full-time work; "domestic" or office-help tasks are done by women

work assignments · interns should receive growth opportunities; work is assigned according to firm, not employee, needs; staff who can do detailed work should do production

relationship to authority · most architects follow rules; the avant-garde buck or undermine authority and power

roles · architects are polymaths (artist, technologist, inventor, scientist); those in design roles are visionaries, all other roles are support

speaking · the person with the most power in the room does the most talking; intellectual expression signals status

ways of working · different generations use different tools; heads go down for long periods to meet deadlines

work ethic · good design takes a lot of time and iteration; personal sacrifice is necessary at certain points during a project and career

ARCHITECTURE'S CULTURAL ICEBERG

Examples of dominant culture's patterns or assumptions of "appropriate" in the architectural profession in the United States.

Notice which aspects of the example stereotypes could be limiting for some individuals or groups in a workplace setting and that might impede the ability of architects across identities to contribute and do their best work.

Why is workplace culture important?

Workplace culture is fundamental to an organization, yet it is complex and must be understood and effectively managed for a business and its employees to thrive. In the process of managing workplace culture, issues and opportunities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion can be linked with specific aspects of the organization—structure, values, physical artifacts, communication, behavior, etc.—and can lead to actions that are aligned and consistent with both values and goals.

INDIVIDUALS

Engagement · Culture is “just the way we do things around here”; engagement is “how people feel about the way things work around here.” Engagement is key to healthy culture, and lack of engagement signals problems in the culture. Moreover, highly engaged organizations are more successful.²

Trust · Working effectively with others requires trust, and different people need different actions and activities in order to build and maintain that trust. Increasing trust increases psychological safety, shifting behavior from survival mode in which analytical reasoning shuts down to “broaden-and-build” mode in which strategic thinking is stimulated.³ High levels of trust are necessary for teams to meet ambitious goals.⁴

Recruiting · When culture is clearly aligned with business goals and values, it can attract “the right fit” and lead to high engagement, yet it is important to understand how to determine fit without perpetuating bias and exclusion. Other concepts to consider include “culture add” and “values fit,” which can increase diverse-applicant numbers and employee referrals for new candidates who support the inclusive strategic direction and equitable culture of the firm.⁵

Productivity · Positive workplace environments (caring, respectful, forgiving, inspiring, meaningful) support individual productivity. Negative environments (lack of transparency, trust, agency, teamwork, physical and psychological safety, reasonable work hours, health insurance, job security) lead to stress, significantly increasing health-related costs (heart disease, high blood pressure, depression) and disengagement (absenteeism, errors, accidents).⁶

Retention · Alignment of an individual’s values with company values is a top predictor of an individual’s satisfaction with the workplace culture, while negative workplace culture leads to an almost 50% increase in voluntary turnover—and turnover costs (recruiting, training, lowered productivity, lost expertise, lowered morale, etc.) are high.⁷ A cocreated inclusive culture means more loyal employees, aiding in retention.

“As long as you have strong core values you’re striving for every day, your team will deliver. It’s not about the free ice cream and the ping-pong table; culture is about whether everybody knows what they’re doing and what they’re working for. It takes effort, not a quote on the wall.”

Principal and Owner, White, Male, 45–50

FIRMS

Firm Structure · An organization's structure and its culture are interdependent; they develop in tandem, and changing one will affect the other.⁸ Firm leaders can make positive and intentional changes to culture by considering their structure (hierarchical or horizontal) and vice versa; maintaining consistency between the two ensures employees and clients will be able to adapt to change.

Explicit and Implicit Messaging · What management intends may not be what employees perceive. Formal written and spoken materials and informal day-to-day language and behaviors in an office can either support or subvert a positive internal culture and may also affect how it is viewed externally. Dominant culture patterns that feel exclusionary to some people may unintentionally come through in some messaging, yet such instances can be opportunities to build awareness and curiosity around underlying patterns that could be better aligned with intentions.

Strategic Planning · “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”⁹ The economic stability and growth of a business relies on good business strategies; however, a strategy can only succeed if there is a culture in place that supports it. Culture is particularly important during times of change, such as leadership transition and succession.

Risk · Workplace cultures that lack basic ethics and legal compliance are at risk. Formal guidelines can help mitigate bad behavior, but they are often not enough to prevent or stop it. Policies and practices work best when they reflect a strong and healthy culture; otherwise, if they are not consistent with other messaging, they might be viewed as irrelevant, or even as obstacles, to achieving business goals.¹⁰

Marketing · A distinct culture with aligned branding gives a business competitive advantage in attracting and retaining employees and clients and helps increase operational efficiency and quality. If your brand purpose and goals are understood by employees, then they are able to reinforce them in their work.¹¹

Clients · Clients will bring their own culturally informed biases, beliefs, and expectations to bear on the working relationships and outcomes of a project. Employees with greater intercultural awareness have greater capacity to bridge potential cultural differences between client and firm and evaluate choices that may impact the firm's values and practices.

PROFESSION

Architecture Culture · Increasing the ability of a larger number of firms and other groups in architecture to clearly see and manage their own cultures will help raise the bar for our collective architecture culture, increasing equity across the profession.

