



An Owner's Guide to Assessing Workplace Culture

What to look at, how to gather evidence, and what to do with what you find.

FOR OWNERS AND SENIOR LEADERS OF SMALL AND MID-SIZED BC BUSINESSES

Why this matters

If your workplace feels "off," you're usually seeing more than one problem at once.

Culture issues rarely show up alone. They cluster:



Declining trust



Weak or inconsistent management



Burnout and turnover



Conflict and communication breakdowns



Inconsistent accountability

A culture assessment moves you past guesswork. It's a structured way to:

- Gather facts
- Hear directly from your people
- Find the patterns
- Decide what actually needs to change

Built for owners and senior leaders of small and mid-sized BC businesses — what to assess, how to gather evidence, and how to read what you find.

Signs you may need one

Few businesses assess culture when things are going well. They usually start when several signals show up at once:

Good people are leaving

Especially in hard-to-fill roles

Employees seem tired or checked out

Signs of overload or disengagement

Managers handle things differently

Team to team inconsistency

People are afraid to speak up

Or raise problems early

Communication feels unclear

Inconsistent or one-directional

Teams blame each other or work in silos

Avoiding cooperation

Complaints and sick time are climbing

Conflict increasing over time

You're not sure what the real problem is

Trust, structure, management, or workload

❏ Not all signs carry the same weight. Some are performance problems. A few hint at a deeper — or legal — layer. When several show up at once, an assessment separates symptoms from causes.

What a culture assessment is

Culture has two layers:

The visible layer

How people are treated, whether it's safe to speak up, how decisions get made.

The deeper layer

The unwritten rules: what gets rewarded, tolerated, or quietly punished, and the gap between the values on the wall and how things really work.

A good assessment reads from the visible layer down to the deeper one.

What employees experience is the symptom. The norms underneath are the culture.

Stop at the survey results and you've only measured the weather.

❏ **It's not:** a satisfaction survey, or a check on whether people seem happy.

It is: a clear look at how the workplace functions, what's getting in the way, and what's hurting trust, performance, and retention.

❏ **Before you start, one honest question.** Feedback collected and then ignored doesn't return to neutral — it leaves people more cynical than before you asked. Only open this if leadership is ready to hear hard things and act on them.

Core areas to assess

Look past surface impressions to the conditions that shape how people work together — and how the business performs.

Area	What to look at	Why it matters
Trust in leadership	Honest, consistent, visible, follows through	Trust drives credibility, morale, and engagement
Manager effectiveness	Sets expectations, addresses issues, supports staff, treats people fairly	Employees often experience culture through their manager, not the org chart
Teamwork and cooperation	Teams collaborate, share information, solve problems together	Silos and friction slow the work and wear people down
Communication	Employees understand priorities, decisions, and change	Poor communication breeds confusion, mistrust, and rework
Workload and role clarity	People know what's expected and can do it without chronic overload	Unclear roles and overload drive burnout and conflict
Fairness and accountability	Rules, consequences, recognition, and opportunity applied consistently	Perceived unfairness erodes trust fast
Employee voice	People can raise concerns, ideas, or mistakes without fear	A business that can't hear the truth early pays for it later
Respect and psychological safety	People feel safe and included, able to speak up and admit mistakes	Healthy cultures depend on respect and the freedom to speak up

The eight-step process

- 1 Get clear on what feels wrong**

Write down what you're seeing: quitting, repeat complaints, inconsistent managers, checked-out staff. Don't force it to one problem — name the whole cluster.
- 2 Decide what you need to learn**

Turn concerns into a few plain questions: "Do employees trust management?" "Why are good people leaving?" "Where is communication breaking down?"
- 3 Choose how you'll gather information**

Don't rely on one survey — one method misses what another catches. Pull from several sources so you can cross-check.
- 4 Ask clear, honest questions**

Ask what people actually experience: trust, workload, fairness, teamwork, management, safety to speak up. A good question points to an action later.
- 5 Look for patterns**

Don't overreact to one comment — look for themes that repeat across sources. Watch *where* problems sit; an average hides the team, location, or manager driving it.
- 6 Identify the real causes**

Low morale might be overload, unclear roles, weak management, conflict, or unfairness — sometimes several at once. Get the diagnosis wrong and the fix fails.
- 7 Choose a few priorities to fix first**

Don't solve everything. Pick what matters most to trust, retention, and daily functioning — a short plan beats a long wish list.
- 8 Share what you learned and what's next**

Tell employees what you heard, the main themes, and what you'll act on first. Visible follow-through builds trust fast; silence destroys it just as fast.

