

Operating Norms

The Unwritten Rules That Actually Govern Behavior

CULTURE LAYER • Component 2 • Years to Shift

Setting the Scene

Marcus had been at Westfield High for exactly eleven days when he figured it out. The official handbook said faculty meetings started at 3:15. The mission statement on the website proclaimed 'collaboration and continuous improvement.' The principal's welcome letter emphasized 'innovative thinking and risk-taking.'

But sitting in his third faculty meeting, Marcus noticed something strange. The agenda said 'discussion of new literacy initiative,' but when the principal asked for feedback, the room went silent. Thirty-seven teachers staring at their papers. After an uncomfortable pause, Mrs. Patterson—the department chair who'd been there twenty-two years—said, 'Sounds great.' Immediate nods around the room. Meeting adjourned in twelve minutes.

Walking to the parking lot, Marcus asked Darnell, the second-year teacher who'd been assigned as his mentor, what just happened.

Darnell laughed. 'Oh, you'll learn. We don't actually discuss things in faculty meetings. That's where decisions get announced. If you want to change something, you need to talk to Patterson first, then she talks to the principal, and if they agree, it happens. If you speak up in the meeting? You become "that person."' "

'But the handbook says—'

'The handbook says a lot of things. Here's what actually matters: Be at your door before the first bell—that one's real. Cover for each other when someone needs to leave early—that's expected. Never, ever criticize a colleague's classroom management where anyone can hear—that's social death. And whatever you do, don't be the first to volunteer for anything new, because then you'll be volunteered for everything new.'

'But what about innovation and risk-taking?'

Darnell's expression shifted to something between sympathy and warning. 'Remember Mr. Harrison? Left at semester? He had all these ideas he kept bringing up in meetings. Real ideas, good ones even. Nobody wanted to be associated with him. He was gone by December. The official story is he "wasn't a good fit.' "

Marcus realized he'd been handed the real employee handbook—the one that's never written down, never posted on walls, but determines who thrives and who disappears. The unwritten rules. The operating norms.

Every organization has two sets of rules: the official policies and the actual norms. When these diverge, the norms always win. Understanding this gap—and learning to work with it—is the first step toward changing anything.



VIDEO

90 Second Elevator Pitch: The Rules Nobody Tells You

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- 1. Distinguish between stated values (what organizations say they believe) and operating norms (what actually gets rewarded and punished)**
- 2. Apply Schein's three levels of culture model to diagnose why change efforts fail at the basic assumptions level**
- 3. Identify how norms form, persist, and serve different stakeholders' interests—even when they harm the organization overall**
- 4. Use the Kegan and Lahey 'Immunity to Change' framework to surface competing commitments that maintain dysfunctional norms**
- 5. Develop strategies for shifting norms through modeling, rewards, stories, and influencing 'Tweeners'**

Why This Matters

Every initiative you've ever seen fail despite good intentions, adequate resources, and genuine effort probably crashed on the rocks of operating norms. The curriculum adoption that teachers dutifully implemented in front of observers and abandoned the moment the door closed. The collaboration mandate that produced scheduled meeting times with no actual collaboration. The data-driven decision-making initiative that generated beautiful dashboards nobody looked at.

Operating norms are the immune system of organizational culture. They determine what new ideas survive and which get rejected. They explain why the same initiative succeeds spectacularly in one school and fails completely in another. Until you understand the actual operating norms—not the stated values—you can't diagnose why change efforts fail.

The gap between stated values and operating norms creates something insidious: organizational cynicism. When people hear 'we value collaboration' but see that lone wolves get promoted, when they hear 'we encourage innovation' but watch innovators get isolated, when they hear 'we're data-driven' but observe decisions made on politics—they stop believing anything leadership says. Not just about this initiative, but about everything.

This cynicism is cumulative and corrosive. Each new initiative announced with fanfare and abandoned with silence adds another layer. Eventually, experienced staff greet every new program with 'this too shall pass'—and they're usually right. The operating norm of waiting things out becomes self-fulfilling.

