UNIONS 21

Building tomorrow's unions

Culture and unions

Building organisations
fit for the future

This report explores how organisational culture shapes the effectiveness of trade unions. Drawing on Unions 21's work across the movement, it identifies key culture types and how they influence strategy, power and member engagement; helping unions move from culture by default to culture by design.

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Building tomorrow's unions

⟩ Culture

Why culture is important

As the starting point in assessing a union's capacity, culture is a key component of creating a union fit for the future and able to deliver on its strategy.

"**Culture eats strategy for breakfast**"

And, to be successful, a union must consider culture to be by design not by default – it is a proactive action and therefore one that union leaders, staff, executives and members need to give great attention to.

Not only will the wrong culture for the right strategy mean that a union is not as effective as it could be, a culture that is unproductive or toxic will mean any capacity building the union attempts will be fruitless. On the other hand, a culture that is productive will be able to ensure the union can build its union house, but it won't be as impactful.

Culture links with other aspects of capacity building because structures, staffing and people will all affect it. The reverse is true as the structures, staffing and people will embed and reinforce prevailing cultures.

⟩ To change a culture, then, is potentially one of the biggest undertakings a union can do.

What kinds of culture exist in unions?

While it's not unusual that unions reflect the prevailing culture within the industries they represent, unions are organisations in their own right and can thoughtfully shape their culture.

From our work with unions, we have identified six main culture types that we can see within unions. While we have distilled these into a typology, it is important to remember that these types of cultures are not exclusive, and many unions will be a combination of aspects. Indeed, unions could see that they have one overarching type with aspects of the others.

The most important thing is for unions to assess where they are now and to hold this up towards the current or upcoming union strategy. Does what you have help or hinder you? If it blocks effectiveness, the union then needs to identify which combination is required.

SERVICE CULTURE

ORGANISING CULTURE

CONFRONTATIONAL CULTURE

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

ADVOCACY CULTURE

PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Types of union cultures & their characteristics

SERVICE CULTURE

Core Idea
Union as provider

Features
· Members become consumers
· Staff drive problem solving
· Focus on grievances, benefits
· Communication one way

ORGANISING CULTURE

Core Idea
Active participation

Features
· Members integral
· Leadership development central
· Emphasis on collective action and mobilisation
· Campaigns prioritised

CONFRONTATIONAL CULTURE

Core Idea
Power built through conflict

Features
· Strike ready
· Aggressive towards employers
· Strong identity around fighting spirit
· High tolerance for risk

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

Core Idea
Union is professional and stability paramount

Features
· Strong bureaucracy and formal procedures
· Emphasis on financial stability
· Decision making centralised
· Bargaining pragmatically

ADVOCACY CULTURE

Core Idea
Social and political change central to union identity

Features
· Heavily involved in legislative and electoral work
· Strong emphasis on ideology

PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Core Idea
Union protects a craft or profession

Features
· Strong occupational identity
· Emphasis on standards, training etc.
· Expertise and autonomy

One thing to note is that when unions talk about servicing versus organising, they're often not talking about the culture of the union, rather what the union does. From an activity perspective, we think that this dichotomy is not helpful, as unions need to do the range of activities often attributed to these labels. We prefer to think of the union understanding how it develops its 'house'.

However, from an internal culture perspective, those labels help us to identify how a union might be doing 'organising activities' and yet not fulfil organising goals.

In this context, the important thing is to consider how a union's culture directly influences what the union strategy should be and how it is implemented. It would be hard to have a strategy that positions the union to be confrontational, when historically it had been administrative. It could work, but without taking the time to think about what culture is prevalent and the steps needed to move colleagues across the union from one to another, any strategy, however brilliant, will fail.

In practice, what does this mean?
It can be hard to really think about how a union's culture really manifests itself in an everyday situation. Therefore, on the next page we have imagined the scenario where a member has called the union with a problem.

SERVICE CULTURE

Actions we tend to see
- Call handler checks they're a member, logs the issue on a casework system.
- The case is allocated to an officer or caseworker.
- An officer represents the member at the hearing/grievance; keeps them updated.
- At the end, maybe a short "how did we do?" survey; little follow-up beyond the case.

ORGANISING CULTURE

Actions we tend to see
- The person taking the call listens and gathers the story, but also asks: "Is anyone else experiencing this?"
- They link the member to their workplace rep or organising team.
- Rep meets them (or a small group) to understand the issue and map who else is affected.
- Parallel tracks:
  i. Representation: member is supported properly in the process.
  ii. Organising: rep and member identify others, have one-to-ones, test appetite for joining together around the issue.
- They might build a petition, issue-based meeting or small collective demand on that problem – using the case as an organising trigger.

CONFRONTATIONAL CULTURE

Actions we tend to see
- The union reacts with anger toward management and frames it as a major battle: "This is outrageous – we're not having it."
- Officers/activists may call a meeting or circulate a strongly worded message
- They might escalate fast: public shaming of the employer, threats of industrial action, protests, etc., even if members' organisation is patchy.
- The individual gets representation, and the tone is strongly combative.

