

HR STRATEGY · CULTURE · 2026

# OCI: The Tool That Reveals What Your Culture Actually Is

Measuring the culture your systems actually reward – and closing the gap between the culture you describe and the one you live.

An eBook by ClayHR

# About this guide

---

Most organizations talk about culture in adjectives — “*innovative*,” “*collaborative*,” “*people-first*.” Few can say, with evidence, what their culture actually rewards day to day. This guide is about closing that gap.

It explains the **Organization Culture Inventory (OCI)**, the most widely used and thoroughly researched diagnostic for measuring workplace culture. You will learn what it measures, how it differs from the tools you may already run, why culture is a board-level issue in 2026, how to read the results, and — most importantly — how to turn a diagnosis into lasting behavioral change.

Culture is a deeply human topic — it is about how people treat one another and do their work. This guide keeps that human lens while showing how to measure it with care, and put real numbers behind it.

## What's inside

- 01 What the OCI actually measures
- 02 How the OCI differs from other culture tools
- 03 Why culture is a business issue, not just an HR one
- 04 The three culture styles — and all 12 norms
- 05 How leaders shape the norms
- 06 Current vs ideal culture: gap analysis
- 07 The hidden cost of a misaligned culture
- 08 Linking culture to performance, retention & engagement
- 09 Who should own the OCI process
- 10 Running your first OCI: a practical rollout
- 11 From survey to strategy: a six-step action plan
- 12 Why culture-change efforts fail — and how to avoid it
- 13 How HR technology accelerates culture change
- 14 Measuring culture change over time
- 15 How to put numbers on culture
- 16 The healthy-culture checklist

## What the OCI actually measures

---

The Organization Culture Inventory is a validated survey that turns culture from a gut feeling into data. It was developed by **Robert A. Cooke and J. Clayton Lafferty** and is published by Human Synergistics International. Crucially, it does not measure how people *feel*. It measures the shared behaviors people believe they must show in order to fit in and succeed.

### Norms, not opinions

The OCI measures **behavioral norms** — the unwritten rules of “how things are done here.” Norms differ from values (what a company says it believes) and from engagement (how satisfied people feel). They describe what behavior is actually expected and rewarded. That distinction matters for one practical reason: **behaviors are visible, repeatable, and changeable. Feelings are not.** To change a culture, you must change the behaviors it rewards — and first you have to see them clearly.

### How it works

Employees respond to statements describing behaviors expected in their organization. Responses are scored and plotted on the **Human Synergistics Circumplex**, a circular map that arranges 12 behavioral styles into one readable picture. The survey takes roughly 20 minutes, can be run anonymously, and produces a visual profile that is easy to share with leaders who have no background in psychometrics.

### Why it's trusted

The OCI has been used across thousands of organizational units worldwide and is supported by decades of peer-reviewed research linking culture styles to outcomes like quality, service, and adaptability. That base lets HR move from “we think our culture is...” to “the data shows our culture is...” — a far stronger position from which to lead change.

WHAT IS THE OCI?

## A validated measure of how your culture *actually works*

The Organization Culture Inventory measures **behavioral norms** — the unwritten rules people follow to fit in and succeed. It turns culture from a gut feeling into data you can act on.

<b>1987</b> First published by Cooke & Lafferty	<b>12</b> Behavioral norms measured	<b>3</b> Culture styles they form	<b>~20 min</b> To complete the survey	<b>900+</b> Org units it is normed against
--	--	--------------------------------------	--	---


 The most thoroughly researched culture assessment - Human Synergetics International

Figure 1 — The OCI at a glance: 12 norms, 3 styles, ~20 minutes, normed against 900+ organizational units.

## How the OCI differs from other culture tools

It helps to know what the OCI is *not*. Many tools touch on culture, but they measure different things, and confusing them leads to the wrong fix. The table below places the OCI alongside the tools you may already be running.

Tool	What it measures	Best for	Main limitation
OCI	Behavioral norms — what the organization actually rewards	Diagnosing and changing culture	Needs follow-through to create change
Engagement survey	How satisfied and committed people feel	Tracking sentiment and morale	Says little about which behaviors to change
Values statement	Stated aspirations and intent	Articulating what you want to be	Often diverges from lived behavior
360 performance review	Individual behavior and results	Developing specific people	Misses organization-wide norms

The takeaway: engagement tells you how people *feel*; the OCI tells you how people *behave* and what the organization rewards. You may want both — but only behavioral data tells you what to change.