Perception · Identity and brand are quick to be damaged and slow to recover; therefore, for the success of each workplace and the profession as a whole, it is crucial to actively manage culture and how it is perceived internally and externally. An organization that is known for a culture of equitable inclusion will be better positioned to attract and retain talent with diverse experiences and identities and to fulfill the needs of a range of clients and partners and the building industry.

We have a strong and healthy workplace culture when...

CLARITY

the workplace culture is deliberately shaped

100% of people in the organization can describe its culture

clients are aware of and can connect with the firm's values

COMPLIANCE

risks are controlled to protect workers from physical harm

the work environment is supportive, not hostile

harassment is not tolerated and has clear consequences

ALIGNMENT

values and goals of the business align with the workplace culture

language and behaviors reinforce positive culture

onboarding and ongoing training teach how to be effective within the workplace

messaging is consistent from leadership, managers, human resources

leaders and employees work together to assess and guide culture

TRUST

everyone is respected and interacts respectfully

everyone is heard when sharing their perspectives

some risk-taking is allowed

mistakes are managed, not punished

problems are met with curiosity, not blame

work environment is engaging, not threatening

success is a win-win outcome

ENGAGEMENT

social relationships are fostered

everyone takes responsibility for a positive culture

leaders model empathy and compassion

leaders are seen as fair and able to forgo self-interest

the meaning of work is emphasized

retention is high, absenteeism is low

employee and client referrals are common

Harassment

This section is intended to introduce you to important legal information regarding harassment but is not a substitute for legal advice. For such advice, we strongly urge you to consult an attorney.

Workplace harassment interferes with an individual's work performance, career, and well-being, creates a negative work environment, undermines equity goals, puts firms at legal risk, and damages our profession's reputation. Culturally, there is an increasing expectation in all workplaces that sexual and other forms of harassment be prohibited; legally, harassment based on an employee's membership in a protected class is prohibited. Creating and maintaining a workplace culture in which employees are empowered to speak up about issues of concern helps prevent harassment.¹²

It is important to note that even though there have been laws and policies in place, the pervasive nature of sexual harassment in US workplaces is of concern and necessitates digging into cultural practices and patterns, including exploring how gender and power impact what workplaces are like for women and feminine-presenting people. A significant percentage of architecture professionals, approximately two-thirds, report having experienced sexual harassment at work, on a jobsite, or in another location. Within this group, 85% of women and 25% of men indicate they have been harassed, yet only 31% reported it to HR or a manager and fewer than .05% filed a lawsuit or claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).¹³ Even though the #MeToo movement is often portrayed in the media as a white and/or wealthy women's issue, it is not. It spans gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, household-income levels, disability, age, and regions.

While a one-time offensive touch, remark, or behavior might not violate federal or state laws, such behavior can lead to the creation of a hostile work environment if left unaddressed. Regular workplace training is an important tool to help employers ensure safe and harassment-free workplaces by educating employees as to conduct expectations and empowering them to raise

concerns before a hostile environment is created. It is also important that firms develop ways to retain employees affected by harassment, appropriately address employees who harass, and provide support to all involved for healing, making amends, and rebuilding trust.

UNDERSTAND THE LAW

Federal law makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, or military service, and most states have additional laws prohibiting discrimination in the workplace. (Educational institutions are governed by Title IX, which addresses equal opportunity in education, including the right of all students to be free from sexual violence and sexual harassment.) Unlawful harassment is a form of discrimination that can be directed at an individual based on any protected characteristic. The following are some key details regarding sexual (and other forms of) harassment and claims:

- Sexual harassment is unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct that is offensive, intimidating, or threatening and is directed at an individual or group because of their sex.
- There are two types of sexual harassment: "quid pro quo" (real or implied promises of preferential treatment for submitting to sexual conduct or threats of retribution for refusing to submit) and "hostile work environment" (interfering with one's ability to do their job due to unwelcome conduct of a threatening, offensive, or sexual nature that is directed at the individual).
- While quid pro quo harassment is necessarily sexual in nature, a hostile work environment is not limited to sexual harassment but can be created when offensive or intimidating conduct is directed at an individual or group of any protected status.
- A legally actionable hostile environment involves conduct that is either severe or pervasive. A severe incident could be a one-time event such as an assault; pervasive harassment can occur as a result

of less significant events that occur repeatedly over time.

- Unlawful harassment can be physical (for example, physical conduct that is sexual in nature or gestures that are physically threatening), verbal (for example, derogatory or explicit comments of a sexual nature or that denigrate a racial or religious group), or visual (for example, pictures, images, cartoons, or posters).
- Unlawful harassment can occur between employees inside or outside of the physical work premises (such as during business travel or a visit to a client site) and during or outside of working hours (such as at an employer-sponsored social event or happy hour).
- Any individual who is connected to the employee's work environment can be considered a harasser (for example, other employees, clients, customers or vendors).
- Employers can be held liable for unlawful harassment committed by both employees and nonemployees (if an employee is impacted).
- Complainants are legally protected from retaliation when they raise harassment complaints in good faith.¹⁴

HAVE PREVENTION MEASURES SUPPORTED BY POLICY

To focus on prevention, establish adequate knowledge and reporting processes.¹⁵ Written policy is essential to help guide employee and manager actions and to help safeguard firms from harassment liability. But remember, harassment is illegal, and a firm can be held accountable whether or not it has an anti-harassment policy.¹⁵

Prevention

- Be clear that harassment will not be tolerated and that there are clear consequences.
- Develop a written policy that is discussed with and signed by every employee.
- Have multiple pathways by which individuals can report incidents.
- Mandate recurrent, engaging training.
- Fully investigate claims, and have clear remediation.