Here's what makes operating norms particularly challenging: they serve someone's interests. Norms don't persist by accident. The senior teacher who benefits from the norm that 'we don't question veterans' will protect that norm. The administrator who benefits from the norm that 'decisions come from the top' will resist distributed leadership. The department chair who benefits from information hoarding won't embrace transparency. Change threatens those who benefit from the status quo.

The good news: norms can change. They're human creations, not laws of physics. But changing them requires understanding how they work, where they come from, and what functions they serve—even dysfunctional ones. Surface-level interventions (new meeting structures, revised mission statements, motivational posters) don't touch the basic assumptions level where norms actually live.

REFLECTION PROMPT

Think about a recent initiative that didn't produce the expected results. What unwritten rules might have been working against it? What behaviors were actually rewarded—regardless of what was officially encouraged?

Module Roadmap

Your journey through operating norms will take you beneath the surface of organizational life—from the visible artifacts and stated values down to the basic assumptions that actually drive behavior. This 90-minute learning pathway equips you to see, diagnose, and begin shifting the unwritten rules that determine whether your change efforts succeed or fail.

Building Background: Schein's three levels of culture and how norms operate at the deepest level

Historical Context: The evolution of culture research and why norms matter more than values

Expert Perspectives: What researchers and practitioners say about surfacing and shifting unwritten rules

Common Misconceptions: The dangerous myths that lead to failed culture change attempts

Organizational Connections: Real examples of norm dynamics across different school contexts

Application Activities: Tools for auditing norms and developing a shifting strategy

Building Background

Key Concepts

Operating Norms Defined

Operating norms are the unwritten rules that actually govern behavior—what gets rewarded, punished, tolerated, and ignored regardless of official policies. They're the real rules people learn through observation and experience, not the ones posted on walls or printed in handbooks. Operating norms answer the question: 'How do things really work around here?'

Schein's Three Levels of Culture

Edgar Schein's foundational model reveals that culture operates at three levels—and the deeper you go, the harder it is to see and change:

Level 1: Artifacts (Visible)

What you can see, hear, and feel. Physical environment, dress codes, rituals, ceremonies, organizational charts. Easy to observe but difficult to interpret without understanding deeper levels.

Level 2: Espoused Values (Stated)

What the organization says it believes. Strategies, goals, philosophies, mission statements. 'We value collaboration.' 'Students come first.' 'Innovation is our priority.' These are aspirations, not necessarily realities.

Level 3: Basic Assumptions (Invisible)

Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs. What's 'just how things are.' 'Senior teachers shouldn't be questioned.' 'Results matter more than relationships.' 'We protect our own.' THIS IS WHERE OPERATING NORMS LIVE.

The critical insight: Most change efforts work at the Artifacts level (new meeting structure!) or Espoused Values level (new mission statement!). But the Basic Assumptions—the operating norms—remain unchanged. And when there's a conflict between espoused values and basic assumptions, assumptions always win.

The Say-Do Gap

The gap between what organizations say (espoused values) and what they actually do (operating norms) creates cynicism. When 'we value collaboration' but lone wolves get promoted, when 'we encourage risk-taking' but failures get punished, when 'we want feedback' but messengers get shot—people learn to distrust everything leadership says.

Competing Commitments (Kegan & Lahey)

Why do intelligent people keep doing things they know aren't working? Kegan and Lahey discovered that organizations (and individuals) have 'competing commitments'—hidden goals that work against stated goals. Example: We say we want collaboration, but we hoard information because we're committed to not looking incompetent. The hidden commitment (self-protection) defeats the stated commitment (collaboration). The hidden commitment IS the operating norm.

Norm Carriers (Muhammad's Framework)

Different groups have different relationships to operating norms:

Believers: Committed to stated values, frustrated by the say-do gap. They want norms to match espoused values.

