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"IT HAS TO START AT THE TOP": LEADERSHIP, PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, AND ADAPTIVE CULTURE CHANGE IN A LARGE INFRASTRUCTURE ORGANISATION

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Abstract. Transforming the culture of large infrastructure organisations is a strategic challenge because effective coordination, safety and performance depend on how people share information, handle disagreement and collaborate across functional boundaries. However, organisations often treat culture change as a planned implementation project. Less is known, though, about how leaders and specialists make culture visible, credible and usable in everyday work. This study examines the experiences of leaders and specialists during a large-scale culture transformation at Isavia, the operator of Keflavík Airport in Iceland. It also explores what this case reveals about leadership, psychological safety, and the limitations of linear change management models. The present study employs an interpretive qualitative single-case design, demonstrating a phenomenological sensitivity to participants' lived experiences. The empirical material consists of nine semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, middle managers, human resources specialists (HR), and project managers, contextualised by Organizational Culture Inventory measurements from 2021, 2023, and 2025. The findings show that senior leaders made the transformation credible by modelling vulnerability, engaging in personal development, and demonstrating cultural ideals through their behaviour. The Organizational Culture Inventory was used not only as a diagnostic tool, but also to provide a shared behavioural language that helped employees discuss defensive patterns without personalising conflict. Psychological safety enables more constructive disagreement, reduces silo thinking and strengthens cross-functional collaboration. The study also identified middle managers as a weak link when top-level commitment was not reflected in everyday routines, expectations and conversations. The study contributes to organisational culture and change management literature by conceptualising large-scale cultural transformation as an adaptive learning process that is supported by cultural measurement, legitimised through visible leadership behaviour and enabled by psychological safety. The case study's practical value lies in demonstrating that organisations should anchor culture transformation in everyday leadership practices, a shared behavioural language and middle management accountability, rather than treating it as a linear change project or an isolated HR initiative. By linking culture transformation to coordination, waste reduction and operational resilience, the case study has relevance for business management and infrastructure studies beyond the specific Icelandic context.

Keywords: organisational culture, change management, leadership, psychological safety, Organizational Culture Inventory, silo mentality, infrastructure organisation.

JEL Classification: M10, M12, M14, L93

1. Introduction

Organisational culture influences how people communicate, make decisions, collaborate and respond to change. Although strategies, structures and formal processes are often considered the visible drivers of organisational performance, culture influences whether strategic intentions are translated into everyday practice or remain merely symbolic. For this reason, culture is not merely something that an organisation possesses; it is reflected in the actions that people repeatedly perform, tolerate, reward, and avoid.

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This issue is particularly pertinent in complex infrastructure organisations, where performance hinges on the coordination of professional groups, hierarchical levels, operational units and external stakeholders. Isavia, the Icelandic company responsible for operating Keflavík Airport, is a relevant case in point. Following major disruptions in 2019 and 2020, including the collapse of a key airline customer and the onset of the global pandemic, senior management recognised that the organisation's previous strategic work had not produced the desired implementation outcomes. In 2021, the organisation therefore initiated a large-scale cultural transformation aimed at improving communication, reducing silo mentality, encouraging constructive behaviour and enhancing organisational performance.

Organisational culture is difficult to change because it is embedded in shared assumptions, behavioural norms and informal expectations that often remain invisible until they are disrupted (Schein, 2010). In large organisations, these patterns may be reinforced by functional silos, defensive routines and inconsistent leadership practices at different organisational levels. Previous studies have demonstrated that constructive organisational cultures can enhance performance, employee well-being, collaboration and adaptability (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Warrick, 2017), whereas a silo mentality can hinder information sharing and cross-functional collaboration (Bento et al., 2020; de Waal et al., 2019). However, little is known about how leaders and specialists approach the practical work of making culture visible, discussable and changeable over time.

Leadership and psychological safety are central to overcoming this challenge. Leaders influence organisational culture through formal decisions, strategic communication and the behaviours they model in everyday interactions. According to transformational leadership theory, leaders should demonstrate vision and role model behaviours that align with shared values (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Meanwhile, research on psychological safety shows that people are more likely to speak up, admit mistakes, and engage in learning when they feel safe taking interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999, 2018). At the same time, traditional change management models often depict change as a linear process involving identifiable stages until new behaviours become ingrained (Kotter, 2012). While such models can provide valuable guidance, they may not fully capture the complexities of cultural transformations that unfold amid uncertainty, experimentation, resistance and continuous learning.

Despite the extensive research conducted on organisational culture, leadership, psychological safety and change management, three issues remain poorly understood. Firstly, there is a need for more empirical knowledge about how culture measurement can become meaningful in everyday organisational life, rather than remaining a diagnostic exercise. Secondly, further research is required to understand how leadership credibility is developed through visible behaviour, vulnerability and personal development. Thirdly, it is necessary to examine whether linear change models accurately reflect the experience of cultural transformation within complex, layered organisations.

This study addresses these issues by conducting an in-depth, qualitative case study of Isavia's cultural transformation. The aim is to explore how the transformation was experienced by leaders and specialists, and to identify the factors that shaped its progress. The study focuses on leadership behaviour, creating a shared language for culture, developing psychological safety and overcoming the challenges of sustaining change across organisational levels.

The study is guided by the following research question:

What is the experience of leaders and specialists in the context of large-scale organisational culture transformation, and what insights does the case study provide into the effectiveness and limitations of traditional change management models?