Policy

- Define harassment to your employees.
- Prohibit harassment, with examples of how it occurs and how to respond.

→ Outline disciplinary measures (e.g., written warning, coaching, demotion, termination).

→ Communicate your commitment to confidentiality.

RESPOND TO VIOLATIONS

Appropriate and timely responses help protect everyone involved in a harassment scenario. The best course of action, if available, is to use formal complaint procedures within the workplace; this ensures that employers have the opportunity to stop harassment and are held accountable. It can be difficult to speak up about harassment, but doing so will help workplace harassment come to be seen as a social issue rather than just an individual's problem.

Individuals

- If possible, address the situation immediately with the harasser; make it clear that you find the behavior unacceptable and that it must stop.
- Write down the incident with the date, time, a factual account, and names of any witnesses.
- Report the incident to your manager, your manager's supervisor, or to HR. (See also the "Use the law" section of this guide.)
- If harassment continues, consider writing a letter to the harasser stating the facts of what has happened, how you object to their behavior, and what you want them to change; save a copy of the letter.

Managers

- Take all complaints and concerns seriously.
- Suspend judgment and remain neutral toward the complainant and respondent. (Many factors, such as physiology, culture, and power dynamics, can bring harassment complainants and respondents to act or speak in ways that are counter to behavior that you might personally expect.¹⁶)
- Immediately report the incident to HR or a firm leader.
- Take action to make the complainant's workplace safe and to prevent recurrent conduct or retaliation.

Human Resources or Firm Leader

- Advise the complainant and respondent of the situation's seriousness.
- Notify police if there is alleged criminal activity.
- Arrange an investigation and report to company officials.
- Notify the complainant and respondent of actions to be taken and oversee the actions.

USE THE LAW

Unfortunately, those who are harassed cannot always depend on their workplaces to adequately address a harassment situation. Given the prevalence of small firms in the profession, many firms do not have a dedicated human resources professional on staff, or may not even have an anti-harassment policy. Such situations may result in an employee facing workplace harassment having no one from whom to seek redress. In some firms, a highly visible leader may be a harasser who, due to his or her power and control over the organization, is essentially immune from recourse. And even if there are anti-harassment policies in place, long working hours may lead to situations in which professional rules of behavior are transgressed. Finally, some firms are quick to apply a one-size-fits-all remedy to anyone accused of harassment, and they fail to fully investigate such claims to arrive at findings that are based on the unique facts, evidence, and witness credibility. It is important that alleged harassers be treated fairly and equitably in this process as well and that firms do not rush to judgment without fully and carefully investigating the allegations and reaching well-reasoned findings.

The following are options that employees subjected to workplace harassment can explore, even in the absence of workplace policies or procedures that effectively address such concerns:

- File a timely complaint with the EEOC if your employer has fifteen or more employees.¹⁷
- Contact your state, county, and city agencies that enforce harassment laws, called Fair Employment Practices Agencies (FEPAs), which often cover smaller-sized companies.¹⁸
- Check with local government for county and city human-rights agencies that have a complaint procedure for enforcing local discrimination ordinances.¹⁹
- Action should be taken to file a complaint promptly following the discrimination or harassment, often within 180 days of the last discriminatory act. (Statutes of limitation vary per agency and jurisdiction.)
- Seek legal assistance from a private lawyer or a legal aid organization.²⁰

For closely related considerations and suggestions see the *Intercultural Competence* and *Compensation* guides. For how to file a complaint with the AIA National Ethics Council, see the *Compensation* guide.

Assess

CLARITY

Can 100% of employees describe your workplace culture? · Are there groups that cannot? · How does the organization communicate its culture? · Are there recognizable subcultures, and do they coexist or conflict? · Does employee conduct align with the organization's values and goals?

How do you negotiate diversity in your workplace? · Does your firm recruit for diversity, then onboard for sameness? · For an employee to be the "right fit," what differences are allowed and supported, and in what aspects is it expected that one adopt the firm's culture? · Are you asking people to assimilate (lose important differences) or acculturate (retain important differences) in relation to dominant-group thinking and behavior?

TRUST

What behaviors are rewarded? · How are behaviors that contribute to a positive workplace culture supported, evaluated, and recognized, and are all employees enabled to perform them? · Are there new behaviors that can be encouraged and rewarded? · Are people held equally accountable for their actions?

How are issues managed? · Is it safe for all employees to take risks, ask for help, and learn from their mistakes? · Are problems communicated and discussed, and is there time and support offered to address and learn from them?