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

Actions we tend to see
- Staff check membership status, eligibility, procedures.
- They walk through the rulebook and employer policies, giving clear, technical advice.
- Representation is provided, but within tight protocols (forms, deadlines, authorisations).
- The case is handled professionally, with good records, but kept strictly within procedural channels.
- Decisions on any wider approach (e.g. raising at bargaining) are taken centrally by officers/committees.

ADVOCACY CULTURE

Actions we tend to see
- The union picks up the workplace issue but quickly connects it to a bigger social/political story: discrimination, unsafe work, insecure contracts, etc.
- While providing representation, officers look at whether this case can feed into:
  a national campaign
  media work
  legal/strategic test cases
  lobbying or legislative change.
- The member might be asked if they're willing to be a "story" – to speak in the media or at events.

PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Actions we tend to see
- The union first understands the issue in relation to the craft/professional standards:
  i."Does this undermine your professional judgement, training or standards?"
- They provide representation but also push arguments based on professional ethics, safety or quality of work.
- The union might convene a meeting of people in that craft at the workplace to discuss how this case fits a pattern of threats to professional standards.
- They may press the employer for changes that protect autonomy, training, staffing levels or quality benchmarks.

What other cultures affect our way of working?

In recent years, the UK movement has had to have some difficult but necessary conversations because several independent reports have highlighted cases where internal cultures have broken down, causing real harm to staff and activists. While these reports have been based in the UK, we think that the cultures identified could apply across the union movement.

For the purposes of this work, we have identified two main 'challenging' cultures that create either an unsafe environment or one that does not enable the union to build its house.

✖ Toxic culture

Using the recent reports as a guide, a toxic culture within a union would consist of the following:

- **Power is personalised.** This is when we see democratic processes are bypassed by informal networks. If decisions rely more on 'who you know' than on the rule book, or if checks and balances are treated as optional for some, accountability begins to erode.

- **Psychological safety is low.** Debate is a good thing and a healthy union needs debate and discussion. However, if either staff or activists feel that concerns cannot be raised or suggest new ideas without fear of genuine retaliation or being seen as 'disloyal', the union loses its ability to learn and correct mistakes.

- **Systems stop functioning.** Think of systems like HR or finance being the plumbing of the union house. When these processes become slow, opaque or seem to protect the institution rather than the individual, trust breaks down fast.

- **Inconsistent accountability.** If inappropriate behaviour is overlooked because an individual is 'too senior' or 'too important' it signals that our values are flexible rather than fundamental.

✖ Unproductive culture

Unions can also develop a culture that, while there are elements of a toxic culture, is more focused on ways of working that ultimately act as a barrier to the union being as influential as it could be. This can be evidenced through the creation of bottlenecks and slowness to act, no desire to grow or innovate and with a tendency towards performative achievements rather than clear outcomes.

↻ What is an agile culture?

One type of culture that is rare within unions is one of agility.
This is an approach that encourages unions to explore how it learns, adapts and acts across:

STRATEGIC
Long term

FUNCTIONAL
Resource allocation

OPERATIONAL
Day to day tactics

A union that cannot learn, does not adapt and will not act on the evidence and change around them will be destined to not reach its potential.

How do these cultures manifest themselves?

SERVICE CULTURE

Positive example ✔	Toxic/unproductive example ✖	Agile example ↻
• Members receive reliable, high-quality support for grievances and casework. • Staff are trained, professional and responsive. • Processes are clear, timely and fair.	• Members become customers and staff become fixers. • Everything becomes a case • Staff hoard cases and exclude colleagues. • Members expect the union to do it for them. • Casework is used as a weapon.	• Casework is analysed, showing patterns, informing campaigns. • Members and stewards take more ownership. • Processes adapt quickly when issues repeat. • Service delivery informs strategic decisions.

ORGANISING CULTURE

Positive example ✔	Toxic/unproductive example ✖	Agile example ↻
• Members build power collectively, learn leadership skills and participate in structured, strategic campaigns. • Decisions are transparent and democratic.	• Everything is a campaign. • Members and staff pressured beyond reasonable levels. • Wins are prioritised over wellbeing. • Dissent is framed as disloyalty. • Leadership development becomes factional.	• Campaigns run in cycles with reflection and adjustment. • Activists co-design tactics. • Resources shift based on results. • The union adapts rapidly to employer approaches.

How do these cultures manifest themselves?

CONFRONTATIONAL CULTURE

Positive example ✔	Toxic/unproductive example ✖	Agile example ↻
• The union is unafraid to stand against employer abuses. • Escalation is strategic. • Members feel strong and united. • Action is used effectively as part of strategy.	• Aggression is normalised throughout. • Leaders punish questioning. • Escalation is default regardless. • Conflict consolidates internal power.	• Confrontation is evidence-driven. • Each action is reviewed for impact. • The union adjusts escalation ladders based on learning, building smarter power.

