Publica

WORKPLACES OF BELONGING – THE NEXT LEADERSHIP *frontier*

Mal Cooke[1]

1. THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE MODERN WORKPLACE

The workplace today is more than a site of economic production—it has quietly become Australia's most prominent social institution. For many, work has surpassed churches, sporting clubs, unions and other civic spaces as the primary environment for community connection, shared purpose and belonging. This article explores how organisations can foster an authentic sense of connection and belonging among team members and the value proposition for those organisations that do.

The foundational drivers of performance are shifting in Australian businesses, government enterprises and not-for-profits. In a rapidly changing and complex operating environment, the most successful organisations are learning to reconcile financial performance with what it means to be human in the workplace – connected, contributing and cared for.

Organisations that successfully create and sustain a sense of collective identity unlock a superpower - enviable employee engagement, brand loyalty and enhanced enterprise value. Those that fail—by leaning into the gig economy, commoditising human resources or relying solely on technology to reverse declining productivity—face the opposite: disengagement, fragmentation and diminished enterprise value.

Navigating this change requires the discipline that all great leaders master – alternating perspective between the high-altitude system level view and the low-altitude individual experience. We will endeavour to transition between both below, before identifying practical tools that may prove helpful to leaders in stewarding this change.

2. CONVENTIONAL MODELS OF POWER

Recent cultural failures within major Australian organisations highlight fundamental problems in corporate behaviour and show why change is urgently needed. Let's first zoom in to the experience of employees at Nine Entertainment, a leading media organisation. It provides a stark (but by no means isolated) example of patterns at the system level.

[1] Mal Cooke is an Executive Director at Neometric (www.neometric.com). He is grateful for the contribution of his colleagues Heidi Rawson and Zoe Cooke in the preparation of this paper.

The experience at Nine Entertainment – when values and reality diverge

Nine Entertainment's 2023 Annual Report articulated a shared purpose — "Australia Belongs Here" — and values of Walk the Talk, Turn Over Every Stone, and Keep it Human. These were intended to unify Nine's people and align expectations.

The glossy brochures masked a different internal reality. An independent review in 2024 revealed a toxic workplace culture marked by systemic abuse of power, bullying and harassment. The Intersection Report[2] described Nine as an organisation where accountability was lacking, decisions were made for personal gain and status was used to bully or "punch down." Poor performers were not managed, high performers carried heavier workloads and those out of favour were denied opportunities.

Employee feedback painted a vivid picture of the very human impact:

- Every day I would wake up with this knot in my stomach thinking am I going to be screamed at, white-anted or publicly humiliated today, or is it someone else's turn?
- The anxiety I experienced before [each workday] was debilitating. He would humiliate me in front of everyone else on the team
- There is no point reporting issues – as the management is not interested – people, especially hard workers, are not recognised – bullies thrive and are rewarded
- When I left Nine I was a shell. I was broken. I had no confidence.

THE GAP BETWEEN MARKETING AND REALITY RESULTS IN ISOLATION AND BROKEN PEOPLE.

The gap between Nine's marketing and reality undermined shared identity and trust, resulting in isolation and broken people. That workplace culture is simply incapable of creating sustainable financial (or any other measure of) success for Nine Entertainment. Something fundamental must shift.

Assumptions that no longer hold

We will now zoom back out to the system level. Public reviews of corporate conduct reveal that this kind of corporate culture is common in Australia.[3] The failures at Nine reflect system-wide foundations in corporate conduct built on dated assumptions including:

- Short-term financial returns to shareholders being prioritised over wider stakeholder impact[4]
- Rigid distinctions between the role of managers (to plan and allocate specific, repeatable, process-oriented tasks) and of workers (to execute those instructions) referable to Taylor's Scientific Management organisational theories devised in the early 20th century)[5]
- Balance sheets which measure (and value) financial capital, to the exclusion of other stores of value – human, social and intellectual capital - that are essential to innovation, shared identity and sustained performance.[6]

A common misconception arising from these assumptions is that organisational

[2] *"Out in the open: Changing the Culture at Nine Entertainment"*, 2024 - https://www.nineforbrands.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Intersection-Nine-Entertainment-2024-Report-FA.pdf [3] Other prominent examples can be seen in the 2024 governance review at Qantas (Qantas Governance Review Report, 8 August 2024, https://www.qantasnewsroom.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/QANTAS-BOARD-GOVERNANCE-REVIEW-REPORT.pdf), the controversy surrounding PwC Australia (see report at https://www.pwc.com.au/about-us/commitments-to-change/independent-review-of-governance-culture-and-accountability-at-pwc-australia.pdf) and systemic banking abuses revealed in the *Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry* [4] See for e.g. https://www.royalcommission.gov.au//final-report, especially at 3.2.1 [5] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911) [6] See for e.g. Christabel, M., Hasya, A., & Muharam, H. (2024). *Human capital on organizational performance: The essence of knowledge sharing practices.* International Journal of Management and Economics, 6(2), 11–18. ISSN: 2664-7079 (Online), 2664-7060 (Print). Published 13 July 2024. Retrieved from http://www.managementjournals.net