To address this question, the study employs a qualitative, single-case, interpretive design with a phenomenological focus. This is based on nine semi-structured interviews with leaders and specialists involved in the transformation. These interviews were contextualised using aggregated Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI) measurements from 2021, 2023 and 2025. The study demonstrates how culture transformation gained credibility through leadership vulnerability and personal development, how OCI-based measurement became a shared behavioural language, and how psychological safety facilitated more constructive conversations across organisational boundaries. By integrating culture measurement, leadership credibility, psychological safety and adaptive learning, the article contributes to organisational culture and change management literature, conceptualising large-scale culture transformation as an adaptive learning process rather than a linear change project.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the literature on organisational culture, culture measurement, leadership, psychological safety, silo mentality and adaptive change. Section 3 describes the qualitative case study design, data sources and analytical approach. Section 4 presents the findings and Section 5 discusses the theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and directions for future research. Section 6 concludes the article.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organisational Culture, Behaviour, and Performance

For this study, organisational culture matters because it shapes the behavioural expectations through which strategy is translated into everyday practice. Rather than viewing culture as a set of stated values, this study adopts the perspective that culture is embedded in shared assumptions, norms and repeated patterns of interaction (Schein, 2010). This distinction is important because formal strategies and value statements may be ineffective if they are not reflected in the behaviours people experience, reward and tolerate in their daily work.

Previous studies have linked organisational culture to effectiveness, collaboration, adaptability and performance (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Hartnell et al., 2011; Warrick, 2017). These links are particularly relevant in complex infrastructure organisations because performance depends on coordination across professional groups, hierarchical levels, operational units and external stakeholders. Therefore, culture operates as a form of behavioural infrastructure, influencing how information is shared, how disagreements are handled, and whether local units prioritise organisational goals over more specific departmental interests.

From a resource-based perspective, culture can be understood as an internal capability that influences the coordination of resources and the conversion of strategic intentions into organisational outcomes (Barney, 1991). This perspective is relevant to the present study, as it links culture to strategic execution, rather than treating it as a purely symbolic or HR-related issue. Consequently, culture transformation is not viewed as the introduction of new values, but rather as a change in behavioural expectations and everyday interaction patterns through which strategy is enacted.

2.2 Measuring and Making Organisational Culture Visible

A central challenge in cultural transformation is that culture is often difficult to observe directly. It is expressed through recurring behaviours, assumptions and informal expectations, many of which remain unnoticed until they are disrupted or brought to the fore for discussion. Therefore, culture measurement can play an important role by helping organisations to make behavioural patterns visible and providing a language for reflection and dialogue.

In this respect, the OCI is relevant because it measures the behavioural norms that employees perceive as necessary for success within an organisation (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000). The instrument distinguishes between constructive, passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive cultural styles. Constructive cultural patterns are generally associated with achievement, support, learning and open communication. In contrast, defensive patterns tend to encourage avoidance, seeking approval, controlling behaviour and internal competition (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000). The OCI can also be used to compare the desired culture with the experienced culture, thereby highlighting the differences between current behavioural norms and future aspirations.

At the same time, there are limitations to survey-based culture measurement. Schein (2010) cautions that questionnaires may capture only visible manifestations of culture, failing to reveal deeper assumptions. Similarly, reviews of cultural instruments suggest that measurement tools are most useful when interpreted carefully and combined with qualitative enquiry (Jung et al., 2009). For this reason, the present study treats OCI results as contextual material rather than as independent quantitative evidence. The focus is not only on what the OCI measured, but also on how this measurement became meaningful in organisational life. In this sense, the potential of culture measurement as a shared behavioural language through which leaders and employees can discuss culture more concretely is examined.

2.3 Leadership Modelling, Vulnerability, and Psychological Safety

Leadership is central to cultural transformation because leaders demonstrate which behaviours are valued, tolerated and reinforced. According to transformational leadership theory, leaders should demonstrate vision and role model the reshaping of shared values (Bass & Avolio, 1994). However, when it comes to cultural transformation, a leader's credibility hinges not only on communicating a vision, but also on embodying the behaviours that the organisation seeks to develop. If leaders ask employees to be open, constructive and accountable, but remain defensive or avoidant themselves, the transformation will not be perceived as credible.

Leadership modelling is therefore particularly important, as leadership credibility hinges on consistency between the behaviours leaders encourage and their own behaviour. Warrick (2017) argues that, while leaders can strengthen culture, they can also damage it when their behaviour contradicts stated values. In the present study, the focus on leadership modelling means that leadership is examined not only in terms of formal sponsorship of change, but also in terms of visible behavioural practice. Particular attention is given to leaders' willingness to engage in self-reflection, accept feedback and demonstrate vulnerability, as this behaviour can encourage others to reflect on their own conduct.

Psychological safety is closely connected to leadership modelling and visible leadership behaviour. Edmondson (1999) defines it as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In such environments, employees are more likely to speak up, admit mistakes, ask questions and voice concerns without fear of punishment or humiliation. Subsequent research has linked psychological safety to learning, information sharing, innovation and constructive conflict (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Furthermore, Edmondson (2018) emphasises that leaders can foster psychological safety by demonstrating humility, encouraging participation, and responding constructively to mistakes.

When it comes to culture transformation, psychological safety is anything but a soft or peripheral concern. Rather, it is a practical condition that enables the discussion of defensive behaviour, the addressing of conflict and the learning from of mistakes (Edmondson, 1999, 2018; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Without it, employees may avoid difficult conversations or outwardly comply while withholding concerns. According to Edmondson & Bransby (2023), psychological safety can transform disagreement from a threat into a source of learning. This makes psychological safety particularly important in complex and safety-sensitive organisations, where performance depends on people sharing information, reporting errors and challenging assumptions across organisational boundaries.