## Why culture is a business issue

Culture is often treated as a “soft” topic owned by HR. That framing is expensive. Culture shapes how decisions get made, how quickly teams move, how openly problems surface, and whether your best people stay — outcomes that show up directly on the income statement.

### Strategy sets the direction; culture decides if you arrive

A strong strategy points the organization toward a goal, but strategy is executed by people, and people act according to the norms around them. **If your strategy demands collaboration while your norms reward internal competition, the norms win.** That is why capable companies with sound plans still stall.

### The 2026 context

Two forces make this urgent now. Hybrid and distributed work have removed many of the informal cues that once transmitted culture, so norms now travel through systems — goals, reviews, recognition — rather than hallways. And talent is harder and costlier to keep. The gap between a company's stated culture and its lived culture is precisely where engaged employees disengage, and where valued people can quietly disengage.

Culture should be **managed as a business system**, measured and reviewed like any other driver of performance.

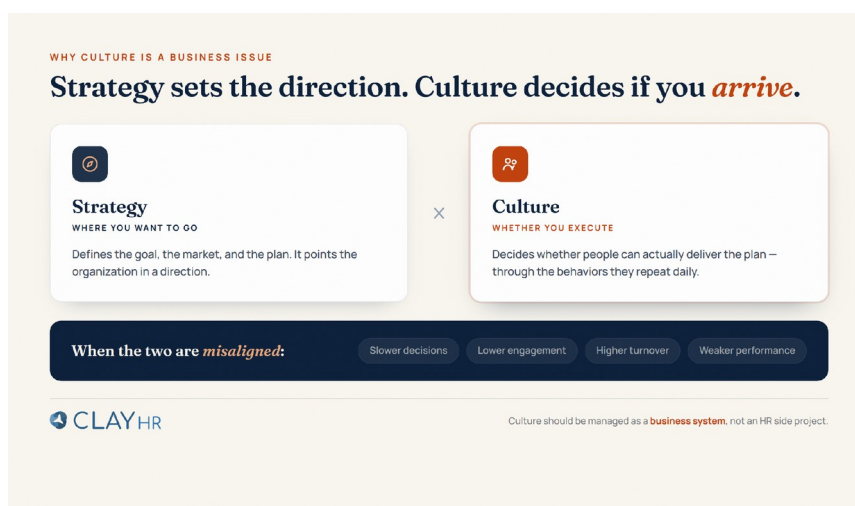


Figure 2 — Strategy sets the direction; culture decides whether you execute. Misalignment compounds into real cost.

## The three culture styles – and all 12 norms

The OCI organizes 12 behavioral norms into three broad styles. Most organizations show a mix, but one style usually dominates daily behavior. The tables below define each norm so the diagnosis becomes something you can act on.

### Constructive styles

These norms encourage people to interact with others and approach tasks in ways that meet their needs for growth and accomplishment. They tend to produce higher quality and stronger long-term performance.

Norm	What it looks like
Achievement	People set challenging but realistic goals and own the outcomes.
Self-Actualizing	People are encouraged to grow, enjoy their work, and be creative.
Humanistic-Encouraging	The organization is participative; people coach and support one another.
Affiliative	Relationships are cooperative and open; the group is a source of support.

### Passive / Defensive styles

These norms lead people to subordinate themselves to protect their own security. They feel safe in the short term but erode initiative, honesty, and speed.

Norm	What it looks like
Approval	People seek to be liked and agree with others, avoiding honest conflict.
Conventional	The culture is conservative and rule-bound; people avoid challenging the status quo.
Dependent	Decisions are pushed upward; people clear everything before acting.
Avoidance	People dodge blame and wait for others to move first.

### Aggressive / Defensive styles

These norms drive people to approach tasks forcefully to protect their status. They can create short bursts of results but damage trust, collaboration, and retention over time.

Norm	What it looks like
Oppositional	Status is gained by being critical and pointing out flaws in others' ideas.

Norm	What it looks like
Power	Authority rests on position; people respond mainly to those above them.
Competitive	Winning is everything; people are pitted against one another.
Perfectionistic	Hard work and obsessive detail are prized; people fear any mistake.