THE HEALTH OF THE FOREST IS MISSED BY NARROW FOCUS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF INDIVIDUAL TREES.

performance that rewards investors is inconsistent (or at best in tension) with an intentionally human workplace culture. That error has shaped norms of leadership and dimmed expectations of employees. Transactional value exchange is standard, reinforced by individualised KPIs that are assumed (as an article of faith) to drive shared financial performance.

The collective health of the forest is missed by narrow focus on the performance of individual trees.

We are all shaped by our own leadership experience, and I am no exception. I recall the clinical way partners would assess the contribution (and proposed salary increases) of our team members in a global commercial law firm. Every year, we would pore over a spreadsheet detailing each lawyer's financial metrics. While utilisation (billed hours per day) was unquestionably a driver of profit in that business, accounting for other contributions such as creativity and contribution to collective camaraderie barely featured in the conversation. We wondered why we struggled with internal competition. I see those same habits and challenges across sectors in more recent consulting work.

The system-wide model that successfully promoted economic growth through the industrial revolution is no longer fit for purpose - a fact that is becoming increasingly apparent, especially

to younger generations entering the workforce. The purpose of this paper is to support those with their hands on the levers of power – boards, executives, private equity and other providers of capital - to adapt. That is not to suggest change is easy, but that has never been an acceptable excuse for inertia.

3. SHIFTS IMPACTING OUR WORKPLACES

In this section, we return to altitude to observe the patterns and contours of the landscape. Three trends are worthy of specific focus.

Declining civic participation and increasing social isolation

Social capital—the shared values and networks of trust that bind communities[7]—has been in decline for some time. Australians are less likely to volunteer, join community organisations or even know their neighbours. Formal volunteering dropped from 23.2% in 2001 to 14.3% in 2020.[8]

Reduced engagement in civic life has been shown to contribute to Australia's growing mental health crisis.[9] Isolated individuals are more likely to seek belonging in more radical or insular groups.

Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* argues that social capital is essential for democratic health and social cohesion. When these networks weaken, society loses vital "third places" where people from diverse backgrounds interact, build empathy and learn to navigate differences. Putnam

[7] See Keeley B., OECD, *Human Capital: How what you know shapes your life*, 2007, reproduced at https://mccrindle.com.au/app/uploads/work/AHISA-Social-Capital-Infographic.pdfp; and Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000 p. 19 [8] Rong Zhu, *The Decline of Formal Volunteering in Australia (2001–2020): Insights from the HILDA Survey* p. 6 https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/VRP_The-Decline-of-Formal-Volunteering-in-Australia-2001%E2%80%932020-Insights-from-the-HILDA-Survey.pdf - HILDA is Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia [9] https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report

warns that without robust civic infrastructure, democracy itself becomes vulnerable to polarisation and disengagement. It is hard to argue as we look across the Pacific and sadly, much closer to home.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND LOW LEVELS OF CONNECTION WITH OTHERS HAS BEEN WELL DOCUMENTED

Generational shifts in the workplace

Expectations in the workforce are rapidly changing. Social research house McCrindle estimates that by 2035, half of the workforce will be comprised of Gen Z (those born between 1995 and 2009) and Gen Alpha (2010-2024) employees, compared with 27% today.[10] Gen Z and Gen Alpha workers tend to bring a strong focus on purpose, values and social impact,[11] and are willing to leave organisations that do not align with their beliefs.[12] Their digital fluency, appetite for learning and advocacy for mental health and equity challenge traditional leadership. Those entering the workplace bring a hunger for authentic connection.[13]

This is creating predictable tensions between the expectations of those in leadership positions (commonly from earlier generations) and the (often younger) workforce they lead. One 2024 survey[14] suggests 18% of managers in the US are considering quitting because of the stress of managing Gen Z employees, and another identified that 60% of employers had fired Gen Z graduates within months of hiring them.

Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA)

VUCA has become a widely adopted term to describe the rapid, unpredictable and complex environment facing organisations. Traditional linear approaches and hierarchical frameworks are no longer effective.