POWER

Who shapes culture in your workplace? · What are the attitudes and behaviors of leaders, and do they align with the business strategy? · Is there a consensus on priorities, and are leaders equipped to lead? · Can you increase opportunities for more people with different identities, experiences, and positions to contribute to decision-making that helps shape culture?

Who benefits from the culture, and who is disadvantaged? · Does the culture support everyone to do their best work? · How do the values of the organization relate to those of different individuals, and what are the behaviors through which individual and collective values can be demonstrated? · Does your culture prize some aspects of work (for example, design) over others, causing you to undervalue people who make significant contributions in other areas?

CONNECTIONS

How do cultures of your clients affect your firm culture? · Do you recognize the full range of cultural identities or workplace cultures of your clients? · Are you engaging their cultures effectively in all communications? · Do the needs and values of clients play a role in how teams are managed or individuals are treated? · If so, are those client needs and values congruent with your firm's culture?

What other cultures impact your workplace culture? · Is there a legacy culture at your firm that helps or hinders goals for your future culture? · Which local, regional, and national communities do you engage with? · Is there an architecture school or program with which you have close ties and whose culture might affect yours? · Do you pay attention to generational and social changes and adapt to them?

Act

INDIVIDUALS

Each person in a firm contributes to its culture and has the ability to reinforce or question it.

KNOW THE CULTURE

Make culture part of your exploration when seeking and starting a new job or when reconsidering your current workplace.

- **Identify employers with cultures that you can support.** Research their policies and discuss their culture in your interview and negotiation processes.
- **Read onboarding materials, and observe the “rituals” and unspoken rules** that keep the office running. Ask for clarification and tips from peers and supervisors to verify your assumptions, and ask for feedback on your cultural integration during your first months on the job.
- **Be aware of how your own values, perceptions, behaviors, and expectations relate** to the culture of your workplace. Similarly, learn about the cultures that other employees bring to work by asking questions and listening, and consider what their context means for them within the office culture.

KNOW YOUR ROLE AND BE PROACTIVE

Your relationship to your firm culture is important for your career and for those connected to you.

- **Understand project, team, and firm goals** and how to collaborate with peers and superiors to achieve those goals. Have in place a plan for being a positive actor within your team and firm culture.
- **Engage in or instigate team initiatives** during the workday and outside of the office.
- **Look for opportunities for growth.** Consider forming an employee interest group around a topic that is important to you.²¹ This, in turn, can contribute to your development as a leader in your firm.

→ Look for things you can personally change.

Consider whether you may be contributing to an aspect of your firm’s culture that you believe is negative and work to correct it; when an issue is outside your control, make constructive suggestions rather than complaints.

→ Understand your personal boundaries as well as your rights

according to office policies and employment law. When you see or experience something that runs counter to them, speak up. For example, if there is a culture of long work hours at your firm, assess what that means for you and how to navigate it. If you feel or see negative effects, discuss them with your supervisor along with what changes can be made individually or firm-wide. Also, talk with other team members about work hours—how to guard against competition to put in the most number of hours and to value one another’s work on quality rather than hours put in.

→ Consider finding a different work situation that might be a better fit

if there is an aspect of your firm’s culture that significantly diverges from your values and seems immutable.

BE A GOOD MANAGER

Managers—those with responsibility for others—are central in shaping and guiding culture in the workplace.

→ Create the conditions for physical and psychological safety

in your group. Encourage those you manage to speak up, and foster trust by becoming familiar with who they are and relating to them individually.

→ Know your own leadership style

and how it fits with your firm’s culture.

→ Stay connected,

and foster social connections within your team.

→ Show empathy,

and make a sincere effort to help others. Your team members will be more likely to do the same.

Act

FIRMS

Each group of people that forms a workplace has the opportunity to produce a unique, robust, and positive culture. Whether a firm is just starting out or decades into its practice, the shared patterns that determine appropriate behavior within the group can support or hinder business goals.

UNDERSTAND YOUR CULTURE

Every step in managing your firm culture involves knowing what it is and how it works.

- **Outline your firm’s mission and purpose**, including values, goals, and strategies, and how they align. Use this sentence to check for misalignment or mixed messages: “We *say* that ____, but when we ____, or when we don’t ____, we’re conveying ____.”
- **Ensure that senior leaders have a common understanding** of the existing company culture and what they want it to be in the future. Use structured discussion, a culture-alignment tool, or a consultant to measure the degree of alignment between individual leadership styles and organizational culture to determine the impacts leaders have.
- **Observe your firm structure**—the way your firm organizes and coordinates its work—and how it supports (or could better support) worker engagement and satisfaction and design and profitability goals.²² Consider ownership and management structures (how decisions are made, who the gatekeepers are, how communication happens), as well as team structures (studio, matrix, market sector, gig, distributed) and the project delivery models you employ.
- **Look for unintended consequences**—for example, notice if there are subgroups that are linked to higher or lower performance. Learn the career pinch points for different demographic groups, and evaluate what your firm structure and culture do to exacerbate or alleviate problems. (Pinch points in architecture include finding the right job fit, gaining licensure, caregiving, reduced paths forward at certain personal and career crossroads, transitions to leadership, and retirement.²³)
- **Assess how your organization’s context** (time, place, market) affects your culture, including the norms and values of your local/regional/national cultures, client cultures, or a legacy culture.
- **Learn from your employees.** Organize open discussions, and welcome anonymous feedback and suggestions for change. Conduct exit interviews, using a reputable party outside the firm to foster candidness.²⁴
- **Administer culture surveys** (focus on values) and climate surveys (focus on attitudes and perceptions) about project management, staff roles, transparency, collaborations within teams and with consultants and clients, etc.
- **Create and administer a regular review process.**
- **Incorporate metrics into feedback loops** to enable everyone to integrate the firm’s values into their performance goals.
- **Consider hiring a third-party consultant** to evaluate your firm culture and structure.