Healthy organizations skew constructive. **Most struggling ones discover they have quietly built a defensive culture — without anyone ever deciding to.**

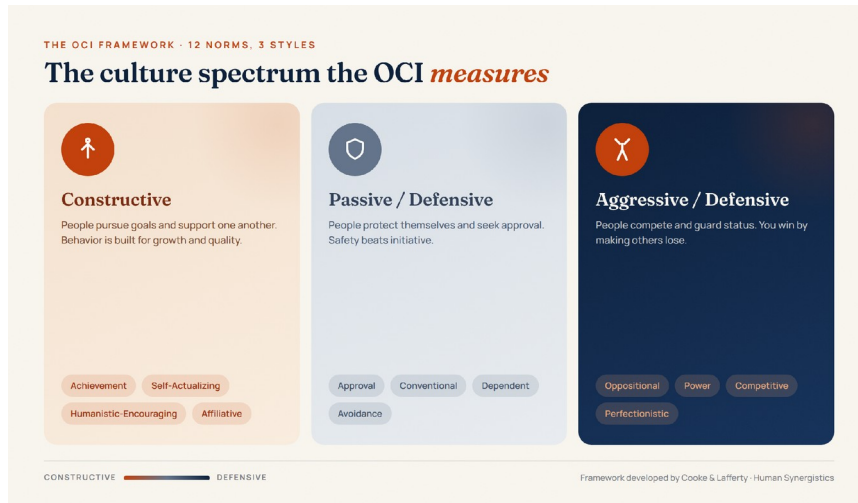


Figure 3 — The culture spectrum: 12 behavioral norms grouped into Constructive, Passive/Defensive, and Aggressive/Defensive styles.

## How leaders shape the norms

---

Culture is not set by posters or values decks. It is set, day after day, by what leaders pay attention to, reward, model, and tolerate. People read those signals and adjust their behavior to fit. That is how norms form — and why they are so hard to change with words alone.

### Four signals that become culture

- **What leaders measure and reward** becomes what people prioritize.
- **What leaders model — especially under pressure** sets the real standard, regardless of stated values.
- **What leaders tolerate** quietly becomes permission for everyone else.
- **What leaders ignore** signals what does not actually matter here.

So a defensive culture is rarely an accident; it is the sum of countless leadership signals. This is also why **culture change must start at the top**. If senior leaders do not change their own behavior, the norms will not move — whatever the survey says.

## Current vs ideal culture: gap analysis

The real power of the OCI comes from comparison. It is administered in two forms. The standard form captures your **current culture** — the behaviors people believe are expected today. The **OCI-Ideal** captures the culture leaders believe *should* exist to make the organization most effective.

### Reading the gap

Plotting both profiles on the same circumplex reveals the distance between where your culture is and where it needs to be. **That distance is your change agenda** — grounded in data, not opinion. A common pattern: leaders describe a strongly constructive ideal, while the current profile leans defensive. The gap names the problem precisely and points to the two or three norms that, if shifted, would move the culture most.

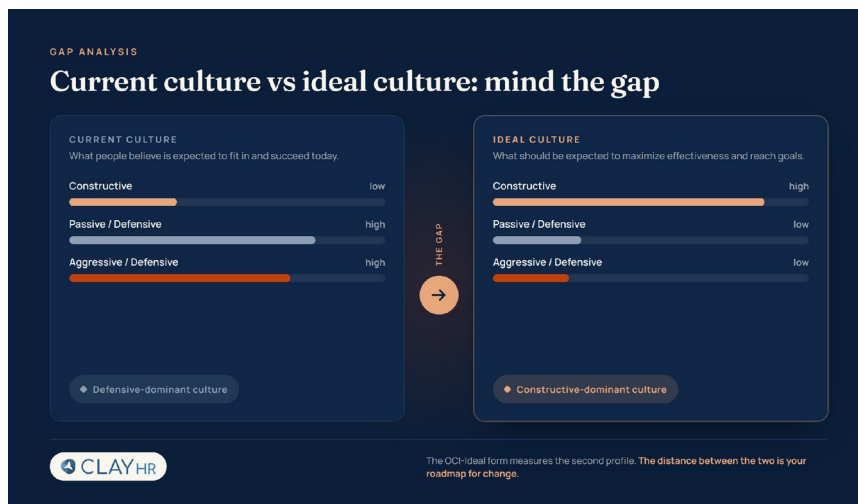


Figure 4 — Comparing a defensive-dominant current culture against a constructive-dominant ideal reveals exactly where to focus.