While the Intersection report documents serious failings in leadership and culture at Nine Entertainment, it is worth recalling the extraordinary pressures facing the company during this period. The Australian media sector was undergoing rapid disruption, advertising revenue was tanking, online and subscription-based competitors were emerging, all compounded by the uncertainty of the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders were required to respond to complexity and change at a pace that exceeded the design parameters of the hierarchical model they were operating within.

Adaptability and constant innovation are now essential for survival. Compassion for *both* leaders *and* employees is critical as we adapt to increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Points of overlap - needs emerging from these trends

At the intersection of each trend are points of overlap and opportunity for insight. Three core needs emerge at the meeting points of these trend shifts in today's organisations:

- **Innovation:** Those organisations that embrace, rather than suppress,

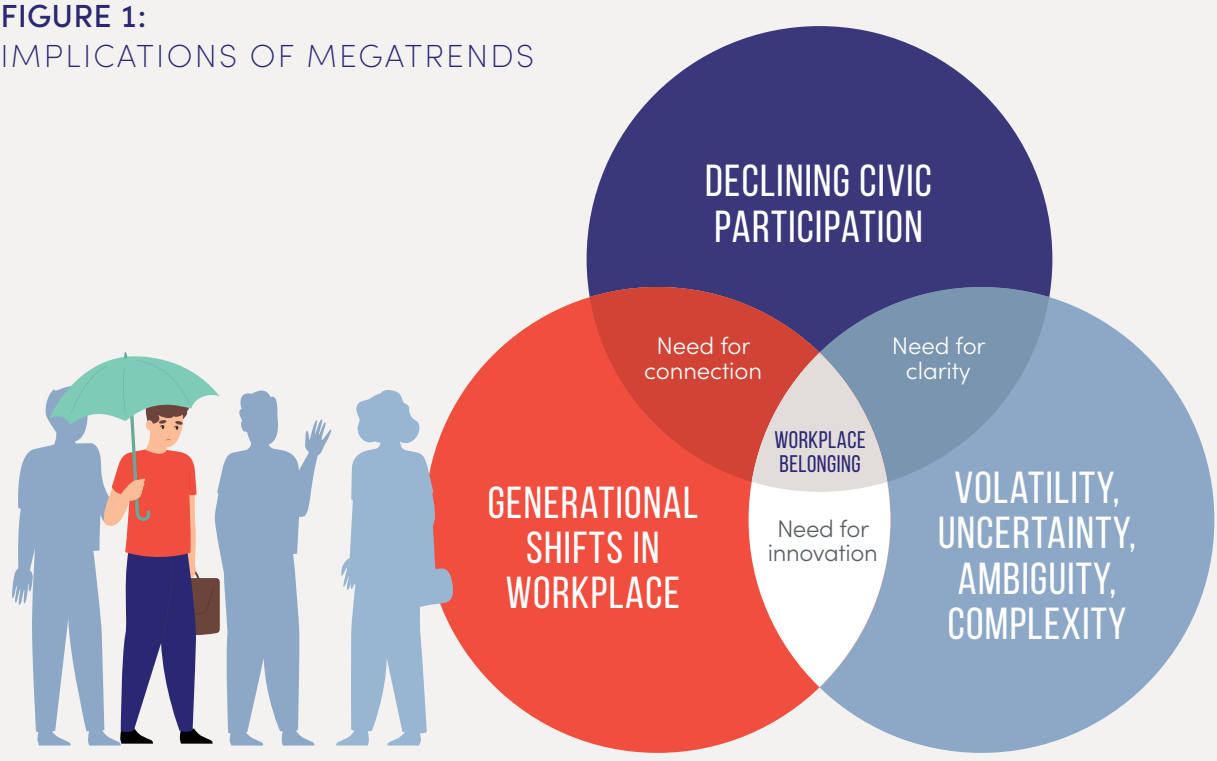
[10] McCrindle. *Generations Defined*, 2023, p9. See www.mccrindle.com.au [11] *"Gen Z are twice as likely as Baby Boomers to be extremely/very likely to take a brand's ethical standards into consideration when making a significant purchase. Younger generations are more likely to actively seek out companies that align with their own values, favouring brands that prioritise sustainability, diversity, and social responsibility."* McCrindle Generations Report Defined, 2025 [12] Hanju Lee. *The Changing Generational Values.* John Hopkins University; https://imagine.jhu.edu/blog/2022/11/17/the-changing-generational-values/ [13] "Gen Z appeared to place high importance on trust, flexibility, and strong interpersonal relationships..." Zahra, Y et al (2025) [14] https://www.forbes.com/sites/traversmark/2024/12/26/5-reasons-why-gen-z-is-struggling-in-the-workplace-by-a-psychologist/ Another found that 65% of hiring managers believe recent college graduates are entitled, 63% believe they are offended too easily and 55% of surveyed hiring managers believe recent graduates lack work ethic. https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/from-hired-to-fired-study-explains-why-gen-z-struggles-in-the-workforce/