COMMUNICATE YOUR CULTURE

Everyone needs to understand the core values and accepted behaviors, best practices, and activities of their workplace. Have multiple ways for employees to learn about your firm’s culture and changes.

- **Communicate your culture formally and informally.** Provide an onboarding program, an employee handbook, and mentoring. Share information and firm stories in break areas, newsletters, and social events.
- **Help managers to continually orient to firm culture**, especially when change is occurring, and when seeking effective ways to lead employees in aligning with business goals.
- **Provide opportunities for employees to celebrate** aspects of your firm culture.
- **Audit messaging regularly** to check for bias-free and inclusive language.

LEAD YOUR CULTURE

Workplace culture is affected by a variety of factors, but it is shaped by firm leaders establishing accepted attitudes and behaviors.

- **Tackle the problems and opportunities you see** in your firm culture; poor practices will not right themselves. Change can be uncomfortable, especially for those who have had a strong hand in forming the firm. Seek opportunities to hold up a mirror in order to understand if firm patterns reflect one's personal ways of thinking or doing and if they currently support the goals and work of the larger team.
- **Think holistically** about how every strategy or decision relates to your culture; be ready to adjust one to maintain alignment with the other. Be careful to look at impacts across every group in the firm—what might benefit one person or group might come at the expense of another.
- **Focus on improving practices that make it difficult for underrepresented groups** to enter and sustain employment within the profession, as well as have an equal voice and equal opportunities for advancement—practices such as long work hours and assignment of office tasks and part-time or flexible work (which have significantly greater impact on women at certain points in their careers). Also look at norms around licensure, pay, mentorship/sponsorship, promotion, and leadership that affect all underrepresented groups in architecture.
- **Know that good management is key.** Have the right metrics in place to hire or develop skilled managers, and give them the training and resources they need to lead great teams.
- **Have more diverse leadership** to help set inclusive workplace culture from the top. Your culture guides who becomes leaders, and it is likely that leaders will perpetuate the culture in which they advanced. Therefore, to robustly build diversity where it is lacking, change must take place in the culture itself, rather than by changing the behaviors of the diverse individuals you wish to promote. This transformation is most successful when the top leaders agree on the need for change, and hold themselves accountable for progress.²⁵
- **Empower culture champions** or ambassadors to demonstrate by example what it looks like to embody the firm's culture or desired culture—based on how they do their work and balance their professional and personal life—and highlight the contributions of employees who help to create a positive cultural climate.

FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is a key factor in a healthy workplace culture.²⁶ Creating a culture of engagement begins with leadership and is reinforced through open and consistent communication. There are concrete ways to support employee engagement and improve performance based on treating employees as active participants in their (and the company's) future and in supporting them to perform their best. (For more on engagement, see the *Recruitment & Retention* guide.)

- **Provide a structured onboarding program** (a six-month process is recommended) to integrate new employees into the firm's culture and reduce high turnover, which detracts from office culture.²⁷
- **Clarify work expectations**, and outline how each part of the work is meaningful and relates to advancement. Acknowledge employee accomplishments, both professional and personal. Share the company goals and achievements with employees, and invite employees to participate in discussing the firm's future strategy.
- **Provide employees with the resources needed** to do their work, and provide ongoing feedback, mentorship, and professional development opportunities.
- **Support social relationships** in the workplace. In addition to all-team meetings, plan different kinds of social events that resonate with and work for different people; ask those who do not attend what they would like to do as a group. Consider what spaces in the office foster socializing and how they might attract more participants. Create wellness challenges or other group activities.²⁸
- **Encourage managers to establish connections** with new employees from day one, and hold managers accountable for their team's engagement and how it relates to group performance.²⁹

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: the level of an employee's commitment to an organization and its goals

Act

PROFESSION

No individual, firm, or school can enact profession-wide cultural shifts on its own. Local, regional, and national professional organizations, including AIA chapters, have an important role to play and are vehicles for understanding, communicating, and advocating for positive workplace cultures. By getting involved, individuals looking to support change in their workplace can broaden their lens and have their voice heard beyond the boundaries of one firm.

KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING

Factors that affect workplace culture and ways of looking at it are continually expanding and changing.

