AUGUST 2026

Company Culture Does Not Disappear Overnight. It Fades Through Daily Choices.

An Article of the Swiss Association of MBAs

Nina Grosse
Author

Recently, I spoke with a senior business leader from a multinational food-ingredients company with more than 150 years of history.

The company had been navigating a difficult market period, and he was reflecting candidly on what it would take to restore performance.

He said something that stayed with me:

“We need to bring our culture back—particularly the entrepreneurial spirit that has always been one of our core values.”

For many years, the company had been a successful market leader. Yet over time, entrepreneurship had become less clearly understood and less consistently practised. The value was still written down, but it was no longer as visible in everyday decisions and behaviours.

His reflection raised an important question:

How do you bring a company’s core beliefs and behaviours back to life?

This organisation is not alone.

As companies grow and mature, the cultural qualities that once drove their success can gradually weaken. Entrepreneurial energy gives way to caution. Speed is replaced by bureaucracy. Customer proximity becomes diluted by internal complexity.

Culture rarely disappears because leaders consciously abandon it. More often, it fades because everyday systems, incentives and decisions begin to reinforce something else.

So how can organisations keep culture alive—or revive the qualities that have weakened?

1. Clarify Why the Culture Matters Now

Cultural change must begin with a compelling business reason.

Why is the shift necessary? Why now? What will happen if nothing changes?

The answer should connect culture directly to business strategy and performance.

For example, restoring entrepreneurship may be essential because the organisation needs to respond faster to customers, identify new growth opportunities or make decisions closer to the market.

Employees need to understand that culture is not a separate HR initiative. It is part of how the organisation intends to succeed.

2. Understand the Current Culture

Before defining the future, understand the present.

Gather honest perspectives across functions, levels and locations. Explore which cultural qualities remain strong, which have weakened and where stated values differ from employees' daily experience.

Ask:

- What behaviours are rewarded today?
- What do people believe is genuinely important?
- Which habits help performance?
- Which habits now hold the organisation back?

The aim is rarely to replace the entire culture. Most organisations need to strengthen a few critical qualities rather than redesign everything.

3. Translate Values into Observable Behaviours

Words such as *entrepreneurship, collaboration and accountability* can mean different things to different people.

Values become useful only when employees understand what they look like in practice.

Entrepreneurship might mean:

- Identify future customer needs
- Develop new products informed by market forsight
- Challenging unnecessary complexity
- Testing ideas on a small scale

It is equally important to clarify what a value does not mean. Entrepreneurship, for example, does not mean ignoring governance or taking uncontrolled risks.

Clear behavioural indicators turn abstract values into practical choices.

4. Involve Employees in Shaping the Culture

Culture cannot simply be announced by senior management.

Employees are more likely to embrace cultural expectations when they help interpret what those expectations mean for their own work.

Engage formal leaders, respected influencers and employees across the organisation. Ask teams:

- What should we do more often?
- What should we stop doing?
- What prevents us from demonstrating this value today?
- What would this behaviour look like in our function?

Co-creation creates ownership and helps turn cultural ambition into operational reality.

5. Communicate Through Stories

Culture becomes memorable through stories, not slogans.

Employees pay attention to examples of colleagues who challenged an outdated practice, acted in a customer's interest, took responsibility during difficulty or experimented with a better way of working.

Leaders should consistently explain why the cultural shift matters, what the desired behaviours look like and where they are already happening.

A single launch event will not change culture. Repetition, credibility and visible examples will.

6. Ensure Leaders Model the Desired Behaviours

Employees watch what leaders do more closely than they listen to what leaders say.

A company cannot credibly promote entrepreneurship if every small decision requires senior approval. It cannot advocate openness if difficult messages are discouraged. It cannot promote collaboration while leaders protect organisational silos.

Role modelling matters most under pressure.

When results decline, do leaders revert to control, or do they continue to encourage initiative and constructive challenge?

Leaders do not need to be perfect, but they must be willing to examine their behaviour, invite feedback and visibly change.

7. Build the Required Capabilities

Sometimes employees are willing to behave differently but lack the necessary skills.

An entrepreneurial culture may require stronger commercial judgement, customer insight, experimentation and risk assessment. A collaborative culture may require better conflict resolution and cross-functional problem-solving.

Training can help, but learning should be connected to real work.

Action-learning projects, coaching, peer discussions and business experiments are often more effective than classroom programmes alone.

8. Align Recognition, Promotion and Consequences

What an organisation rewards sends a stronger signal than what it writes on a wall.

If employees are encouraged to collaborate but rewarded only for individual results, the organisation creates a contradiction.

If leaders are promoted despite repeatedly violating company values, employees conclude that results matter more than behaviour.

Recognition should highlight people who demonstrate the desired culture while delivering meaningful outcomes. At the same time, behaviours that undermine the culture must be addressed—even when they come from high performers.

Who gets promoted, recognised and trusted reveals an organisation's real culture.

9. Remove Organisational Barriers

Culture problems are not always mindset problems. Sometimes they are design problems.

An organisation may ask people to be entrepreneurial while maintaining multiple approval layers. It may promote customer focus while measuring internal activity. It may encourage collaboration while targets and budgets reinforce competition.

Review whether the desired culture is supported by:

- Decision rights
- Organisational structures
- Performance measures
- Governance
- Resource allocation
- Meeting practices

Employees cannot consistently demonstrate behaviours that the organisation makes difficult.

10. Embed Culture into Systems and Rituals

Culture is sustained through repetition.

Desired behaviours should be integrated into recruitment, onboarding, performance management, succession planning, leadership development, promotions and business reviews.

Rituals also matter. The questions leaders ask, the stories shared during onboarding and the way teams review success and failure all reinforce cultural expectations.

When culture is embedded into these routines, it becomes part of how the organisation operates rather than another initiative.

Measure Behaviour and Business Impact

Culture may be difficult to measure, but it is not immeasurable.

Employee surveys provide one perspective. Organisations can also track decision-making speed, customer responsiveness, collaboration, innovation, turnover, internal mobility and leadership behaviour.

The most useful question is not simply:

“Do employees recognise our values?”

It is:

“Are the desired behaviours becoming more frequent, and are they improving business performance?”

Keeping Culture Alive

Embedding cultural change can take months or years.

Culture requires continuous attention because organisations never stand still. Strategies change. Leaders change. Markets shift. New employees join.

The aim is not to preserve culture unchanged.

A strong culture must be both rooted and adaptive: grounded in enduring beliefs, but continually reinterpreted for new circumstances.

For a 150-year-old organisation, restoring entrepreneurship does not mean recreating the past. It means reconnecting with the conviction behind that value and expressing it in ways that are relevant today.

Ultimately, culture is kept alive through thousands of everyday choices:

What leaders prioritise.
What managers tolerate.
What teams repeat.
What the organisation rewards.
And what people do when no one is watching.

Culture is not what an organisation says it values. It is what the organisation consistently makes possible.

About the Author

Nina is a strategic HR and organizational development leader who helps businesses scale and transform through their people. With a track record spanning Fortune 100s to high-growth SaaS tech firms, she has led global initiatives in leadership development, culture building, and org design that drive measurable business results. Backed by advanced credentials and a data-driven approach, Nina partners with executive teams to successfully implement strategies and accelerate change in complex, fast-moving environments.

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/nina-tianhui-grosse-0aab734