complexity and uncertainty become more adaptive and innovative. The ambition extends beyond leading resilient businesses - those that bounce back after disruption - to leading anti-fragile organisations[15] that grow stronger through stress and volatility. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the same factors that McCrindle's research tells us motivate younger workers also enable organisations to adapt as the ground shifts, innovate offerings and create ongoing value.

- **Authentic Connection:** As an article in Harvard Business Review puts it: "Social belonging is a fundamental human need, hardwired into our DNA. And yet, 40% of people say that they feel isolated at work, and the result has been lower organisational commitment and engagement."[16]
  Like the erosion of soil revealing the extensive tree root networks beneath, declining social capital has surfaced the deeper need for connection that has characterised human existence. While social media is rarely structured to meet the depth of that need, its embrace provides strong evidence for the appetite to connect. Greater scaffolding is needed to support a shift from transactional to authentic relationship.
- **Clarity and Shared Identity:** Considerable ink has been dedicated to the value of diversity and inclusion in recent years. But for diversity to co-exist with community requires common or shared foundations. Put another way, where there is diversity, there is no inclusion without the glue of something explicitly shared that is worth protecting. Shared identity needs explicit definition.

The intersection is where belonging is forged—a need that has always sustained human survival and well-being.

FIGURE 1:
IMPLICATIONS OF MEGATRENDS



[15] See Taleb, Nicholas. *The Black Swan, The Impact of the Highly Improbable;* Penguin Books, 2008 [16] Carr, E. W., Reece, A., Kellerman, G. R., & Robichaux, A. (2019). The Value of Belonging at Work. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2019/12/the-value-of-belonging-at-work

4. HOLDING DIVERSITY IN PERIODS OF CHANGE

IF THE LONELY PERSON CAN CONNECT AND GET SUPPORT, THEY CAN PREVENT FUTURE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS, AND THERE ARE POSITIVE STEPS THAT CAN BE TAKEN.

Even in stable times, the experience of conflict is an inevitable feature of human systems. It is a function of the presence of diverse perspectives pursuing a shared endeavour. Introducing significant change amplifies that conflict.

The system-level trends outlined above will crystallise diverse perspectives and tensions, amplified by generational influences. These pressures are often expressed as conflict at ground level (whether active or suppressed) in different organisational contexts:

- In **family businesses** during periods of generational succession: founders or senior family members may struggle to relinquish control to the next generation, interpreting new ideas as threats rather than contributions. The result is often a clash between legacy and innovation.
- In **NGOs:** long-time leaders who have carried the mission with deep personal conviction may find it difficult to shift from directive leadership to participatory engagement. As passionate supporters and staff seek more voice and agency, the old model of central authority becomes increasingly untenable.
- In **entrepreneurial ventures:** challenge often emerges when a founder—accustomed to making every decision in the early stages—must delegate authority as the organisation grows.

Hierarchy and the threat of exclusion

Conventional hierarchical models tend to manage diverse perspectives by requiring compliance. This was evident at Nine Entertainment. Those with positional authority have power to dominate those without. Though having the appearance of confidence, it is more often simply a form of conflict avoidance, suppressing the feedback loops that challenge established power structures and perspectives. Ongoing participation within the organisation or team becomes conditional on compliance with often arbitrary rules and the creative opportunity of disagreement is compromised.

The risk of exclusion from any team threatens one of the most fundamental human needs: belonging.[17] Most of us recall experiences from childhood where being laughed at or picked last activated the deeper psychological threat that one's

[17] Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). *The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation.* Psychological Bulletin, 117(3), 497–529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

OPINIONS OF THOSE IN POWER BECOME ENTRENCHED WHERE THE COMPLIANT ARE REWARDED AND THOSE WHO VOICE CONCERN BECOME SCAPEGOATS.

standing, relationships or future within the group was in jeopardy.[18] Conflict and threat of exclusion can trigger what neuroscientists refer to as an amygdala hijack—where the brain interprets conflict as danger, leading to defensiveness, withdrawal or aggression.[19]

The same dynamic exists in adult workplaces. Conflict avoidant cultures suppress difference and leave them unexplored.[20] An alternate but equally dangerous dynamic is where the response to conflict is aggressive, asserting that an alternate perspective is unwelcome. A vacuum of real dialogue emerges.