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

Positive example ✔	Toxic/unproductive example ✖	Agile example ↻
• Systems, policies and procedures are professional, consistent and transparent. • Governance is strong. Budgets, compliance, HR and safeguarding work. • Structures protect people, not power.	• Rules and processes are weaponised or manipulated. Bureaucracy stifles initiative. • HR and governance exist on paper. Complaints disappear. • Leaders hide behind procedure to avoid accountability.	• Data from governance and HR informs adjustments. • Policies are reviewed regularly. • Bureaucracy is reduced where it blocks agility. • Processes adapt to failures.

📢 ADVOCACY CULTURE

Positive example ✔	Toxic/unproductive example ✘	Agile example ↻
• Championing broader justice issues while staying grounded in member needs. • Partnerships that strengthen campaigns. • Messaging mobilises workers and allies. • Members feel proud of union values.	• Political agendas override workplace needs. • Leaders use resources for personal goals. • Dissent is dismissed as ideological impurity. • Symbolic politics replaces member support.	• Work is informed by member data and real needs. • Partnerships and messaging are evaluated for effectiveness. • Advocacy adapts based on impact and stays connected to workplace issues.

🛡️ PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Positive example ✔	Toxic/unproductive example ✘	Agile example ↻
• Strong pride and identity anchor members to their profession. • Defence of high standards of skill, training and workmanship. • Apprenticeships thrive. • Expertise is shared. .	• Elitism, exclusion and gatekeeping dominate. • New or diverse members feel marginalised. • Traditionalists resist change. • Skill standards become political tools. • Jurisdiction fights overshadow wellbeing.	• Standards evolve through iterative learning. • Training updates based on technology and member feedback. • New members' experiences inform development. • Craft knowledge is documented and shared.

Steps for cultural change

Throughout this piece, we have continually said about the need for unions to assess and understand their culture. Unions really do need to have a clear picture of not only what culture it has but also whether there is consistency across the organisation.

Look at what you are trying to achieve. Can you identify whether the culture helps or hinders your strategy and demonstrate the values and behaviours that would need to be in place?

Unions 21 has developed an assessment tool that you can use across the union to get a sense of where your union is right now.

Once you have done this identification there are some broad ideas that you need to work through.
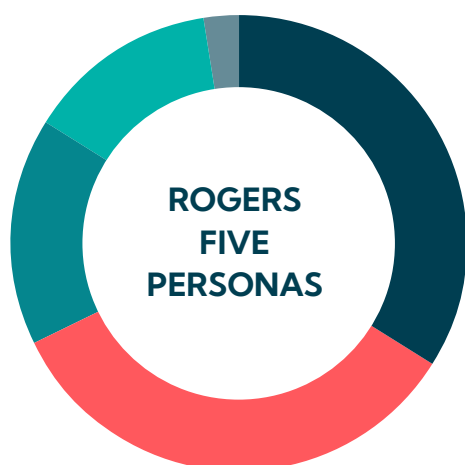
Identify leadership from across the union and what changes in systems and structures you need, practically to support colleagues

To support the new culture and ensure the strategy can be successful, you will need to consider the potential modification to formal systems, policies and practices. Staff and members will need skills and knowledge to adapt to new expectations as well as ongoing top-ups.

Leadership from across the union is key, as well as from the democratic structure. Identify those who would be interested in the ideas or change needed and build up a group that can model the behaviours and processes you need to demonstrate. Remember not everyone will want to change culture, especially if they benefit from the current approach. Some change experts discuss Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory, which uses a bell curve to understand the speed at which new ideas can spread. This is not without critique, but it is useful to use this as a loose guide to think about how your desire for change will disperse across your union.

Rogers identifies five personas:

ROGERS FIVE PERSONAS

34% Early majority

Slower in the adoption process, they need evidence that the change works before committing.

34% Late majority

Sceptical and adopt change only after the majority has embraced it.

16% Laggards

The last to adopt change and only do so when they have no other choice.

13.5% Early adopters

Opinion leaders who adopt ideas early and help the change gain credibility. They are key to influencing the broader population.

2.5% Innovators

The first to adopt change and who are willing to take risks.

If you want change in your union, think about how the early adopters can be engaged and dispersed across staff and then who they can engage within the early majority. Accept that for a certain number of staff, change will only happen when they have no other choice.

Buy-in from the top is important as they are the ultimate modellers of behaviour and need to have the legitimacy to pull up others on their behaviours, as well as the ability to change structures and ways of working more generally.

Those structural changes will need to be identified and undertaken to embed the cultural change that you want to see achieved (more of this later on).

Embedding Change Through Communication and Values

Communicate often, celebrate success and be patient

There needs to be constant communication to ensure that messages about why change is being undertaken. Work on cultural change is a marathon, not a sprint, and it requires time, effort and long term commitment. Engagement with staff and members will be crucial to that.

This communication needs to not only be clear but also positioned on how individuals and teams are succeeding, which is based on objective progress and metrics of success. The most important aspect to this is to stay focused, plan for emotional responses and don't expect immediate results.

Remember our trade union values

Think about how we can make sure that change happens in an inclusive and equitable way. Not only should the culture of change reflect our values, it should also be implemented in the same way. Engage with staff unions, make sure there are objective policies in place and that people are trained up to use them properly.