Tweeners: New or undecided, watching to see which norms are real. They're being socialized into the culture.

Survivors: Disengaged, just doing their jobs. They follow norms passively without investment.

Fundamentalists: Invested in current norms, often powerful. They protect the status quo because it serves their interests.

The strategic question: Who is mentoring your Tweeners? If Fundamentalists mentor new hires, norms perpetuate. If Believers mentor new hires, norms can shift.

Research Highlights

Schein's Foundational Work on Culture

Edgar Schein's four decades of research on organizational culture established that culture is not what organizations say they value—it's the pattern of basic assumptions that have worked well enough to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel. His insight that culture operates at three levels, with the deepest level (basic assumptions) being largely invisible even to members, revolutionized how we understand organizational behavior.

Key finding: You cannot change culture by changing artifacts or announcing new values. You can only change culture by surfacing and testing the basic assumptions, then having experiences that disconfirm them and create new assumptions. This is why culture change takes years, not months.

Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Gruenert and Whitaker on School Culture

Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker's research on school culture revealed that the best predictor of student achievement isn't curriculum, funding, or even individual teacher quality—it's the collaborative culture of the school. Their work distinguished between 'collaborative' cultures (where norms support shared practice) and 'toxic' cultures (where norms protect isolation and resist accountability).

Critical insight: In toxic cultures, the operating norm is 'leave me alone in my classroom.' Attempts to implement collaborative practices fail because they violate this fundamental assumption. Until the basic assumption changes, behavioral compliance produces no lasting change.

Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2015). *School culture rewired: How to define, assess, and transform it*. ASCD.

Kegan and Lahey's Immunity to Change

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's research on why change is so hard revealed the concept of 'immunity to change'—a hidden system of competing commitments and big assumptions that work against our stated goals. Their studies showed that individuals and organizations often have genuine commitments that contradict each other, with the hidden commitment usually winning.

Key tool: The four-column immunity map surfaces: (1) the stated commitment, (2) what we're doing/not doing instead, (3) the competing commitment that explains the behavior, and (4) the big assumption underlying the competing commitment. This big assumption is often an operating norm.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business Press.

Muhammad's School Culture Framework

Anthony Muhammad's research on school culture identified four groups present in every school: Believers, Tweeners, Survivors, and Fundamentalists. His crucial insight was that culture change doesn't require converting everyone—it requires tipping the balance so that Believers influence Tweeners more than Fundamentalists do.

Practical finding: In most schools, 10-15% are Believers, 10-15% are Fundamentalists, and the rest are Tweeners or Survivors. The cultural battle is for the Tweeners. Whoever socializes them determines whether norms perpetuate or shift.

Muhammad, A. (2009). *Transforming school culture: How to overcome staff division*. Solution Tree Press.

Coyle's Culture Code

Daniel Coyle's research on highly successful groups identified three key skills that create strong cultures: building safety (signals of connection that generate belonging), sharing vulnerability (habits of mutual risk that drive cooperation), and establishing purpose (narratives that create shared goals and values). His work showed that culture is not about who people are—it's about what they do, consistently, in thousands of small moments.

Key insight: Culture is created by small, repeated behaviors, not big announcements. Leaders shape culture through the consistent signals they send: who they talk to, what they notice, what they reward, what they ignore.

Coyle, D. (2018). *The culture code: The secrets of highly successful groups*. Bantam Books.

Video

Historical Context

The Evolution of Understanding 'How Things Really Work'

The study of operating norms emerged from a growing recognition that what organizations say and what they actually do are often very different things—and that the difference matters enormously.

The Human Relations Movement (1930s-1950s)

The Hawthorne studies at Western Electric in the 1920s-30s accidentally discovered that work groups develop their own informal norms that powerfully influence behavior—often more than formal rules and incentives. Researchers found that workers who produced 'too much' faced social sanctions from peers, regardless of financial incentives. This was among the first scientific recognitions that informal norms shape behavior.