2.4 Silo Mentality and Cross-Functional Collaboration

Culture is rarely uniform within large organisations. Subcultures may develop within departments, professions, or operational units. While these subcultures support expertise and identity, they can also create boundaries that restrict communication and shared responsibility (Schein, 2010). The term 'silo mentality' refers to situations in which units or groups do not effectively share information, knowledge or responsibility across organisational boundaries (Bento et al., 2020).

Silos are important because they can hinder coordination, decision-making and organisational performance. De Waal et al. (2019) describe silos as a threat to organisational effectiveness, citing their negative impact on collaboration, innovation, and responsiveness as key reasons why. Similarly, Neill and Jiang (2017) show how siloed communication can undermine internal integration and the ability to serve stakeholders effectively. Such patterns are particularly problematic in complex infrastructure organisations because operational performance depends on the timely sharing of information and coordinated action across specialised units.

In this study, silo mentality is considered not only a structural issue, but also a cultural and relational one. It reflects whether employees prioritise local unit interests or wider organisational goals. Therefore, reducing silos requires more than just formal coordination mechanisms; it also requires trust, psychological safety and leadership behaviour that makes cross-functional collaboration credible. The study examines whether reducing silos can be considered a practical expression of cultural transformation, and whether participants experienced a stronger willingness to communicate across boundaries, share responsibility, and work towards organisational rather than departmental goals. Treating silo reduction as a cultural and relational challenge is directly linked to change management. If silos are sustained by everyday norms, identities and defensive routines, they are unlikely to be resolved through structural coordination or linear implementation steps alone.

2.5 Change Management: Linear Models and Adaptive Learning

It is evident that traditional change management models are beneficial in providing leaders with a structured framework, clear direction, and a vocabulary for organising change. As posited by Lewin's three-step model, Kotter's eight-step model, and the Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement (ADKAR) model, there is a necessity to disrupt existing patterns, communicate direction, support adoption, and reinforce new behaviours (Burnes, 2004; Hiatt, 2006; Kotter, 2012). These ideas remain relevant to cultural transformation because leaders still need to establish their authority, set clear expectations, encourage commitment and maintain focus over time.

However, cultural transformation also highlights the limitations of linear change thinking. Unlike discrete system or process changes, cultural change involves informal norms, trust, identity, defensive routines and local interpretations that cannot be fully planned in advance (Ekendahl et al., 2026; Schein, 2010). In large, complex organisations, change can spread unevenly among senior leaders, middle managers and front-line staff as local individuals interpret, adapt to or resist it in different ways (Ekendahl et al., 2026). Resistance may manifest as open opposition, passivity, avoidance, waiting out the change or failing to translate new expectations into everyday practice (Ashton-Sayers & Brunetto, 2024).

Therefore, adaptive and emergent perspectives provide an important corrective. Rather than viewing change as a limited process that moves through set stages, these approaches highlight the importance of continuous interpretation, feedback and learning in response to ambiguous and evolving circumstances

(Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Although agile and iterative approaches offer a practical parallel because they emphasise feedback, collaboration and responsiveness (Beck et al., 2001; Rigby et al., 2016), they are used here as supporting language rather than as the primary theoretical basis. The primary concept in this study is adaptive organisational learning.

Viewing culture transformation as adaptive organisational learning does not mean that structure should be abandoned. Rather, it may require direction and adaptation, combining a clear aspiration for the desired culture – supported by measurement, leadership commitment and reinforcement – with the flexibility to learn from and revise practices in response to new challenges (Ekendahl et al., 2026; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Therefore, the key question is not whether traditional change management models are useful or irrelevant, but rather how well they capture the lived experience of cultural transformation within a complex organisation.

Together, these perspectives form the analytical basis of the following qualitative case study, which examines how leaders and specialists interpret culture measurement, leadership behaviour, psychological safety, reducing silos, and adaptive learning in practice.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Case Setting

This study was designed as an interpretive, qualitative, single-case study, adopting a phenomenological approach to the participants' lived experiences. It was not intended to be a full descriptive phenomenological study. Instead, phenomenological sensitivity informed the focus on how participants experienced, interpreted and understood the culture transformation in their everyday organisational context. The case-study design was appropriate because the research aimed to examine a complex cultural transformation within an organisational context (Yin, 2018). Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach focused on participants' lived experiences, interpretations and meaning-making processes (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The aim was not to test a preconceived hypothesis, but rather to gain an understanding of how leaders and specialists interpreted culture change, leadership behaviour, psychological safety and organisational learning in their day-to-day work.

The case organisation was Isavia, the Icelandic company responsible for operating Keflavík Airport. Isavia was selected because, from 2021 onwards, it had undertaken a large-scale cultural transformation and systematically monitored cultural development through repeated OCI measurements. The case therefore provided an ideal setting in which to explore how a large, complex infrastructure organisation attempts to make its culture visible, discussable and amenable to change. The organisation was also a relevant case study because its operations depend on coordination across professional groups, hierarchical levels, operational units and external stakeholders.

3.2 Data Sources and Participants

The empirical material primarily consists of semi-structured interviews. Additionally, aggregated OCI results from 2021, 2023 and 2025, together with internal cultural documents, were used to provide context. In this qualitative study, these materials were not treated as independent quantitative evidence. Instead, they were used to contextualise participants' accounts and clarify how the organisation had framed, measured and monitored cultural development over time.