Ways to gather evidence

No single source tells the whole story. Each method shows a different part of the picture.

Method	Best for	The watch-out
Confidential survey	Hearing from a group at once; patterns in trust, workload, fairness	Only run it if leadership is ready to act on the results
One-to-one conversations	Depth and context; understanding <i>why</i>	People speak freely only if confidentiality is real
Small group discussions	Testing themes; hearing it in people's own words	Low trust or the wrong facilitator turns these silent
Leadership interviews	Assumptions, blind spots, intent vs. experience	Leaders' view often isn't the employees' — the gap is the finding
HR and people data	Turnover, absence, overtime, complaints, exit themes	Company-wide averages hide where the problem sits
Policy and process review	Whether fairness is built into how the business runs	A good policy means nothing if applied inconsistently
Observation	How work actually happens — meetings, tone, who speaks	Supports other evidence; weak on its own

❏ **No single method is enough on its own.** Choose the right mix and read the sources against each other — that's how scattered complaints become a clear diagnosis.

❏ **A note on anonymous surveys.** They work in mid-to-large organizations — not small ones. In a 15-person company there's no true anonymity; slice by team, role, or tenure and you've named people. Promising anonymity you can't deliver does more damage than not promising it. In small teams, confidential one-to-one conversations are often more honest than an "anonymous" survey.

Questions you can ask

Plain-language questions that work in a survey, a one-to-one, or a group conversation:

Trust in leadership

Do you trust the leaders here to make fair, sensible decisions?

Manager effectiveness

Does your manager give clear direction and deal with problems when they come up?

Role clarity

Do you understand what's expected of you and your team?

Workload

Is your workload manageable most of the time, with the support and tools you need?

Fairness and accountability

Are people held to the same standards across the business?

Psychological safety

Can you raise a concern or disagree without worrying about the consequences?

Common mistakes to avoid



Running a survey and never sharing the results



Asking for honest feedback when leaders aren't ready to hear it



Treating culture like a branding problem instead of an operating problem



Fixing a management or workload issue with a team-building event



Looking only at company-wide averages — and missing where the problem sits



Taking one strong comment as proof without checking for a wider pattern

A note for BC employers

Some culture problems are just culture problems — with a management fix. But some carry a legal layer worth knowing about:



Bullying and harassment

BC employers have WorkSafeBC duties to prevent and address it (policy, procedures, training, annual review).



Psychological health and safety

Workload and chronic stress are recognized workplace concerns.



Work-related mental disorder claims

In certain circumstances, these can give rise to a WorkSafeBC claim.



Discrimination and the duty to accommodate

A separate track under the BC Human Rights Code.



Themes vs. disclosures

A general complaint is findings; a specific allegation can trigger a legal duty to act.

Each of these carries its own rules. Telling a culture finding from a legal one is its own skill — and the focus of a separate Senterra HR resource. Ask us about it.

What real change requires

Assessment is the easier half. Changing a culture is the longer, harder one — not a memo, an offsite, or a values poster.



Behaviour changes first, belief follows

Change what gets rewarded and modelled, and belief catches up.



Managers are the transmission layer

Culture moves through them or not at all.



Pick a few behaviours, not everything

Broad "be better" programs fail; a few specific, visible behaviours is what shifts.



It's tiered, and it takes time

Real change runs over quarters and years, with accountability and re-measurement built in.

This guide covers the assessment end. The change end is a longer process — planned over months, with ownership and follow-through at each stage.

When outside help makes sense

Some businesses can gather basic information on their own.
Outside support tends to be worth it when:



Trust is already low



The issues are sensitive



**Leaders are too close
to the problem**



**The business needs a
more credible,
structured process**

An external HR consultant can:

- Design the questions and protect confidentiality
- Run the conversations and read the patterns
- Turn confusing feedback into a practical plan

People also tend to speak more openly to an outside party than to internal leadership.

Senterra HR helps BC small and mid-sized employers turn scattered concerns into a clear assessment, honest findings, and practical next steps.

Book a free consultation — senterrahr.ca

Book a Free Consultation

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Sources and further reading

Edgar H. Schein — *Organizational Culture and Leadership* — on the layers of culture and reading beneath what's visible.

Amy C. Edmondson — *The Fearless Organization* — on psychological safety and why people speak up or stay silent.

WorkSafeBC — *Workplace Bullying and Harassment* — employer duties, policies, and resources under BC occupational health and safety.