

What dead culture looks like when AI joins the team

How to identify dead company culture in the age of AI and agentic work

DEMO EBOOK

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Short answer. A culture that only lives on paper is the gap between what a business says it values and what people actually do on a busy day. You can spot it with five signs: values nobody uses in a decision, a plan nobody can say back, rules that live in one person's head, priorities that never get dropped, and the same question getting different answers. AI tools don't cause the gap. They read what you've written down and act on it, so they show you the gap faster than anything else will.

Tuesday, ten past two

Mark runs an electrical wholesaler out of Geelong. Sixty people, three branches, a trade counter that opens at 6.30. In August his ops manager set up an AI assistant on the shared drive so the counter crew could ask it questions instead of ringing head office.

The first real test came on a Tuesday afternoon. Josh, three weeks into the job, had a sparky at the counter wanting \$4,000 of cable on an account already \$1,800 over its limit. Josh asked the assistant what to do.

It gave him three answers. The credit policy from 2021 said stop supply and refer to accounts. An email from the branch manager last summer said regulars could run 30 days over. And the values page from the last offsite said "We back our trade customers."

Josh did what any sensible new starter does. He rang Shaz in accounts, who has been there nineteen years and knows exactly who pays. She said yes. The sparky got his cable.

Nothing went wrong that day. But Mark now had a printout showing three versions of his business, all written by his own people, none of them agreeing. The assistant wasn't broken. It read exactly what the leadership team had left behind.

The warning signs

That's what dead culture looks like when AI joins the team. Not a scandal. A quiet gap between what's written down and what really happens, held together by people like Shaz.

In most businesses we see, it shows up in five places.

1. The values are on the wall, but they never come up in a decision. Think about when someone last said "we're doing this because of our value about X" in a real meeting. If nobody can remember, the values are decoration.

2. Nobody can say the plan back without notes. Ask five people what the three priorities are this year. If you get five different lists, or a lot of looking at the ceiling, there isn't a plan. There's a document.

3. The real rules live in one or two heads. Every business has a Shaz. When the answer to "how does this work?" is a person's name, the rule isn't written anywhere.

4. Priorities get added, never dropped. The 2024 project is still technically live. So is the one from the offsite before that. Half the business is still working on things leadership quietly stopped caring about.

5. The same question gets different answers. Ask two branches, two shifts or two team leaders how a common situation is handled. If the answers differ, your customers have already noticed.

None of these signs mean people are doing the wrong thing. Usually they're doing the sensible thing with what they've got. The friction is in what leaders never wrote down, or wrote down three different ways.

The gap

Culture is what people do at two o'clock on a busy Tuesday. It isn't what's on the wall.

Every business has three versions of itself. What leadership says. What's written in the policies, procedures and systems. And what actually happens on the floor. When those three line up, new people learn fast, customers get the same answer twice, and you can take a week off.

When they drift apart, the business still runs. It just runs on goodwill and memory. People like Shaz become the system. That works right up until Shaz takes long service leave.

Here's how far apart the versions can get. In one 80 person distribution business, we asked 12 leaders and team leaders to write the three company priorities on a sticky note. We got 19 different priorities, and only two people wrote the same three. **DEMO** Every one of them had been in the room when the priorities were set.

The AI test

This is where AI changes things. Not because it's clever, but because it's literal.

A new person works out the unwritten rules in a few months. They watch, they ask, they learn which policy is real and which one is old. An AI tool can't do that. It reads what it can access: your decks, your policies, your shared drive, your inbox if you let it. Then it acts on that, quickly, without the judgement to say "that one's out of date".

So it shows you the gap. Ask it for your priorities and see what comes back. Ask it how you handle a late-paying customer. Ask it what your values mean for a refund. Whatever it says is a fair reflection of what you've actually written down.

That's useful. AI doesn't create dead culture. It shows it to you, faster. And as AI tools start acting on their own, approving credit, answering customers, booking jobs, the gap stops being something you can see and starts being something that happens to a customer.

How we'll look at the whole business

Over the next eleven weeks we'll go through the business one part at a time, roughly in the order the problem travels: leadership, customer service, team leaders, sales, marketing, operations, finance, people, technology and delivery. In week 12 we put it all on one page, your culture map.

Each week asks the same five questions. You can run them on any team today.

1. **What does the company say?** The values, priorities, policies and promises.
2. **What's actually written down?** The procedures, systems and decision rules people and AI tools can find.
3. **What really happens?** The shortcuts, exceptions and "ring Shaz" moments.
4. **What happens when AI gets involved?** Where a literal reader would get it wrong.
5. **Where does it travel next?** Which team, customer or system catches the problem.

The connection

This week isn't about one department, but the pattern always starts somewhere and moves.

In Mark's case it started in the **leadership team**, which wrote a values line and never squared it with the credit policy. It passed through **finance**, whose policy was right on paper and ignored in practice. It landed on **customer service** at the counter, where a new starter had to pick between three answers. And it keeps going into **sales**, because the reps have been telling builders "we'll look after you" on accounts finance wants stopped.

Keep that chain in mind. Most of the friction in this series shows up downstream and starts upstream.

The ident check

Answer yes or no. Nobody's marking it.

1. Could five people from different parts of the business name the same three priorities without notes?
2. Could each of them say what their own part is in those priorities?
3. Could they say what the business stopped doing this year?

4. Has a company value been used out loud to make a real decision in the past month?
5. If your most experienced person left tomorrow, would the rules they carry be written down anywhere?
6. Would two sites, branches or shifts handle the same common situation the same way?
7. If you asked an AI tool on your shared drive for your priorities, would it give one clear answer?

Questions 1 to 3 are the recall test. If any of those is a no, start there. Everything else makes more sense once you know what people actually carry around in their heads.

Cheap first

1. **Ask three people the recall questions this week.** Costs nothing, takes a day. Pick someone senior, a team leader and someone new. Write down exactly what they say.
2. **Find your Shaz.** List the two or three people whose name is the answer to "how does this work?" Don't change anything yet. Just know who they are.
3. **Run the AI test.** If you have an AI assistant on your drive, ask it for your three priorities and one common policy question. Print the answers.
4. **Count your live priorities.** Every project, initiative and focus area still technically running. If the number is above five, you've found part of the problem.

Then the harder fix: getting the leadership team to agree on three, write them down in words a team leader would use, and announce what's been dropped. That's next week.

The Monday close

This week, ask three people to name your three priorities without notes. Don't correct them. Just listen and write it down.

Next week we start where it usually starts: the leadership team. Priorities nobody remembers, decisions that never leave the room, and what happens when an AI tool starts reading the plans.

Questions people ask

How do you know if your company culture only exists on paper?

Look for five signs: values that never come up in a decision, a plan nobody can say back without notes, rules that live in one or two heads, priorities that get added but never dropped, and the same question getting different answers in different teams.

Does AI cause culture problems?

No. AI tools read what you've written down and act on it literally. They don't create the gap between what you say and what you do. They show it to you, faster.

What is the recall test?

Ask people from different parts of the business, without notes: what are our three priorities, what's your part in them, and what did we stop doing this year? If the answers differ, the plan hasn't reached them.

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