The OCI material was owned by the organisation and made available to the researchers in aggregated form. The researchers did not have access to individual-level survey responses, and the OCI data were not analysed statistically as part of this study. Repeated measurements were used to understand how the organisation framed and monitored the culture transformation. It was also used to contextualise participants' accounts and interpret how culture measurement became part of the transformation process, providing a shared language. As the response base and participant composition varied across the years of measurement, particularly due to increased participation from front-line staff in 2025, the OCI results are considered to be contextual indicators of cultural development rather than directly comparable longitudinal evidence.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, which was supported by organisational access. The aim was to include individuals with direct experience of the culture transformation, representing different leadership and specialist roles within the organisation. The purpose of the study was to capture the perspectives of participants who had been involved in leading, supporting or interpreting the transformation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), so the sample was information rich rather than statistically representative. Although a contact in the HR department helped with identifying potential participants, the final selection of interviewees was made by the researchers.

The final sample consisted of nine participants: the CEO; two executives; two department heads; and two HR specialists and two project managers. All of the participants were active contributors to the transformation and had joined the organisation by early 2022 at the latest. To protect confidentiality, all participants except the CEO are identified by participant codes and broad role descriptors rather than by name. With consent, the CEO is referred to by organisational role because the position was unique and analytically central to the case, and it was not possible

to anonymise them in a single-case study of a CEO-led culture transformation. Direct quotations from other participants are attributed only by broad role category, such as 'executive', 'department head', 'HR specialist' or 'project manager', in order to reduce the risk of identification.

Table 1
Overview of the interviewees

Participant	Gender	Role
P1	Male	CEO
P2	Male	Executive
P3	Female	Executive
P4	Male	Department head
P5	Female	Department head
P6	Female	HR specialist
P7	Female	HR specialist
P8	Female	Project manager
P9	Female	Project manager

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection process started with a pilot interview with a former Isavia executive. This interview was used to develop a contextual understanding of the transformation and refine the interview guide. The pilot interview was not included in the analysis. The first formal interview was conducted with the CEO. After this, the guide was adjusted as the study evolved from focusing initially on the CEO's role to examining leadership more broadly, as well as shared language, psychological safety, front-line implementation and the limitations of linear change models.

The interviews took place between January 12 and March 30, 2026. They all took place face-to-face in meeting rooms at Isavia's offices, lasting between 27 and 116 minutes on average, with an average length of approximately 50 minutes. The semi-structured format enabled us to adopt a consistent thematic structure while facilitating follow-up questions when participants raised issues relevant to their experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The interview guide covered the following topics: participants' roles; experiences of workplace culture; communication and conflict; leadership behaviour; OCI measurements; implementation challenges; perceived changes; and the visibility of established change management elements in the transformation process. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to mention anything else they thought was important.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic. The English translations of the excerpts presented in the article were reviewed by both authors to ensure that the participants' intended meaning was preserved rather than producing literal translations.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using an inductive thematic approach, guided by the study's phenomenological focus (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This began with repeated readings of all transcripts to gain an overall understanding. Meaning units were identified in relation to culture, leadership behaviour, communication, psychological safety, the silo mentality, resistance, the role of middle management, and organisational learning. The initial codes were kept close to the participants' own language before being compared across interviews and grouped into broader analytical categories and themes.

The analysis was conducted manually. To strengthen the audit trail, the coded material was organised into working documents for each emerging theme, which included illustrative quotations and extracts that complicated the developing interpretation. The emerging themes were reviewed collaboratively, with selected interpretations being challenged and the extent to which the themes were grounded in the empirical material being discussed. Therefore, the analysis moved iteratively between individual accounts, cross-case patterns, the full dataset, the research question and the relevant literature.

Discrepant or negative cases were also considered, including resistance, passivity, uneven middle management engagement, delayed front-line involvement and limitations of OCI-based cultural work. These tensions helped to refine the final themes, ensuring that the transformation was not presented as linear or uniformly successful. The final themes were chosen because they encapsulated key aspects of the participants' experiences and were relevant to the literature on organisational culture and change management.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Several steps were taken to enhance the study's trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the interviews, follow-up questions and paraphrasing were employed to clarify the intended meaning of participants' responses and verify the interviewer's understanding (Lloyd et al., 2024). Participants were invited to elaborate on their responses and provide additional reflections at the end of each interview. Verbatim transcription, repeated reading of the material and systematic comparison across interviews strengthened the credibility and dependability of the analysis. Using direct quotations in the findings further supports transparency, as it allows readers to see how interpretations were grounded in the participants' accounts.

Reflexivity was particularly important in this case, as it concerned an organisational transformation that the participants had helped to lead, support or interpret.

Consequently, the authors treated participants' accounts as situated interpretations rather than neutral descriptions of organisational reality. During the analysis stage, claims relating to organisational outcomes, front-line implementation, and cultural progress were carefully examined and framed as participant perceptions, unless they were supported by contextual material. Power dynamics and organisational access were also considered, as participants were recruited through organisational contacts with the support of the HR department. The study adhered to the ethical procedures applicable at the authors' institution. According to these procedures, formal ethics committee approval was not required as the study involved adult professionals, focused on their work-related experiences of organisational change and did not collect special category personal data. The authors were not responsible for management within Isavia and conducted the study independently of the organisation's internal decision-making structures. HR provided organisational access, but did not determine participation. The final selection of interviewees was made by the researchers. In order to address organisational access and power dynamics, participation was voluntary and participants could choose not to answer questions or withdraw from the study.