These studies sparked the human relations movement, which emphasized that organizations are social systems with informal structures that can support or undermine formal objectives.

The Rise of Culture Research (1970s-1980s)

In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers began systematically studying organizational culture. Edgar Schein's work at MIT established the foundational model of culture operating at three levels—artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. His insight that the deepest level is largely invisible even to members, yet determines behavior, was revolutionary.

The publication of 'In Search of Excellence' (1982) and 'Corporate Cultures' (1982) brought culture into mainstream management thinking. However, these popular treatments often oversimplified culture as something that could be quickly 'installed' through values statements and rituals—a misunderstanding Schein himself warned against.

Culture Enters Education (1990s-2000s)

Educational researchers began applying culture concepts to schools in the 1990s. Seymour Sarason's work on 'the culture of the school and the problem of change' identified how existing norms actively resist new practices. His insight that schools have 'regularities'—patterns so taken for granted they're invisible—presaged much later work on operating norms.

Anthony Bryk's research on school improvement found that schools with 'collaborative cultures' dramatically outperformed those with 'isolated' cultures—even when controlling for student demographics and resources. The culture difference wasn't about stated values; it was about the actual norms governing professional interaction.

The Say-Do Gap Gets Named (2000s-2010s)

Chris Argyris's work on 'espoused theory' versus 'theory in use' explicitly named the gap between what organizations say and what they do. His research showed that people are often unaware of this gap—they genuinely believe their behavior matches their stated values. This unconsciousness makes the gap particularly resistant to change.

Kegan and Lahey's 'Immunity to Change' framework (2009) provided a practical tool for surfacing competing commitments that maintain the say-do gap. Their insight that people have 'hidden commitments' working against their stated goals explained why well-intentioned change efforts so often fail.

Current Understanding: Norms as the Control System

Today, we understand operating norms as the actual control system of organizational behavior. Policies and values are inputs, but norms are what actually governs outputs. This understanding has several implications:

- Change efforts that don't address norms are cosmetic at best
- Norms persist because they serve someone's interests
- Norm change requires experiences that disconfirm basic assumptions
- The timeline for norm change is years, not months
- Surface compliance without norm change snaps back when pressure releases

A Hypothetical Roundtable with Expert Perspectives

An Imaginary, Insightful Conversation

In a university conference room, researchers and practitioners gather to discuss one of the most challenging aspects of organizational change: the gap between what we say we value and what our norms actually reward.

Dr. Edgar Schein, whose work defined organizational culture research, opens: 'The most common mistake leaders make is thinking they can change culture by announcing new values. They create beautiful mission statements, post them everywhere, and wonder why nothing changes. Values statements operate at level two—espoused values. Norms live at level three—basic assumptions. Level two doesn't reach level three.'

Dr. Anthony Muhammad responds: 'What I see in schools is even more complicated. There's active resistance, not just inertia. The Fundamentalists—and every school has them—aren't just following old norms passively. They're protecting them, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. Those norms serve their interests.'

'That's the piece that often gets missed,' adds Dr. Lisa Laskow Lahey. 'Norms persist because they solve a problem for somebody. Even dysfunctional norms. When we ask people to give up protective behaviors without addressing what they're protecting against, we're asking them to be vulnerable without safety. They won't do it.'

Dr. Steve Gruenert brings the conversation to practical ground: 'The teachers in toxic cultures aren't bad people. They've learned through experience that the norms are: protect your classroom, don't trust administration, wait out every initiative. Those norms developed because administration was untrustworthy, or initiatives really did change every year, or collaboration was used to identify 'weak' teachers for punishment. The norms make sense given the history.'

'Which is why you can't just tell people to change,' observes Daniel Coyle. 'You have to create new experiences that create new assumptions. In my research on high-performing groups, culture wasn't changed through announcements. It changed through belonging cues, vulnerability loops, and purpose narratives—thousands of small signals that accumulated into new patterns.'

