

# ALLEN & OVERY

## A view on culture from... *South Africa*

### HAVE YOU SEEN A CHANGE IN THE WAY CLIENTS ARE APPROACHING CULTURAL ISSUES WITHIN THEIR ORGANISATION? IF SO, WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

Despite all the memes that have been floating around the internet for years, the impact of millennials entering the workforce is undeniable. Ten to fifteen years ago, the traditional “8 to 5” job was the norm and the relationship between employee and employer was purely transactional – the provision of services in exchange for money.

Now, companies have realised that employees seek purpose as well as a pay cheque. A positive workplace culture has become integral to employee engagement and retention, and ultimately the company’s success. We therefore see an increased focus on employee well-being and autonomy, improvements to communications and transparency, and an embrace of non-traditional ways of working. Once a rare sight, policies that allow for individual circumstances to be accommodated and celebrated are now common, such as flexi hours, remote working, additional leave for community service, and more.

### HAVE YOU SEEN AN INCREASE IN ANY PARTICULAR CULTURAL ISSUES? EG HARASSMENT, WHISTLEBLOWING, MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

There has been a steady incline in awareness of mental health issues globally and South Africa is no different. In fact, the Department of Health reports that one in three South Africans will or already suffers from mental illness in their lifetime with depression being the most common mental health issue. This is a difficult issue that employers continue to grapple with.

In addition, over the last three years or so, there has been a marked increase in whistleblowing, followed by active investigation and robust action taken against those who contravene rules and values.

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Nikita Shaw



## ARE ANY PARTICULAR SECTORS MORE AFFECTED THAN OTHERS?

Anecdotally, mental health issues seem to be prevalent in sectors and job categories that inherently require high-pressure decision making and long, irregular hours

## WHAT WOULD YOU SAY HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST DRIVER FOR CHANGE/HAD THE MOST IMPACT ON CULTURE IN RECENT YEARS?

Technology is at the heart of everything. Positively, it allows employees to work wherever and whenever they are needed. For example a business analyst can answer emails at home whilst waiting for the oven to beep for a baking side hustle. The shadow, however, is the risk of burnout if that person never unplugs or disconnects. Similarly, social media provides a way for people to express their views with impunity, which can lead to greater transparency and accountability. Conversely, however, companies often struggle to keep up with their employees' thirst for information, the breakdown of traditional communication hierarchies and an increased desire to be heard.

## HAVE YOU SEEN ANY PARTICULARLY INNOVATIVE WAYS CLIENTS HAVE BEEN ADDRESSING CULTURAL ISSUES WHETHER TO PROACTIVELY IMPROVE CULTURE OR TO ADDRESS SITUATIONS OF POOR CULTURAL BEHAVIOUR?

A large financial institution recently announced an unlimited leave policy where employees are assessed and remunerated for their output and high bonuses are paid for innovation, not just completing tasks. That same company has also thrown out its dress code policy for the majority of its employees, who are now expected to simply 'dress for their day' – the only proviso is to remember the firm's brand of professionalism.

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## WHAT TRICKY ISSUES HAVE ARISEN IN YOUR JURISDICTION RELATING TO CULTURE?

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## WHAT WOULD BE YOUR TOP 5 TIPS FOR CLIENTS FACED WITH A COMPLAINT OF POOR CULTURAL BEHAVIOUR?

### 1 Communicate!

Share both successes and failures, pull down the traditional hierarchies of communication and motivate employees by taking them on the journey with management. Inspire employees by empowering them with the “why” not just the “what”. Team lunches are particularly effective, as the one thing that always brings people together is food.

### 2 Listen to employee feedback.

Too many surveys are completed, pretty graphs are compiled and then nothing happens. When management has the humility and emotional intelligence to listen carefully to honest feedback and change toxic behaviours or practices, everyone wins.

### 3 Get to know your team and promote a team atmosphere.

People are motivated by different things, but everyone likes to feel ‘seen’. In a world full of information, invest time. Schedule time for individual catch ups; ask thoughtful questions and get to know your employees’ working preferences and styles, what drives them, what makes them ‘tick’. Employees that feel like they matter and are part of something bigger than themselves are infinitely more engaged

### 4 No one likes to be micromanaged and trust is not easily given or received.

However, autonomy is vital to accountability, confidence and fostering an open and collaborative environment where ideas can be shared without fear of reprisal. Encourage being wrong and use problems as teaching moments.

### 5 Recognise and reward valuable contributions and actions that demonstrate the company’s values.

Culture building is tough and it’s easy to get distracted by the bottom line. But culture is a mix of leadership, values and everyday behaviours that make the workplace environment what it is. Celebrate those individuals who walk the walk and talk the talk; don’t underestimate the ‘social glue’ that these individuals represent.