All participants gave informed oral consent before the interviews began. They were informed about the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, how data would be stored and the confidentiality procedures. With their consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Access to the recordings was restricted and they were deleted after transcription. To reduce the risk of identification, the names of individuals and departments, and any other identifiable references, mentioned during the interviews were changed or removed, except where the CEO is referred to by organisational role for the reasons outlined above.

4. Results

The analysis revealed four interconnected themes that shed light on how participants experienced the cultural transformation at Isavia. When presenting the findings, the CEO is referred to by their organisational role, while the other participants are referred to by broad role descriptors. As the sample did not include front-line employees, references to front-line implementation reflect participants' perceptions of how the transformation was translated into these settings, rather than providing direct accounts from front-line staff. The first theme focuses on leadership as a means of effecting cultural change. The second theme demonstrates how measuring culture created a shared language for discussing behaviour. The third theme focuses on psychological safety, constructive conflict and reducing silo mentality. The fourth theme presents culture change as an adaptive learning process, highlighting the critical challenges of middle management and front-line implementation. These four main themes are summarised in Table 2 and discussed in Sections 4.1–4.4. Section 4.5 then provides a synthesis of the participants' perceived organisational outcomes rather than presenting an additional theme.

Table 2
Overview of main themes

Theme	Core meaning
Leadership as embodied culture change	Culture change was experienced as beginning with senior leaders but requiring behavioural consistency throughout the management chain.
Making culture visible through shared language	OCI measurements made culture discussable and helped participants address defensive behaviour without personalising conflict.
Psychological safety and constructive conflict and the reduction of silos	Increased trust enabled employees to speak up, admit mistakes, and engage in disagreement more constructively.
Adaptive learning and the fragile middle	The transformation did not follow a linear path; it required experimentation, patience, and stronger translation through middle management and front-line leadership.

4.1 Leadership as Embodied Culture Change

Participants consistently described leadership behaviour as the central mechanism through which the cultural transformation gained credibility. They did not primarily experience the transformation as a formal programme, but as a behavioural shift that had to begin with the leaders and become visible in their everyday interactions. Several participants used the expression 'the limbs dance according to the head', indicating that employees were looking to leaders to determine whether the transformation was genuine or merely rhetorical.

The CEO was said to have played a particularly important role in initiating and sustaining the transformation. One participant explained that the CEO had 'set the issue on the agenda' and demonstrated the endurance required to maintain its presence on the agenda for several years. Another participant emphasised that the transformation would not have survived without visible commitment from senior management: 'If he hadn't been so committed and such a strong role model, it would have collapsed.'

However, participants also emphasised that senior-level commitment alone was insufficient. The desired culture had to cascade through the entire management hierarchy. As one project manager explained, the transformation depended on every level of management conveying the same message:

'It is imperative that the CEO maintains their role as a spokesperson for the culture, with the executive team providing support at every level. In the absence of such commitment, it becomes challenging for us to proceed with visits to departments.'

This finding was particularly evident in relation to middle managers. Participants described middle managers as a potential bottleneck if they failed to adopt the new behavioural expectations. Some managers continued to act primarily as technical specialists rather than as leaders responsible for shaping organisational culture. When this happened, employees questioned why they should behave constructively when their own manager did not. As one participant put it: 'Is there any point in me being constructive if my manager isn't?'

One recurring finding was that leaders had to work on themselves before they could credibly ask others to change. Participants described this as necessary but difficult self-work. One executive stated, 'We need to work with ourselves. We are the instrument. That is the difficult part, because you have to be willing and brave enough to look at yourself and all your flaws.' Another manager explained that culture stems from behaviour, and that leaders cannot expect others to change if they fail to model the desired behaviour themselves.

The CEO's public vulnerability was described as an important symbolic moment in the transformation. The results of the study demonstrated a discrepancy between the participant's self-perception and the perception of others. The participants interpreted this as a signal that it was acceptable to be imperfect, to receive feedback, and to engage in personal development. The CEO described the logic of this act as follows: 'This is the vulnerability that you, as a leader, must be willing to show if the people you rely on are also going to be willing to do it.'

Leadership was therefore not experienced as communication about culture, but as the practical embodiment of it. The transformation became credible when leaders demonstrated vulnerability, welcomed feedback, initiated challenging discussions and took ownership of their behaviour. This emphasis on visible leadership behaviour also influenced how participants interpreted and utilised the OCI measurements. Vulnerability, feedback and self-work were considered more credible and useful for everyday leadership practices, rather than as separate diagnostic exercises.

4.2 Making Culture Visible Through Shared Language

The OCI measurements played a central role in the transformation by making culture visible and open to discussion. Participants described the initial measurement in 2021 as a turning point. The results revealed a discrepancy between the current organisational culture and the desired culture, with the organisation seeking to transition towards a more constructive culture. The CEO described this as the moment when it became clear that the strategy would not succeed unless the cultural problem was addressed first. He explained, 'I did not change the culture by implementing strategy. I changed the culture by going into the problem.' Therefore, Table 3 should be read as a summary of how the aggregated OCI measurements provided context for participants' accounts, rather than as a statistical analysis of cultural change.