Dr. Muhammad picks up this thread: 'The battle for culture is the battle for the Tweeners—the new and undecided people. If Believers get to them first, if their early experiences are of collaboration and trust, they internalize those norms. If Fundamentalists get to them first, they learn the protective norms. This is why onboarding matters so much.'

'And why leadership behavior matters even more,' adds Dr. Schein. 'People watch what leaders do, not what they say. What leaders pay attention to, what they reward, what they ignore—these are the most powerful norm-shaping forces. A leader who espouses collaboration but makes all decisions alone is teaching isolation as the real norm.'

Dr. Lahey offers a practical tool: 'This is why we developed the immunity map. When there's a persistent gap between what we say we want and what we actually do, there's usually a competing commitment—something we're also trying to protect. Surface the competing commitment, test the big assumption behind it, and you can begin to shift.'

The conversation turns to timeline. Dr. Gruenert is direct: 'Leaders want culture change in a semester. Real norm change takes three to five years of consistent behavior. Not announcements—behavior. Every time a leader acts according to the new norm, especially when it's costly to do so, they make a deposit. Every time they violate it, especially when it's convenient, they make a withdrawal. The balance of deposits and withdrawals over years determines whether norms actually shift.'

Dr. Schein concludes: 'The hardest thing I tell leaders is that they can't change culture—they can only create conditions where culture might change. Provide new experiences that disconfirm old assumptions. Model the new behaviors consistently. Make it safe to try new things. And wait. Culture is patient. It will outlast any single initiative, any single leader. Respect its power, work with it rather than against it, and change becomes possible. Just don't expect it to be quick.'

Common Misconceptions

The concept of operating norms is frequently misunderstood, leading to failed change attempts. Let's examine the most dangerous misconceptions:

The 'Values Poster' Fallacy

Many leaders believe that creating and posting values statements will change norms. They invest in mission statement workshops, print laminated values cards, create acronyms (RESPECT, PRIDE, CARE), and wonder why behavior doesn't change.

The reality: Values statements operate at Schein's level two (espoused values). Operating norms live at level three (basic assumptions). Announcements don't reach level three. Only repeated experiences that disconfirm old assumptions and confirm new ones can shift basic assumptions.

The 'Bad Apple' Theory

Some leaders attribute norm problems to a few toxic individuals. 'If we could just get rid of those resistant people, our culture would be fine.'

The reality: While some individuals do damage culture disproportionately, norms are systemic properties. They emerge from and are reinforced by the whole system. Removing individuals without changing the conditions that created the norms often just shifts which individuals embody them. New 'bad apples' emerge because the tree is still producing them.

The 'Quick Win' Myth

Leaders often expect culture change on a semester or annual timeline. When new initiatives don't produce immediate behavior change, they conclude the initiative failed and try something else.

The reality: Operating norms take years to shift—Schein suggests three to five years of consistent behavior for deep change. The 'this too shall pass' norm exists precisely because past initiatives were

abandoned before they could affect the basic assumptions level. Impatience is the enemy of norm change.

The 'Mandate' Misconception

Some believe that if they have enough positional authority, they can mandate norm change: 'From now on, we WILL collaborate.' 'Teachers WILL share their practice.' 'We ARE now data-driven.'

The reality: You can mandate compliance, but you cannot mandate commitment. Mandated behaviors produce surface compliance while norms remain unchanged. The moment oversight relaxes, old patterns reassert. Worse, mandated change often drives resistance underground, making norms harder to surface and shift.

The 'Training Solution' Error

Organizations often treat norm gaps as skill gaps: 'Teachers don't collaborate because they don't know how. Let's train them!' 'We need a workshop on data-driven decision making!'

The reality: When norms reward isolation, no amount of collaboration training changes behavior. When norms punish mistakes, no amount of growth mindset professional development creates risk-taking. The problem isn't skill—it's the consequences attached to using the skill. Training without addressing norms produces people who know how but won't.