- **Stay up to date on thought and research** on the architecture profession published in journals and through groups such as the AIA, American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), Equity by Design (EQxD), National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB), National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB), National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS), and the Architecture Lobby.
- **Look for sources that offer perspectives different from your own experience**, attend professional events that are outside of your comfort zone, and ask people about their experiences.
- **Conduct your own research** through surveys or case studies on a topic important to your group or community, and share it with others.

SUPPORT POSITIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE PROFESSION-WIDE

Every contribution to local and national questions can make an impact.

- **Seek out ways to work with and through national organizations**, bringing change from within and building upon existing infrastructure.

- **Discuss, write about, and present** on topics important to your group to open up the conversation for new ideas and joint efforts both within the group and with a broader audience.
- **Offer professional development**, creative opportunities, and social events around current topics like flexible work, harassment, and gender identity in the workplace.
- **Connect with schools, faculty, and students to model and help instill positive workplace culture practices**, such as work hours and expectations. Share what to be aware of when entering the workforce or engaging with practitioners and firms to better prepare everyone to be active and effective in culture change.³⁰

LOOK BEYOND ARCHITECTURE

Learn what issues and problem-solving approaches are occurring in other professions and industries, and ask what might be relevant for improving the current and future practice of architecture. Workplace frameworks are continually evolving as societies change; use a mix of resources to stay connected to the conversations.

- **Bring in a diverse range of outside experts** to share their knowledge on workplace issues, and discuss your thoughts afterward as a group on possible impacts and whether or not action should be taken.
- **Follow business-oriented sources** such as *Harvard Business Review*, Gallup, Forbes, Deloitte, McKinsey, Pew Research Center, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Catalyst, Great Place to Work Institute, Lean In.
- **Be aware of discussions and resources developed by other parts of the building industry** through groups like the AIGA (the professional association for design), Associated General Contractors (AGC), Construction Owners Association of America (COAA), Construction Users Roundtable (CURT), Lean Construction Institute (LCI).

Consider

MANAGING CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

“I remember having a commitment on Wednesday nights that required me to leave at 6:30 p.m., and consistently, the receptionist would say I was going part-time. The office, many times, had the expectation we would work on Sundays, so even weekends people felt like they needed to participate or you’re not being collegial or part of the group. I understand that, and yet I found a way to make choices and prioritize what I wanted, so that while it involved many ‘walks of shame,’ leaving earlier than everybody else, it also made me feel empowered to know that I’m somebody who gets their work done and you can rely on, yet you might not want to come to me on a Thursday at 7:00 p.m. with a deadline for the next morning. I found a way to be very happy in that office, but it wasn’t easy.”

— Director, Business Owner, Sole Practitioner, and Educator, White, Female, 38

DISCUSS:

- What is objectively occurring in this story, and what assumptions might you and those within the story possibly be making? What questions would you ask to determine a well-informed recommendation as a way forward?
- What stereotypes or biases could “walk of shame” relate to in terms of this person’s identities? What might the receptionist’s statement say about her expectations for full-time work and her role in the office? Does “going part-time” sound like a negative comment?
- How might a person with a different mix of identities perceive the same situation or possibly be treated differently by others when exhibiting the same behavior? Why?
- If you were to ask different people in this firm what the appropriate and inappropriate number of hours worked in a week should be, do you think there would be a consistent answer? What does “working hard” look like, and who gets to decide?
- How could this type of culture impact employees working toward licensure, with caregiving obligations, who have certain disabilities, or have different value systems? Who might this type of culture keep out of the firm? Would there be value to the firm to be inclusive of a greater range of employees with a greater need for flexibility in when, where, and how they work?
- In what ways is communication happening within this story? What might this person discuss with her colleagues and manager about changes around work times and perception? How could the firm clarify their values related to employee work times and clearly communicate expectations of how much time should be put toward work, when work happens, and how commitment is evaluated?

Consider

PROVE IT AGAIN

“Watching other women, I noticed that their responsibility wasn’t acknowledged in the same way as their male colleagues’. At the end of the day, there was a glass ceiling at that office for women who wanted to become a principal. During design pinups, the work I was doing was scrutinized and questioned more than the work of my male colleagues—I had to support my design argument more. This was different from what I experienced in school. It was noticeable within the staff: a tendency among male designers to question women’s work more than their own work or other men’s work, sometimes bringing the woman to tears. At some point you realize that’s not how you want to practice, and that was why people left.”

— Architect, White, Female, 30–40

DISCUSS:

- What types of biases are occurring in this story?
- Why do you think her experience in the workplace was different from her experience in school?
- What are the direct and indirect consequences of the behavior of the men designers for the women designers and the firm? Do the men designers have a responsibility to correct their behavior and its repercussions?
- What strategies could the women designers or men allies use in these situations?
- What might be changed culturally and structurally within the firm to prevent this, and how?
- Do you think the glass ceiling at the firm is related to women’s designs being more scrutinized? If so, how? What effects might this have on the health of the business?
- In what other situations do some people have to prove their competence more than people of dominant groups? Have you noticed double standards within your work context, and if so, are there certain identities to which they seem connected?
- How do these types of workplace cultures affect the profession?