Table 3
Contextual overview of OCI measurements

Year	Use of OCI in the study	Broad interpretation
2021	Baseline contextual measurement of experienced and desired culture	A substantial gap between experienced culture and the desired 2028 culture was made visible.
2023	Follow-up contextual measurement	A marked movement towards more constructive cultural patterns was reported.
2025	Follow-up contextual measurement with broader front-line participation	The overall development appeared broadly sustained despite a wider response base, whilst further work remained.

Aggregated OCI material indicated a shift towards a more constructive culture between 2021 and 2023, a trend that was broadly maintained in 2025 despite a larger number of front-line employees participating in the measurement. Participants interpreted this as evidence that the transformation had moved beyond a temporary initiative. However, they also recognised that the organisation had not yet reached its desired culture and that more work was needed.

The OCI created a shared language beyond measurement. Participants repeatedly referred to the colours and behavioural styles in the model as practical tools for discussing behaviour. Rather than accusing a colleague of being defensive, controlling or avoidant, for example, employees could describe their behaviour as 'a little red' or 'a little green'. Participants experienced this as less threatening and more constructive. The CEO explained:

'We are beginning to understand this better. We are more willing to deal with things constructively, and if someone sees that somebody is not doing that, they are more willing to step in and say: should we try to be a little more constructive? We also use the colours. Now you are a little red, now you are a little green, and that makes the conversation easier.'

This shared language helped to depersonalise conflict. Participants said that it was easier to address behaviour when the conversation focused on patterns rather than personal character. One manager recalled

being told by another manager that he had acted 'red' in a meeting. Rather than dismissing the comment, he asked why the other person had perceived him in that way. This made him realise that he had entered the conversation intending to win rather than to understand.

The shared language also helped to reinforce personal responsibility. Participants emphasised that culture is not created solely by senior leaders or HR, but is expressed through the behaviour of each employee. One executive summarised this as follows: 'The key message is to keep reminding ourselves that this is inside each of us. Each person needs to decide how they are going to respond and take responsibility for their own performance.'

The findings therefore show that the OCI functioned as more than just a diagnostic tool. It evolved into a behavioural language that enabled participants to identify invisible norms, discuss defensive patterns and link cultural change to everyday interactions. This shared language also helped create the conditions for the psychological safety and constructive disagreement described in the next theme by depersonalising discussions of defensive behaviour.

4.3 Psychological Safety, Constructive Conflict, and the Reduction of Silos

Participants described increased psychological safety as one of the most significant outcomes of the transformation. They reported that employees had become more willing to speak openly, admit mistakes, ask for help and voice their opinions. The CEO described the new environment as a 'playground' where employees could practise new behaviours every day, such as discussing feelings, admitting ignorance, and asking for help.

This shift was particularly significant for a safety-sensitive organisation, where the ability to report mistakes is crucial for learning. One executive explained, 'If we are not informing others about mistakes and cannot examine what happened and correct something in our environment or processes, then the danger is that it will simply happen again.'

Participants linked psychological safety to trust. Several of them described trust as the foundation for more constructive communication. A department head responsible for a large front-line unit stated, 'There was a lack of trust. Trust is the foundation of everything.' This participant described how, previously, employees had agreed with instructions outwardly while avoiding real commitment. However, as trust increased, they became more willing to speak up, suggest improvements and take greater initiative.

Psychological safety also altered the way in which participants experienced conflict. Instead of seeing disagreement as harmful, participants increasingly described constructive conflict as being necessary for making better decisions. One project manager explained, 'There is value in stating your opinion, and there is also value in being able to disagree. Then we can look at what is best for Isavia and choose that option. Even if your idea is not selected, it has been discussed. Then you are more committed to the decision because you have said what you needed to say.'

Psychological safety was closely linked to reducing silo mentality. Participants described earlier patterns in which units focused narrowly on their own goals without considering the effect of their actions on others. Over time, however, they experienced stronger cross-functional collaboration, better information sharing and a greater willingness to work towards organisational rather than departmental goals. Several participants also perceived an improved internal culture as having strengthened relationships with external stakeholders at Keflavík Airport. They described Isavia as having moved towards a more collaborative role within the airport community.

These findings suggest that psychological safety and reduced silo mentality reinforced each other. As trust increased, employees became more willing to speak up and collaborate across departments. As cross-functional collaboration improved, participants experienced less waste and unnecessary meetings, and better decision-making. However, participants also emphasised that these improvements in psychological safety and cross-functional collaboration were uneven. They pointed to the importance of how the transformation was communicated by middle managers and front-line leaders.

4.4 Adaptive Learning and the Fragile Middle

Participants did not experience the transformation as a linear process with clearly defined stages. Instead, they described it as uncertain, iterative and adaptive. One project manager stated that transformation work 'does not go from A to B in a straight line'. The CEO expressed a similar view, explaining that, while the organisation knew its starting point through the first OCI measurement and had defined its desired culture, it did not know exactly how to achieve it:

> 'You cannot plan this journey. You can decide to begin with one part of the culture and try something. Then you see some progress, and suddenly you hit a wall. Then you need to go somewhere else. There are so many things that are unclear that you have to be willing to run into things and remind yourself that you are not necessarily making wrong decisions.'

Participants described a major adaptive challenge concerning the timing of front-line implementation. The transformation began with the executive team, senior managers and specialists. Participants saw this as necessary, as managers needed to understand and embody the new culture before passing it on to their

teams. However, participants also recognised that this created a distance between office-based employees and front-line staff. It should be noted that these accounts are leaders' and specialists' interpretations of front-line reactions rather than direct evidence of front-line employees' own experiences. One project manager explained that some front-line employees felt excluded and asked why other groups were considered more important, while also adding, 'It has to start at the top.'