The 'Neutrality' Assumption

Some assume operating norms are neutral patterns that just need to be identified and updated—a technical problem of reprogramming.

The reality: Norms serve interests. People who benefit from current norms will protect them, often unconsciously. The teacher who benefits from isolation norms will frame collaboration as 'taking away planning time.' The administrator who benefits from top-down norms will frame distributed leadership as 'chaos.' Norm change is political, not just technical.

The 'One Size Fits All' Approach

Leaders sometimes apply standardized culture change programs across an entire organization, assuming all departments or teams have the same norm issues.

The reality: Operating norms vary significantly across sub-units. The math department may have strong collaboration norms while the English department has isolation norms. The front office may have transparency norms while the counseling office has confidentiality norms. Effective norm work diagnoses specifically and intervenes locally.

The 'This Is Just How It Is' Fatalism

After failed change attempts, some conclude that 'you can't change culture' or 'this is just who we are.'

The reality: Norms are human creations and can be changed—but not through the methods usually tried. Change requires sustained consistency over years, experiences that disconfirm old assumptions, modeling from leaders, addressing the interests that current norms serve, and patience. Difficult, but not impossible.

Organizational Connections

Case Study: Eastwood High School

When 'Untouchables' Set the Norms

Eastwood High School had three veteran teachers—Mrs. Peterson (28 years), Mr. Walsh (25 years), and Mrs. Chen (24 years)—who together formed an informal power structure that new Principal David Santos quickly recognized. They weren't on the leadership team. They didn't have official titles. But everyone knew: nothing happens at Eastwood without their approval.

The operating norm was clear: veterans are exempt from expectations that apply to everyone else. Peterson routinely started class five minutes late. Walsh hadn't changed his curriculum in fifteen years. Chen refused to attend professional development, sending her aide to sign in for her. And everyone knew nothing would happen to them.

New teachers watched and learned. The real rule: put in your time, build your status, and eventually you too can opt out of accountability. In the meantime, keep your head down and don't rock the boat.

The Failed First Attempt

David's predecessor had tried to address this directly. She called out Peterson's tardiness in a faculty meeting, requiring all teachers to be at their doors before the bell. Peterson complied for two weeks, then quietly resumed her pattern. When confronted privately, she filed a grievance. Other teachers watched: administration loses to veterans. The norm strengthened.

David's Different Approach

David recognized that direct confrontation wouldn't work—the power structure would mobilize, and he'd lose. Instead, he pursued a strategy he called 'changing the ecosystem.'

Step 1: Build Alternative Power Centers

David identified teachers who were informally influential but aligned with his values—not the three veterans, but other respected teachers who believed in accountability and improvement. He gave them voice, resources, and visibility. Gradually, an alternative influence structure emerged.

Step 2: Change What Gets Celebrated

Every faculty meeting, David highlighted teachers who were innovating, collaborating, and improving. He told stories of teachers who sought feedback, adjusted practice based on data, and supported colleagues. None of these teachers were the three veterans. The implicit message: this is what success looks like here.

Step 3: Arm the Believers

David worked with department chairs (not the three veterans) to establish peer accountability processes. When teachers needed to give each other feedback on punctuality, curriculum updating, or professional development participation, the conversations happened peer-to-peer, not top-down.

Step 4: Protect New Teachers from Fundamentalist Mentoring

David restructured the mentoring program so new teachers were paired with teachers he'd identified as Believers, not veterans who would socialize them into the old norms. He created induction experiences that explicitly taught the norms he wanted—collaboration, continuous improvement, accountability—before the old guard could teach them 'how things really work.'

The Gradual Shift

Over three years, the ecosystem shifted. Peterson retired, and the teacher who replaced her was someone shaped by the new norm structure. Walsh remained but was increasingly isolated—his resistance, once the dominant cultural position, became a minority stance. Chen slowly began participating more as she saw the social costs of non-participation rising and the benefits of engagement increasing.