Consider

HE TOUCHED ME

“The first thing to improve in architecture must be sexual harassment. My experience wasn’t aggressive; it was everyday encounters. The office was in a region where the culture is for men to kiss women on the cheek, but certain practices crossed the line. Design principals would touch my side or pat the small of my back. I once peeled someone’s fingers off my side and said, ‘Could you just not touch me?’ I was catcalled in the corridor. It was supposed to be funny, but over time it’s harmful. It affected what I wore, where I would stand; it creates a background of noise in your head in what’s already a difficult job. It became distracting and otherwise unprofessional. There wasn’t anyone to talk to about it and no HR, and I eventually left to work at a different firm, as have other women. [The firm I left] has since formed a kind of HR committee to address the issue, but it’s not really working. I don’t know what I would have done differently. Now I feel like I can speak up for myself, but brand new out of school working for a fancy design firm, I didn’t feel like I could speak up—I might have been fired or switched to a team that wasn’t as strong in design.”

— Architect, White, Female, 30–40

DISCUSS:

- What type of harassment might this constitute? (Quid pro quo or hostile work environment? Severe or persistent?)
 - How can a workplace and its employees distinguish between behavior that is harmless or harmful, regardless of the intention?
 - What role might cultural context play within the culture of this firm? How could that be managed?
 - Is there anything the woman could have done differently in order to prevent being harassed? Why do you think harassment continued after she directly and verbally asked for inappropriate behavior to stop?
- What courses of action might be advisable to her before, during, and after the incidents?
- To whom might she have been able to report? What should happen once someone in the firm is notified of the incidents, in terms of both the specific harassment scenarios and firm-wide? What should the woman do if the harassment continues after she reports it?
 - How are the employee and the firm undermined by the behaviors of the design principals?
 - Do you think the HR committee is a good idea? What could it do to most effectively help prevent future harassment in the firm? What other approaches could the firm take besides forming and calling upon the committee?

Consider

BEING AN OPENLY GAY ARCHITECT

“In twenty-plus years of practicing architecture, I’ve only spent six months working in a large, commercial firm. Very early on it became apparent that I did not fit with the company culture. While I was a white male—enough to give me a leg up—I was openly gay in a very straight male culture. There were no overt actions or comments. However, I never fit into any of the cliques within the company. I wasn’t married. Didn’t have kids. Didn’t have a history of infidelity. I simply did not fit, and today, the leadership in the company is still exclusively white, male, and straight.

After this, in the early years with my prior firm, we were struggling to gain a foothold in the market. A local gay realtor recommended joining the local LGBT chamber of commerce as a means of creating some visibility within the community. One of my partners made it clear from the start that I would be responsible for maintaining activity within the organization because they were—as she put it—“your people.” Her idea of funny took an ironic twist when she had to attend the chamber’s orientation lunch because I had been up all night working on a deadline and was too tired. However, in eight years of being members (the membership was dropped when I exited the firm), my two partners attended a total of two events, and every other activity was left to me.

As a firm owner, being an openly gay architect has provided me with some opportunities I might have missed otherwise. I worked with an older gay couple to create a new house they could enjoy when they they could enjoy when they retire. I was approached because they wanted to work with an LGBT architect—both for their own comfort and to support the LGBT community. I mentioned this to one of my partners, who commented that their decision felt a little discriminatory given the number of straight architects. Perhaps with a little too much glee, I was happy

to point out that there was no national nondiscrimination law that included sexual orientation—either gay or straight—and she would have to accept that.”

— Architect, White, Male, Gay, 50



DISCUSS:

- What stereotypes do you perceive within these stories? Is discrimination occurring? Does it have a positive or negative effect? Is it unlawful?
- What type of dominant group patterns at the large commercial firm might have kept him from feeling it was a fit? Do you think it would have been possible for the firm to make changes to increase his feeling of inclusion? How could the firm have communicated to this employee that it was important to the group that he feel included in the company culture?
- How do you think this man interpreted the actions and responses of the female partner? What other information would you want to know in order to better evaluate people's behaviors in these situations?
- Are there situations when it is an appropriate strategy for partners to divide up their outreach to specific communities? What factors should be considered in making this decision? What does it communicate internally or externally if the partners do (or do not) take this approach?
- Are there recognizable differences between small firm and large firm cultures that affect people with nondominant identities? Which identities? What are the differences?

Consider

DIVERSE CLIENTS

“My client base represents a very successful, high-end, sort of high-net-worth group. It is not socioeconomically diverse, but about a third of our clients are people who identify as gay or lesbian. It’s been interesting for me because when we bring young people in they’re often startled—many come from suburban backgrounds, go to large land-grant universities where the same set of stereotypes are reinforced, so coming into an environment where you work with, engage with, and earn a living from accomplished people in open relationships, with children, it can be a shock for them. I’m really proud we have clients who are different in some ways from our staff because it says a lot about how we’re able to engage and embrace and work with clients. I have a lot of pride in that aspect of our practice.”