This is like sand in the gears of adaptability. Opinions of those in power become entrenched into tribal positions where the compliant are rewarded and those who voice disagreement or concern become scapegoats. As one of the anonymous sources from inside Nine Entertainment put it:

> *She made it very clear that it would not be in my best interests to make an issue out of it.*

Innovation grinds to a halt, other than for projects or ideas that are explicitly sanctioned from on high. Curiosity is squashed and dissent is suppressed creating a false impression that the concern has dissolved. But it is a mirage. At Nine Entertainment, the culture of exploitation of hierarchical power was only revealed when the varied consequences of silencing dissent had become so exaggerated as to require an external review.

5. BUILDING BELONGING: PRACTICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR LEADERS

Few would argue against the theoretical ideal of communities with more authentic human connection. But it is a leap for many to believe it is realistic for workplaces to contribute to that outcome. Altruism alone has not proven adequate fuel for most organisations to become centres of genuine belonging.

Transformational change is needed if this possibility is to be realised. It must first be imagined, then designed and then activated. Transformation rarely occurs until the pain of the status quo is acknowledged to outweigh the discomfort of change.

The cost of the status quo is growing:

- conventional hierarchical models demand that leaders establish what workers are expected to do and demand compliance
- highly transactional employment models have come to be accepted as normal to fit that framework, with increasing measurable evidence of the costs of low engagement, high turnover, recruitment, retraining and talent auctions

[18] Thakore, D. (2013). *Conflict and Conflict Management.* IOSR Journal of Business and Management, 8(6), 7–16.https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jbm/papers/Vol8-issue6/B0860716.pdf [19] Fitzduff, M. (2021). *Our Brains at War: The Neuroscience of Conflict and Peacebuilding,* (Oxford University Press) [20] Thakore, D. (2013). Conflict and Conflict Management. *IOSR Journal of Business and Management,* 8(6), 7–16.

- increasingly, societal shifts reward organisations that welcome diversity and leverage multiple perspectives to drive innovation
- those familiar with command-and-control models experience this as chaotic and dangerous, driving conflict between generations within the organisation and undermining trust, connection and shared identity
- organisational performance is undermined and individual mental health plummets.

What many organisations (and their leaders, investors and funders) need to justify the discomfort of change is a clear-eyed (and self-interested) recognition of the strategic imperatives of the realities facing organisations today. That vision of the possible becomes actionable with the encouragement that the fuel for change is already present in a growing portion of the workforce.

The surprising reality is that those organisations that cultivate an authentic sense of belonging and shared contribution

THE ABILITY TO CURATE STRONG, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS IS AN ESSENTIAL ASSET TO INNOVATION.

of team members are far more likely to enjoy standout performance. The ability to curate strong, trusting relationships is recognised as an essential and strategic asset to innovation.

The most effective leaders in the current landscape:

- *reimagine their organisations* as adaptive, learning systems that foster belonging and resilience
- *reframe generational* shifts from exaggerating trends that lead to isolation to being the key to reversing them, recognising that the changes essential to creating self-adaptive innovative organisations require a cross-generational approach
- *exhibit the humility, courage and curiosity* to experiment with new ways of working.

Fortunately, they are exactly the qualities likely to generate the trust from younger workers that is essential to sustain their supportive participation. We must be careful about leaning too heavily into generalisations. Just as not all older workers embrace command and control hierarchical models, not all younger people will trade salary for shared purpose. Nevertheless, the system-level shifts are clear and provide momentum for learning from one another across generations and embracing the best insights and experience that each offer.

Learning cultures which synthesise and integrate the input across generations are positively correlated with high performing teams.[21] Factors that have been shown to release greater creativity, collaboration and engagement include:

- a shared ethic of interdependent contribution

[21] If governance positions reflect an age distribution across generations, one study found enterprise value can be expected to increase by 1.8%. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/05/intergenerational-leadership-redefining-business-performance-innovation-and-resilience/

- formalised norms for collaborative processes and
- a shared social identity.[22]

Leaders have a critical role in promoting these elements.[23] When leaders erect frameworks that encourage self-organisation, decentralised decision-making and continuous learning, they tap into the full spectrum of talent and insight within their teams. McKinsey concludes that

> *... leaders who empower their employees (giving those closest to the work the autonomy to make their own decisions) are 85 percent more likely to improve the quality of organisational decisions, as compared with their peers.*[24]

Leadership which values and cultivates distributed authority requires a redefinition of power: not as control, but as the ability to create clarity and foster contribution. In the language of modern regulatory codes, this creates the conditions for psychological safety.[25]

The balance of this paper is dedicated to practical, on-the-ground steps available to leaders to improve the human experience, and therefore the collective performance, within their organisations.