The 'untouchable' norm didn't disappear overnight. But the system that reinforced it changed. New teachers no longer learned that veteran status meant exemption. The cultural carriers shifted.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why did direct confrontation fail where the 'ecosystem change' approach succeeded? 2. Who are the informal power holders in your organization? What norms do they protect or promote? 3. How could you create alternative influence structures that model the norms you want?

Adaptations

New Leader Context

Challenge: You've inherited norms you didn't create and may not fully understand.

- Spend your first 90 days observing and asking questions, not announcing change
- Ask: 'What would you tell a new hire about how things really work here?'
- Identify the origin stories of current norms—they often make sense given history
- Find the Believers early and learn from them which norms they're frustrated by
- Resist the temptation to announce major cultural changes before understanding the system

Long-Tenured Leader Context

Challenge: You may be seen as part of the norm structure, making change harder.

- Acknowledge your role in creating or maintaining current norms—model vulnerability
- Name the say-do gaps you see without blaming others
- Be prepared for skepticism: 'Why change now after all these years?'
- Find external voices that can say things you can't credibly say
- Demonstrate changed behavior consistently, not just changed words

Strong Fundamentalist Presence

Challenge: Powerful norm protectors actively resist any change.

- Don't engage in direct confrontation you can't win
- Build alternative power centers with teachers who model desired norms
- Change what gets celebrated, resourced, and highlighted
- Protect new teachers from Fundamentalist mentoring
- Be patient—sometimes norms can only shift when certain people leave

Multiple Subcultures

Challenge: Different departments or grade levels have very different norms.

- Diagnose norm landscapes specifically rather than assuming uniformity
- Use strong-norm teams as models for others

- Create cross-team experiences that expose people to different norm possibilities
- Be careful about imposing one subculture's norms on all—it breeds resentment
- Identify common elements that can serve as bridging norms

Post-Trauma Context

Challenge: Current norms developed as protection from past experiences.

- Acknowledge the history that created protective norms
- Understand that norm change requires feeling safer, not just being told things are safer
- Create small experiences of safety before asking for vulnerability
- Expect trust to rebuild slowly—years, not months
- Be consistently different from the past, even in small moments

Implementation Barriers and Solutions

Impatience

Barrier: Leaders expect norm change in months when it takes years.

Solutions:

- Set realistic expectations upfront: 'This is three-year work'
- Track leading indicators that show norm shift before outcomes change
- Celebrate small wins: 'A teacher admitted struggle in a meeting—that's progress'
- Protect the work from initiative fatigue—stick with it
- Help stakeholders understand why quick change attempts have failed before

Say-Do Gap in Leadership

Barrier: Leaders espouse new norms while behaving according to old ones.

Solutions:

- Get honest feedback about your own say-do gaps
- Make your commitment public and ask others to hold you accountable
- When you violate the new norm, acknowledge it immediately
- Pay attention to what you're modeling in small moments, not just big ones
- Remember: people watch what you do, not what you say

Resistance from Norm Beneficiaries

Barrier: Those who benefit from current norms actively protect them.

Solutions:

- Understand what the current norms provide (security, status, ease)
- Find ways to meet those needs under new norms
- Build alternative influence structures rather than fighting existing ones directly

- Sometimes: wait for natural transitions (retirements, transfers)
- When necessary: make continued resistance more costly than adaptation

Inability to Name Norms

Barrier: Operating norms are often invisible, making them hard to address.

Solutions:

- Ask: 'What would you tell a new hire off the record?'
- Look for say-do gaps between stated values and actual behavior
- Notice what gets rewarded regardless of official policy
- Pay attention when people use phrases like 'that's just how it is here'
- Use tools like the immunity map to surface hidden commitments

False Starts and Cynicism

Barrier: Past failed change attempts have created 'this too shall pass' norms.