Participants' accounts of front-line implementation emphasised the importance of local leadership structures. In one large front-line unit, a lack of trust, resistance to the new shift system and ambiguous leadership roles made it challenging to translate management intentions into everyday practice. The unit was therefore provided with substantial support, including from external consultants, internal HR and culture specialists. Over time, the roles of the leadership team were clarified and divided between operational shift management and people-oriented team leadership. Participants described this as a turning point.

Participants' accounts also suggested that a culture change requires a balance of care and firmness. Leaders worked to build trust and engage employees, while also clarifying expectations regarding behaviour, punctuality, and professional standards. Constructive culture was therefore not perceived as a way of avoiding difficult decisions, but rather as something that required clearer leadership, stronger accountability and more transparent communication.

The middle management layer remained a recurring concern. Participants described some managers as early adopters who had changed significantly, while others tried to wait out the transformation. This resistance did not always manifest as overt opposition, but rather as passivity, a lack of ownership, or an inability to delegate leadership responsibilities effectively. The findings therefore show that the transformation was adaptive rather than sequential. Progress depended not only on senior-level vision, but also on middle managers' and front-line leaders' ability to translate that vision into everyday behaviour. Taken together, these adaptive challenges provide important context for understanding the organisational outcomes discussed in Section 4.5.

4.5 Perceived Organisational Outcomes and Reported Practical Value

Participants perceived the transformation as having practical organisational value across the four themes. They associated the shift towards more constructive behaviour with more productive meetings, fewer defensive conversations, less duplication of effort, and better decision-making processes. The CEO emphasised that the culture work was not symbolic, but connected to performance: 'I am doing this because I want to improve the profitability of the company and reduce waste.'

Participants linked the transformation to greater resilience in the face of external shocks. The cessation of operations by a major airline customer in 2025 was cited as an example of how improved communication and collaboration had enabled a faster and more balanced collective response. They also identified potential benefits for employee wellbeing, such as greater openness and a stronger willingness to provide assistance across different departments. In one front-line unit, there were reports of reduced sickness absence. While these accounts are treated as participant perceptions rather than independent causal evidence, they suggest that the transformation was experienced as having both human and operational value.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore how leaders and specialists experienced a large-scale organisational culture transformation at Isavia, and to reveal insights into the role of leadership and the effectiveness of traditional change management models. The findings show that the transformation of organisational culture was experienced as a leadership-driven, measurement-supported and adaptive learning process. Four findings are particularly important.

Firstly, participants identified leadership behaviour as the primary means by which cultural change could be made to appear credible. Secondly, the OCI measurements made culture more visible and created a shared language for discussing behaviour. Thirdly, psychological safety enabled more open communication, constructive conflict and cross-functional collaboration. Fourthly, rather than unfolding as a linear change project, the transformation was a continuous process of experimentation, adjustment and learning. These findings are discussed in more detail in sections 5.1–5.4.

5.1 Leadership as the Embodiment of Culture Change

The findings reinforce the idea that leadership in cultural transformation involves not only sponsoring change from the top, but also making new behavioural expectations credible through visible practice. This finding adds to transformational leadership theory by showing that vision and modelling become important when leaders share their learning journey, accept feedback and demonstrate the interpersonal risks they ask others to take (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Warrick, 2017). In this case, vulnerability and self-reflection served as mechanisms of legitimacy: they reduced the gap between the stated culture and actual behaviour,

making the transformation less likely to be perceived as an HR initiative or a mere symbolic programme.

The key implication is that leadership credibility must travel through the management chain. Although senior commitment created direction, culture change remained fragile when middle managers failed to translate the desired culture into daily conversations and expectations. Middle managers therefore appear not only as implementers of senior management's intentions, but also as cultural translators whose behaviour determines whether abstract values become actionable at a local level. This adds nuance to individual adoption models such as ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006), showing that employees' willingness and ability to adopt new behaviour is shaped not only by their own readiness, but also by their immediate manager's credibility.

5.2 Culture Measurement as Shared Language

The study also shows that the practical value of measuring culture lies not just in diagnosis, but also in translating the results into a shared language. The OCI enabled participants to identify behavioural patterns and discuss defensive routines without resorting to personal accusations. By demonstrating how OCI-based measurement can become a shared behavioural language, the study builds upon existing research in this field by proposing that survey tools can facilitate change when embedded within dialogue, feedback and leadership practices, rather than being used solely for reporting purposes (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000; Jung et al., 2009).

This matters because a culture that remains vague or moralised is difficult to change. A shared behavioural language can make invisible issues more discussable and create safer entry points for feedback. At the same time, however, the case supports Schein's (2010) warning that measurement alone cannot reveal or change deeper assumptions. The OCI became meaningful because leaders and employees incorporated it into their everyday decision-making processes. The implication is that the value of cultural measurement should be evaluated not only in terms of its diagnostic value, but also in terms of whether it helps organisational members to engage in more concrete and less defensive conversations about behaviour.