THREE QUESTIONS THAT EVERY EMPLOYEE SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

A common challenge in change management is to shift from mental assent of the need for change to practical application at the ground level. While there is no comprehensive formula that will guide leaders to create collaborative aligned cultures in every context, there are simple tools that every leader can confidently apply to shift the dial.

Start with this diagnostic: everyone in the organisation should be readily able to answer three foundational questions:

1 **What are our shared essentials?**
2 **Who decides what they are?**
3 **What is my part to play?**

Shared essentials

The essentials can be adapted in each context. But a proven place to start suggests they would comprise clear expression of an organisation's purpose, desired impact, values and strategic priorities.

PURPOSE

The enduring reason the organisation exists beyond profit

The International Standard on the Governance of Organisations defines purpose as "the organisation's meaningful reason to exist".[26] It is common for commentators to distinguish between two sectors of the economy – for profit and for purpose. That distinction is falling away. Even those organisations that require profit to be viable are increasingly expressing a shared purpose beyond profit.

[22] See for e.g. Adler, P.S. and Heckscher, C., 2018. *Collaborative community: The basis of a new managerialism.* In: P.S. Adler, P. du Gay, G. Morgan and M. Reed, eds. *The Oxford handbook of sociology, social theory, and organization studies: Contemporary currents.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.124–146 [23] He, W., Hao, P., Huang, X., Long, L.R., Hiller, N.J. and Li, S.L., 2020. Different roles of shared and vertical leadership in promoting team creativity: Cultivating and synthesizing team members' individual creativity. *Personnel Psychology*, 73(1), pp.199–225. [24] https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/organizational-health-is-still-the-key-to-long-term-performance [25] *Work Health and Safety (Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work) Code of Practice 2024* (Cth) https://www.legislation.gov.au/F2024L01380/latest/text [26] ISO 37000:2021, *Governance of organizations — Guidance.* International Organization for Standardization, Geneva, 2021

Examples include

- **Microsoft – "To empower every person and every organisation on the planet to achieve more"**
- **Patagonia – "Build the best products, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to protect nature"**
- **Tesla – "To accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy."**

While the authenticity of these statements is appropriately subject to scrutiny, the trend is clear. In its 2022 UK study,[27] Deloitte found that 36% of respondents felt that purpose is as important as salary in their decision to join an organisation. Deloitte concluded that:

> *If organisations adopt a 'profit with purpose' strategy, they can pursue financial gain at the same time as – and in many cases as a result of – delivering value to customers, communities and the public, and thus, truly differentiate themselves from organisations whose purpose goals are just an afterthought.*

The research shows that organisations characterised by purpose-driven leaders outperform others[28] – they exhibit increased work engagement and commitment driven by stronger loyalty and improved employee productivity and effectiveness. But there are no shortcuts. Employees will readily distinguish between purpose-driven leaders and those who use language of purpose as marketing. Deloitte concluded that "consistency between the externally facing purpose-led brand and the internal employee experience of purpose … is critical, and companies need to ensure that they effectively integrate purpose and draw on the workforce's ideas in their business strategy."[29]

As we noticed at Nine Entertainment, defining the expression of shared purpose ("Australia belongs here") is merely the first step to embedding it in the culture. There is every indication in the Intersection Report that Nine's management failed to take the next steps.

DESIRED IMPACT

Defining the change the organisation seeks to create in the world

Having articulated a clear purpose, creating the conditions for it to become embedded in shared practice requires clear articulation of the impact (beyond profit) that the organisation seeks to create. The International Standard describes the responsibility this way: "Organisations need to generate value which represents something of worth to its stakeholders. … Appropriate value needs to be generated for stakeholders so that they are willing, and able, to support the organisation in fulfilling its organisational purpose over time."[30]

This gives purpose tangible shape and direction. It is like organisational expressions of vision but with a focus on measurable impact.

