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MANREAU ESSAY

Culture Does Not Follow A Transformation. It Governs It.

By Waheeda Görlitz | 11 August 2026

Culture is the most cited reason transformations fail, and the least precisely defined. MANREAU's reframing: culture shapes what an organization sees and the quality of judgment it exhibits, collectively, when it matters most.

Culture becomes consequential before behavior changes: it shapes what the organization can see, how it judges and whether it can act coherently.

Culture gets blamed for everything. It explains nothing.

Culture is the most cited reason why transformations fail. And the least precisely defined. When leaders say culture is the problem, they mean something real, they are experiencing friction they cannot explain by strategy, structure, or skills alone. But the diagnosis stops there. Culture becomes the word that means everything wrong that cannot be named anything else.

This matters because what is not precisely understood cannot be precisely changed. Organizations respond to culture problems with culture programs: leadership workshops, values declarations, employee experience initiatives, engagement surveys. These are not without value. But they do not address what culture actually does in a transformation, and why it so often stops one.

Culture shapes what an organization sees and the quality of judgment it exhibits under pressure.

MANREAU's view is this: culture is not only what an organization says it believes. Culture shapes what becomes visible, how material reality is interpreted and the quality of judgment the organization exhibits collectively when it matters most. Not the values on the wall. Not the aspiration described in the annual report. The patterns of attention and decision under pressure, with incomplete information, among people whose interests are not perfectly aligned.

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This reframing is not a semantic distinction. It has direct consequences for where you intervene, what you observe, and what you develop.

Three connected capabilities: perceive together, interpret honestly, act from shared understanding.

Coherent Collective Judgment, the specific cultural dimension MANREAU focuses on, consists of three connected capabilities: the capacity to perceive reality together, the capacity to interpret it without suppressing the differences in what people see, and the capacity to act from a sufficiently shared understanding. Each has a distinct anatomy, a distinct failure mode, and a distinct way to be developed.

Perception fails when the signals available at the operational level, the ones closest to customers, processes, and the daily reality transformation is intended to change, do not reach the people making strategic decisions. This is not primarily a communication problem. It is a structural one: most reporting architectures are designed to confirm what leaders already believe, not to surface what they need to know.

Interpretation fails when people in the same room are working from different readings of the same situation, and the organizational culture treats that divergence as dangerous rather than informative. The most familiar form of this failure is false alignment: people nod in agreement and walk out pursuing different agendas. This is not dishonesty. It is a rational response to a culture that has learned to treat unspoken disagreement as the safer option.

Collective action fails when even people who share an understanding cannot translate it into coordinated behavior. This is where culture meets governance: the decision rights, incentive structures, and rhythms of accountability that either make shared intent operational or turn it into something that was once agreed upon in a meeting.

An organization where everyone agrees all the time has not developed judgment, it has developed suppression.

The word 'coherent' in Coherent Collective Judgment is doing specific work. Coherence does not mean unanimity. Coherence means that differences in perspective have been surfaced, tested against the available evidence, and brought into a shared understanding that is robust enough to act on, while remaining honest about what it does not yet know.

This distinction matters because organizations frequently mistake false alignment for genuine coherence. The executive team finishes the strategy session with a slide everyone endorses. Three weeks later, functional priorities diverge, resource commitments shift, and the transformation initiative absorbs another round of delay that no one can explain. The slide was coherent. The judgment was not.

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The thinking is not new. The synthesis is.

The intellectual foundations of this view are not new. Karl Weick's work on organizational sense-making established that organizations do not simply react to an objective reality, they actively construct the reality they act on, through shared attention, interpretation, and language. Jürgen Habermas drew attention to communicative action as the medium through which genuine agreement, as distinct from compliance, becomes possible. Chris Argyris documented the specific mechanisms by which organizations learn to avoid learning: the defensive routines that protect comfortable assumptions from the challenges that would actually improve performance.

Edgar Schein added the sharpest insight for practitioners: culture does not change because values are declared. It changes because the shared assumptions beneath those values are exposed, questioned, and revised through real experience. The lever is not communication. It is the quality of the conversations that happen when there is genuine disagreement, under real pressure, with something at stake.

INTERPRET is culture in motion.

Within SITT, the INTERPRET discipline is where Collective Judgment is most directly engaged. INTERPRET is defined as the discipline of collective sense-making: bringing different readings of reality into a shared picture without erasing their differences. The failure mode SITT targets explicitly, apparent alignment concealing future failure, is not a strategy problem or a project management problem. It is a culture problem, precisely defined.

Culture is not changed by learning about it. It is changed by doing it differently, until the new pattern becomes the default.

MANREAU does not develop Collective Judgment Capability through culture programs. It develops it by practising SITT within CADENCE on real transformation work. Leaders and teams perceive and interpret together; leaders and managers with the relevant authority remain accountable for translating the resulting judgment into decisions and action.

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Collective Judgment does not expire when the initiative ends. It compounds.

What this builds over time is a cultural asset that outlasts any single transformation initiative. Unlike expertise attached to a specific project, Collective Judgment compounds. An organization that has learned to see more clearly, interpret more honestly, and act from genuine shared understanding becomes systematically better at navigating whatever transformation arrives next, not because it has a better methodology, but because it has developed the human capacity to use one.

This is what it means to treat culture as a management object, not a management excuse. Not something that explains failure after the fact, but something that can be observed, measured, and deliberately developed, as an organizational capability, governed by the same discipline and rhythm that governs any other.

Sources

This essay draws on Karl Weick's organizational sense-making theory, Jürgen Habermas's communicative action framework, the organizational learning work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, and Edgar Schein's foundational research on organizational culture. The Collective Judgment Capability concept is a MANREAU synthesis developed through sustained engagement with transformation programs across multiple industries.

The Art Behind the Insight

Vasily Kandinsky — Several Circles (Einige Kreise) (January-February 1926)

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Kandinsky gives each circle its own scale, color, density and position. Some remain separate; others overlap, recede or gather around a stronger center. Against the deep field, their differences are not resolved into uniformity. They become legible through their relationships, creating a composition that feels both ordered and alive.

That is why the work accompanies this essay. Coherent Collective Judgment does not require everyone to see the same thing or arrive with the same perspective. It requires distinct observations to remain visible, meet one another honestly and form a shared picture strong enough for action. Like Kandinsky’s circles, coherence comes from productive relationship, not sameness.

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About MANREAU

A transformation program is not yet a transformation.

Your strategy can be sound, delivery disciplined and change carefully planned. Yet your transformation can still fail.

Managing the initiatives is one job. Managing the system that must transform the business is another. Most organizations manage the first explicitly. The second goes unmanaged. That system is the Transformation Operating System.

MANREAU works with leaders on their Strategic Mobilization to improve the conditions for successful transformation by making the Transformation Operating System visible and manageable. Strategic intent turns into coherent action, booked and sustained value, and the capacity to transform again.

About the author

Waheeda Görlitz is the founder of MANREAU. She works with leadership teams on the organizational, political and human system through which transformation becomes executable and enduring.

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