5.3 Psychological Safety, Constructive Conflict, and the Breaking of Silos

The findings suggest that psychological safety is a mechanism that links leadership behaviour to collaboration and learning. Rather than describing psychological safety as a state of comfort or avoidance of tension, participants described it as the condition that made disagreement, error reporting and difficult conversations more productive. By demonstrating that psychological safety facilitates interpersonal risk-taking in the form of speaking up, reporting errors and engaging in constructive disagreement, the study aligns with Edmondson's definition of psychological safety, as well as subsequent research linking it to learning and constructive conflict (Edmondson, 1999, 2018; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

More broadly, psychological safety was found to improve the quality of cross-boundary interactions. In a siloed organisation, people may prioritise local interests, avoid conflict or withhold information. In the Isavia case, however, participants perceived that greater trust made it easier to raise problems, share responsibility, and consider organisational goals rather than those of individual departments. These perceived changes in cross-boundary interaction link cultural change to operational performance. A constructive culture is important because it improves the climate and changes how information, disagreement and responsibility move across boundaries (Bento et al., 2020; de Waal et al., 2019; Neill & Jiang, 2017).

5.4 Culture Change as Adaptive Organisational Learning

Finally, the case study clarifies why traditional change management models only partly explain culture transformation. The work of Lewin, Kotter and ADKAR remains useful for understanding the need for direction, mobilisation and reinforcement (Burnes, 2004; Hiatt, 2006; Kotter, 2012). However, the findings demonstrate that the cultural change did not unfold in accordance with the initial plan. The process demanded repeated interpretation, experimentation and recalibration as leaders encountered resistance, uneven middle-management engagement and the challenge of front-line translation.

Theoretically, culture transformation should be understood as adaptive organisational learning rather than a bounded change project. This conceptualisation of culture transformation aligns with continuous and emergent change perspectives, which view change as an ongoing process of making sense of things and adjusting to them rather than as movement through fixed stages (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). In practice, both structure and adaptability are necessary: leaders require a credible direction and a shared language, but they must also learn from and adapt to local constraints and emerging resistance. Therefore, culture transformation is sustained not by completing a change model, but by repeatedly translating desired behavioural expectations into local practice.

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

The study's main theoretical contribution is its conceptualisation of culture transformation as a form of measurement-supported, leadership-legitimised and psychologically safe adaptive learning. The case shows how these mechanisms work together rather than separately: culture measurement provides a shared behavioural language (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000; Jung et al., 2009), leadership vulnerability gives that language credibility (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Warrick, 2017), psychological safety enables its use in difficult conversations (Edmondson, 1999, 2018), and adaptive learning sustains translation across organisational levels (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

This process view makes a contribution to the literature on organisational culture and change management by shifting the focus from culture transformation as a planned sequence of interventions to culture transformation as an ongoing learning process. The findings suggest that large-scale cultural change depends not only on diagnosing culture, communicating values and following change steps, but also on repeatedly translating desired behavioural expectations into local practice. In this sense, the study brings together culture measurement, leadership modelling, psychological safety and adaptive learning to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding culture transformation in complex organisations.

5.6 Practical Implications

The findings suggest that culture transformation is a leadership responsibility, not an HR project. While HR can support the process, senior leaders must be visible sponsors and role models to make the desired culture seem credible (Warrick, 2017). The work of culture also needs to be connected to everyday leadership practices, such as meetings, providing feedback, making decisions, having performance conversations and collaborating across functions.

Organisations may also benefit from using culture measurement as a shared behavioural language, rather than just for diagnosis. In the case of Isavia, for example, the ability to describe behaviour using a common language made difficult conversations less personal and more actionable. However, measurement only becomes useful when it is embedded in dialogue, reflection and leadership practice (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000; Jung et al., 2009).

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of middle managers and front-line translation. Middle managers need clear expectations, coaching, and accountability because they determine whether cultural aspirations become local practice. Based on leaders' and specialists' accounts, organisations should also avoid delaying front-line involvement for too long, as this may create distance or a sense of exclusion. Therefore, culture transformation should be managed as a long-term learning process, with desired behavioural expectations repeatedly reinforced and adapted across organisational levels (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. Firstly, as it is based on a single case study of an Icelandic infrastructure organisation, it cannot be statistically generalised to other contexts. Instead, its purpose is to provide analytical insight into how culture transformation is experienced and enacted within a complex organisational setting.

Secondly, the sample comprised leaders and specialists who played a key role in the transformation process. Therefore, the findings reflect the perspectives of those who led, supported or interpreted the process, and may be influenced by retrospective sensemaking and commitment to the transformation. While participants discussed front-line implementation, the study did not directly capture the experiences of front-line employees.

Thirdly, the OCI results were used to provide context rather than as independent quantitative evidence. Therefore, the study does not test for causal relationships between cultural change and organisational performance. However, future research could combine qualitative accounts with longitudinal cultural measurements and operational indicators, such as staff turnover, sickness absence, safety reporting, customer satisfaction and financial performance.

Future studies should examine cultural transformation from the perspective of front-line employees, comparing similar processes across different organisational, sectoral and national contexts. This would help to clarify whether the mechanisms identified in this case study – leadership self-work, shared cultural language, psychological safety, and adaptive learning – also apply to other complex organisations.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how leaders and specialists experienced a large-scale cultural transformation at Isavia, revealing insights into leadership and the limitations of traditional change management models. The findings demonstrate that the transformation was not perceived as a discrete change project, but rather as an ongoing organisational learning process, driven by leadership behaviour, a shared language, a sense of psychological safety, and repeated adaptation.

This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on organisational culture and change management by demonstrating how culture measurement, leadership vulnerability, psychological

safety and adaptive learning interacted to sustain large-scale cultural transformation in practice.

Overall, the Isavia case suggests that large-scale cultural transformation is not sustained by formal statements alone, but by repeated behavioural choices across organisational levels. Culture becomes malleable when it is made visible, discussed safely, modelled by leaders and reinforced continuously in everyday work.

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