VALUES

The expected behavioural commitments

Organisations are increasingly identifying values that frame shared behavioural expectations that guide how people interact, especially when navigating competing priorities or perspectives. Even Nine Entertainment had revised its values of *Walk the Talk, Turn Over Every Stone and Keep it Human* prior to the events that led to the external Intersection review. Regrettably, as is too often the case with

[27] Deloitte. (2022). Mind the Purpose Gap [28] Ribeiro, M.F.; Costa, C.G.d.; Ramos, F.R. *Exploring Purpose-Driven Leadership: Theoretical Foundations, Mechanisms, and Impacts in Organizational Context.* Adm. Sci. 2024, 14, 148. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14070148
[29] https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/business-strategy-growth/mind-the-purpose-gap.html [30] ISO 37000:2021, Governance of organizations — Guidance. International Organization for Standardization, Geneva, 2021

corporate values programs, management had failed to embed them in Nine's culture.

When implemented with discipline across the organisation, including embedding them in reward and recognition and related policies, they become lenses of shared and distributed accountability. Of course, they must be embodied by leaders if they are to have sustained effect.

WHEN CHURCH IMPROVES THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS – THAT IS THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE LONELY EXPERIENCE.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The focused areas where resources will be directed

Competition for resources is a common cause of conflict and misalignment. All team members are entitled to the dignity of understanding what the organisation has committed to resourcing. This demands choice of what will (and by implication, won't) be prioritised based on an assessment of what will most effectively advance the desired impact in current conditions.

Collectively, these four agreed elements - purpose, desired impact, values and strategic priorities – become helpful shared essentials. When explicit, they become common decision-making lenses for everyone in the organisation. They create clarity and a shared sense of identity for those that work together in common cause.

Who has authority to decide the shared essentials?

The second of the foundational questions is no less important. Defining the essentials is commonly understood as falling within the governance responsibility. Implementing them falls to management.[31] How that division is defined within each organisation will depend on its size, maturity and context. But in each case, that definition deserves explicit attention and description, so that any ambiguity can be addressed by those with the requisite responsibility.

This is a heavy responsibility of leadership. Clearly defining the essentials will inevitably displease some. It is as much an exercise in exclusion of those who cannot embrace and commit to them as inclusion of those who will. It will crystallise hard conversations. It will require some people to be asked to leave if they do not have the courage or awareness to make their own choice.

Allocating this responsibility to governance and operational leaders does not suggest the stakeholder voice should not be heard and incorporated into the exercise. Because of the significant impact on all stakeholders, the reverse is true.

> *The creation of a purpose statement and a supporting narrative should not be a branding exercise but a deeply reflective process. ...[T]ake the time to understand all stakeholders' perspectives...*[32]

The reason the answer to this second question is so critical for all within the organisation is to provide clear accountability. Once the essentials are defined, the contest between different perspectives ceases and all stakeholders can decide whether to lend their capacity to the shared endeavour or find another organisation with a more aligned purpose to commit to.

[31] See https://purposeeconomy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CPEP_Purpose_and_StakeholderGovernance_BestPractices_2023-04.pdf [32] https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-boards-role-in-embedding-corporate-purpose-five-actions-directors-can-take-today

What is my part to play?

Answering the third question is essential to creating a sense of belonging. It builds on the shared non-negotiables explored above and ignites the enthusiasm of making a unique contribution.

Knowing the part each person plays in a collaborative environment requires frameworks that allow each contributor to clearly understand:

- their roles and accountabilities
- others' roles and responsibilities
- points of interface between them and
- the policy framework that defines acceptable conduct (linked with values) and creates clear pathways for grievances to be aired and resolved.

These elements form the trellis on which individual roles grow and connect with others' roles, forming a vine. It orients those who contribute to the organisation, those who interact with it, those who regulate it and those who are impacted by it.

This relational architecture is a core responsibility of executive leadership. The intention is to provide those within the system the framework to interact with one another in right relationship. These frameworks will be anchored in and advance the essentials defined in question 1. This harmonisation fosters agility, trust and a sense of belonging even in the presence of complexity and rapid change.

Meeting the challenge of conflict

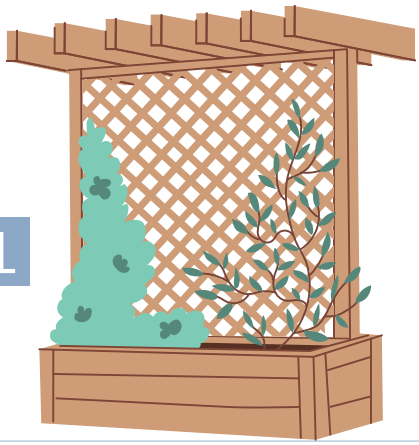
This framework is not naïve to the presence of friction. It creates the conditions within which friction is expressed creatively rather than defensively. These elements provide the boundaries within an organisation necessary for productive conflict.