— Firm Founder and Principal, White, Male, 60

DISCUSS:

- What are the different aspects of identity that you notice are recognized by the speaker in this story? Do you think he is making assumptions about different identity groups? Should those assumptions be discussed, and if so, how, and toward what goal?
- What do you think might be contributing factors for this firm’s successful relationship with a gay and lesbian client base? What might those factors say about the firm’s culture?
- Do you think that the client’s possible differences in ways of thinking or doing might have an affect on the firm’s culture? If so, how?
- How might the firm support the young employees who are shocked when they begin working with gay or lesbian clients? What are the ways to prepare employees to work with diverse types of people?
- If the firm sought to expand their client base to include people with other types of differences (e.g., race, class, age, ability), what might be several strategies they could try?

Consider

SHE'S SO HOT

“A woman professor came to our city to speak at convention. All the men around me said, ‘Wow, she’s hot, look at that.’ Since I was in a leadership position, and they were right behind me, I turned around and said, ‘You have to stop, you can’t do this right now.’ They were somewhat chastened, but the gist of all the chatter—after an amazing presentation—was ‘she was hot, I’d watch her lecture any time.’ It comes up over and over again when we’ll be discussing speakers—‘Let’s get her back again.’ I look at those guys, and I say it to them sometimes, ‘You’ve got daughters. How would you like if your daughter came and the main takeaway was how attractive or unattractive she was?’ It’s a way men are able to compartmentalize their thinking... if you bring it around to things that are important to them and can identify with, they can reorganize their thinking.”

— Firm Founder and Principal, White, Male, 60

DISCUSS:

- What does this story reveal about bias and the diversity within this group?
- What did this leader do well, and what could be improved? What other arguments could be used to help the men respect the woman speaker? Does the reference to daughters perpetuate the perception that women need to be protected by men?
- What could someone not in a position of power, male or female, do in this situation? Since not speaking up implies consent, one option is to quickly say something to deflate the conversation, like “Whoa! Those comments are silly!” The topic can then be gently resumed at a later time with the individuals, either on your own or with an ally: “Hey, what you said the other day made me uncomfortable, can we talk about it?” What other options are there?
- How could this “locker room” talk be stopped, either with individual action or through a change in culture?

Resources

FIRM CULTURE

Be Inclusive – Catalyst

<https://www.catalyst.org/be-inclusive>

Variety of resources provide tools, perspectives, and information on building an inclusive work environment for all employees.

Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement: Optimizing Organizational Culture for Success – Society for Human Resource Management (2015)

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/business-solutions/documents/2015-job-satisfaction-and-engagement-report.pdf>

Based on a survey of six hundred people, the research summarizes the key factors that lead to job satisfaction in the following categories: career development, employee relationships in management, compensation and benefits, and work environment.

Great Place to Work Institute

<https://www.greatplacetowork.com/>

Research, certification, publications, and speakers on the characteristics of “great places to work” for all.

Organizational Culture and Leadership – Edgar Schein (5th ed., 2016)

Foundational text addressing the elements of culture and the role of leadership in creating change at different stages of organizational life.

The Research Is Clear: Long Hours Backfire for People and for Companies – *Harvard Business Review* – Sarah Green Carmichael (2002)

<https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies>

Analysis of studies that show working longer hours does not increase productivity and leads to high stress levels and poorer health. In addition, overworked employees have more difficulty interacting with each other, make more mistakes, and generally lose sight of the bigger picture. All of these together reveal a point beyond which working more hours eliminates the benefits.

Room at the Top? Sexism and the Star System in Architecture – Denise Scott Brown (1989)

<http://www.mascontext.com/issues/27-debate-fall-15/room-at-the-top-sexism-and-the-star-system-in-architecture/>

A personal account illustrating the legacy of architecture’s “star system” that attributes designs, ideas, and work to the most famous leader in a firm. Scott Brown writes, “The star system, which sees the firm as a pyramid with a designer on top, has little to do with today’s complex relations in architecture and construction.” Still relevant to how the profession is seen, how firms are structured, and how architecture is evaluated.

HARASSMENT

Sexual Harassment:

What Employers Need to Know – Catalyst (2018)

<http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/sexual-harassment-workplace-what-employers-need-know-0>

Infographics that show how employers can address sexual harassment, including guidelines for preparation, prevention, and response. Also includes recommendations to address workplace culture issues surrounding sexual harassment.

What Do I Need to Know about Workplace Harassment – US Department of Labor

<https://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/crc/2011-workplace-harassment.htm>

Guidance information for compliance with sexual harassment laws, including definitions and reporting of sexual harassment, when harassment violates the law, and how to report.

Workplace Harassment Resources

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/workplace-harassment-resources.aspx>

A collection of resources for companies; includes guides for compliance and policies, training, investigation, and research.

Notes

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14. The full federal laws prohibiting employment discrimination enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission appear at <https://www.eeoc.gov/employers/index.cfm>. Consult with an employment attorney or advisor to stay current on state and federal law.

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20. If you intend to litigate, look for a lawyer early in the process. There are resources for locating legal help through different groups: for victims of sex discrimination, see the National Women’s Law Center, <https://nwlrc.org/legal-assistance/>; and for transgender and LGBT resources, see the “Additional Help” page on the National Center for Transgender Equality website, <https://transequality.org/additional-help#legal>.
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