Solutions:

- Acknowledge the history: 'I know initiatives have come and gone'
- Make your commitment visible through consistent action over time
- Be explicit about what's different this time
- Underpromise and overdeliver—rebuild trust through reliability
- Accept that skepticism is rational given history; patience is required

Norm Conflict with External Pressures

Barrier: New norms conflict with district mandates or external accountability.

Solutions:

- Find space within mandates for desired norms
- Build coalitions with other leaders facing similar tensions
- Advocate upward for policy changes that enable healthy norms
- Be transparent about constraints: 'I wish we could X, but Y prevents it'
- Protect staff from external pressures where possible

Optional **Application Activity** [Downloadable](#)

Review & Reflect Wrap-Up

Key Takeaways

Video

THE ART OF NORM CHANGE

Leaders don't change norms through announcements, mandates, or training. They change norms through what they model, what they reward, what they ignore, what stories they tell, and who they empower. Every small moment is an opportunity to reinforce the old norm or demonstrate the new one. Patience, consistency, and attention to small signals matter more than grand gestures. The work is measured in years, not semesters.

Reflection Prompts

- 1. What would genuinely shock a new employee about how things really work in your organization versus what they were told?**
- 2. Where is the biggest gap between what your organization says it values and what actually gets rewarded?**
- 3. What operating norm would need to shift for your most important initiative to succeed?**
- 4. What norm do you personally reinforce through your own behavior, even if you don't endorse it?**

Next Steps

Within one week:

- Notice three moments where you see operating norms in action
- Identify one norm you personally reinforce and experiment with different behavior
- Have one conversation about 'how things really work here'

Within one month:

- Complete a full norm audit for your team or organization
- Identify the Believers, Tweeners, and Fundamentalists
- Design one experience that could disconfirm a dysfunctional assumption

Within one year:

- Commit to consistent modeling of one new norm—every day, small moments
- Track whether new hires are being mentored into new norms or old ones
- Assess whether the say-do gap is narrowing

Self-Assessment

Part 1: Knowledge Check

1. According to Schein's three levels of culture, operating norms live at which level?

- a) Artifacts (visible)
- b) Espoused values (stated)
- c) Basic assumptions (invisible)
- d) None of the above

2. When stated values and operating norms conflict, which typically wins?

- a) Stated values, because they're official
- b) Operating norms, because they reflect basic assumptions
- c) Neither—they balance each other
- d) It depends on the organization

3. According to Muhammad's framework, the 'battle for culture' is primarily about:

- a) Converting Fundamentalists to Believers
- b) Who mentors and influences Tweeners
- c) Removing Survivors from the organization
- d) Creating stronger values statements

4. The 'Immunity to Change' framework helps identify:

- a) Who is resistant to change
- b) Competing commitments that maintain dysfunctional norms
- c) The best training programs for change
- d) How to mandate behavior change

5. What's the typical timeline for meaningful norm change?

- a) One semester with focused effort
- b) One school year with consistent implementation
- c) Three to five years of consistent behavior
- d) Norms cannot be changed

Part 2: Application Scenarios

6. A principal wants to change the norm of teacher isolation. The most effective first step is to:

- a) Announce that 'we will now be a collaborative culture'
- b) Mandate weekly collaborative planning time
- c) Understand why isolation norms developed and what needs they meet
- d) Send teachers to collaboration training

7. A new teacher is being mentored by a Fundamentalist who is teaching them 'how things really work.' The best response is to:

- a) Confront the Fundamentalist about their negative influence

b) Restructure mentoring so Believers mentor new teachers

c) Tell the new teacher to ignore their mentor

d) Hope the new teacher figures it out on their own

8. A stated value is 'we encourage risk-taking,' but teachers who try new approaches face criticism when they fail. This is an example of:

a) A training gap that more professional development can solve

b) A say-do gap that erodes trust and reinforces risk-avoidance norms

c) Normal organizational dynamics that don't need addressing

d) A communication problem that better messaging can solve