This is critical because of the threat that conflict often holds. A critical element of psychological safety in the workplace is the capacity to hold disagreement constructively, neutralising the fight or flight responses. Belonging is not contingent on uniformity, but on shared commitment to clearly defined essentials.

When an organisation is characterised by trust and connection, team members can hold tension without fragmentation and efficiently reconcile difference. Clarity of purpose, desired impact, values and priorities offers signposts about where contest is welcome and where personal agendas will not be tolerated. When individuals know that their place in the organisational community is secure because they share commitment to the essentials, even when they disagree on tactics, the emotional charge of conflict is reduced. The system is designed to hold difference, not eliminate it.

Patrick Lencioni's 2002 book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*[33] explores how healthy conflict is essential for team effectiveness. He points out that the absence of conflict more often signals a lack of trust than a lack of alignment. Fisher agrees in *The Collective Edge: Unlocking*

KNOWING THE PART EACH PERSON PLAYS FORM THE TRELLIS ON WHICH INDIVIDUAL ROLES GROW AND CONNECT WITH OTHERS' ROLES, FORMING A VINE



[33] Lencioni, P., 2002. The Five Dysfunctions of a Team. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

the Secret Power of Groups.[34] He argues that conflict, when managed well, can be a constructive and even welcome part of group dynamics. Genuine discovery, Fisher suggests, comes from engaging with diverse viewpoints and surfacing the unique knowledge each person brings to the group.

This mindset is particularly powerful during times of change. It invites all generations, cultures and ethnicities to contribute—those who built the organisational foundations, and those who build on the strength of them. The transition is held together in community, where belonging is sustained through clarity and trust, not homogeneity of perspective.

A conflict confident organisation is not chaotic – it has the structural integrity of a three-legged stool.

1 ***The governing body*** (often the founder in the early stages of an organisational lifecycle or the board in a more mature organisation) defines the organisation's non-negotiables—its purpose, desired impact, values and strategic priorities.

2 ***The Executive*** articulates the strategic priorities for the team to make them tangible and builds the relational architecture that creates the clarity of how each person can uniquely contribute.

3 ***Team Members*** are empowered to operate within these boundaries, contesting ideas and shaping tactics that best respond to the dynamic context they work within.

This gives rise to a stable yet adaptive expression of mission. It is dynamic, constantly evolving, but anchored to stabilising features that guide decision-making and behaviour.

The stool serves three vital functions:

- As a *proactive framework*, it helps assess whether team members have the clarity they need to act confidently and responsibly, and where leadership development may be needed.
- As a *diagnostic tool*, it helps identify the root causes of conflict when it arises—clarifying whether ambiguity or misalignment is at play.
- As a *coaching tool*, it supports those invited to help resolve conflict by guiding individuals to take responsibility for what properly sits with them, while recognising the systemic context.

6. ORGANISATIONS OF SHARED IMPACT

Humans are social at their core. We gather and pursue shared interests. We thrive together and wither alone. We yearn to be part of something bigger than ourselves and contribute our unique talents to it.

Sadly, we are finding it harder to locate ourselves in these communities. We have come to accept low expectations of one another and our workplaces, treating them as cold exchanges of transactional value. The decline of traditional institutions that once taught people how to belong, participate and integrate different

[34] Fisher, C. M (2025) The Collective Edge: Unlocking the Secret Power of Groups. Simon & Shuster.

perspectives has left a vacuum for the astute organisational leaders to fill.

As organisations create teams aligned around shared purpose, they incidentally become communities of practice in which people relearn the art of disagreeing agreeably. The practice of working together develops skills which shape culture, both organisationally and at a wider community level. They provide safe, structured environments where people can explore difference, practise dialogue and build the relational muscles needed to hold tension without fragmentation. This is the work of belonging, and of identity that extends beyond the subjective boundary of self.

Belonging is not a by-product of good intentions - it is the result of deliberate choices about how power is shared, how differences are navigated and how every individual is invited to participate in the collective story. But as every member of a high performing team knows, this culture also has a hard edge of accountability. There is little room for tolerance of those unwilling or unable to commit to shared essentials.

When leaders embrace this shift, the workplace transforms from a relic of outdated hierarchies into a vibrant community where every contribution matters. The organisations that intentionally foster belonging will not only attract and retain the next generation of talent, but will also unlock the innovation, resilience and collective energy needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Publica

Strengthening family and community in a post-Christian society