## The hidden cost of a misaligned culture

A misaligned culture is expensive long before anyone names it as the cause. The visible symptoms — turnover, missed targets, slow projects — are only the tip. Most of the cost sits below the surface, in the behaviors a defensive culture quietly rewards.

Left undiagnosed, those costs accumulate:

- **Slow, fearful decisions.** Defensive norms make people seek approval before they act, so everything takes longer.
- **Hidden mistakes.** When errors are punished, people conceal them instead of fixing them early.
- **Lost talent and rehiring cost.** Your strongest people leave first, and replacing them is expensive and slow.
- **Stalled innovation.** When risk-taking feels unsafe, new ideas dry up and the organization stops adapting.
- **Weaker customer experience.** Internal friction eventually reaches customers as slower, lower-quality service.

These costs rarely appear together in a single report, which is why leaders so often miss them. **The OCI brings them to the surface** and assigns them to a cause you can act on.



Figure 5 — The symptoms leaders notice are the tip; the real cost of a defensive culture sits below the waterline.

## Linking culture to performance, retention & engagement

Culture data is most persuasive when you connect it to outcomes the business already tracks. On its own, a culture profile is interesting. Laid alongside your HR and performance metrics, it becomes a **predictor**.

### How to make the connection

- Match OCI results to engagement scores, team by team.
- Compare culture styles against turnover, performance ratings, and customer feedback.
- Look for teams where defensive norms and attrition rise together — that correlation is your early-warning system.

The pattern is consistent: constructive cultures tend to correlate with higher engagement, stronger performance, and better retention, while defensive cultures show the opposite.

### What to watch

When this rises...	...watch this metric	Expected direction
Constructive norms	Engagement / eNPS	Higher
Constructive norms	Voluntary turnover	Lower
Defensive norms	Time-to-decision	Longer
Defensive norms	Regretted attrition	Higher
Defensive norms	Customer satisfaction	Lower

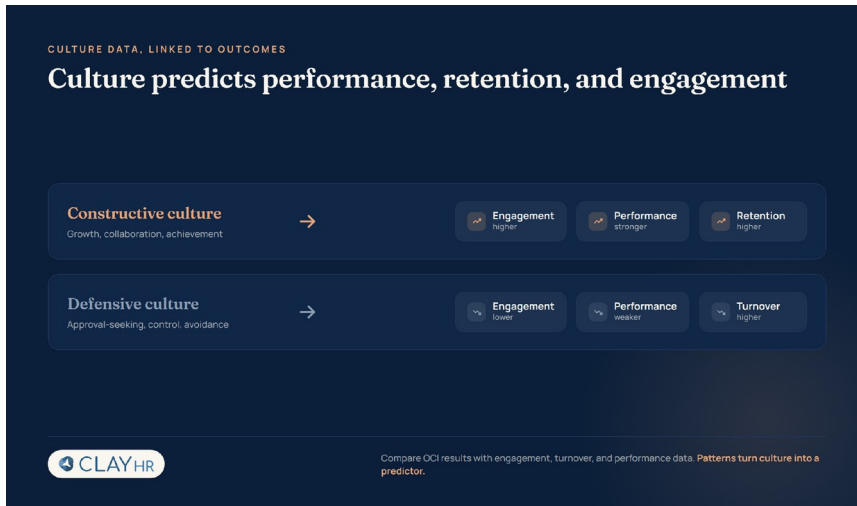


Figure 6 — Constructive cultures tend to lift engagement, performance, and retention; defensive cultures do the reverse.

## Who should own the OCI process

HR usually coordinates the OCI, but ownership has to be shared. The most reliable way to picture it is as a set of concentric responsibilities, with honest employee input at the core and visible executive sponsorship around the outside.

Stakeholder	Their part	What they do
Executives	Sponsor	Define and own the ideal culture, fund the work, and model the change themselves.
HR	Orchestrate	Design, run, and interpret the assessment, and own the rollout end to end.
Managers	Translate	Turn findings into daily behaviors and norms within their own teams.
Employees	Inform	Provide the honest input the process depends on; anonymity protects candor.

The most common failure mode is treating the OCI as an HR project. **Culture change works best as a shared effort, not HR's alone.** Transformation needs participation from employees, action from managers, and accountability from the top.

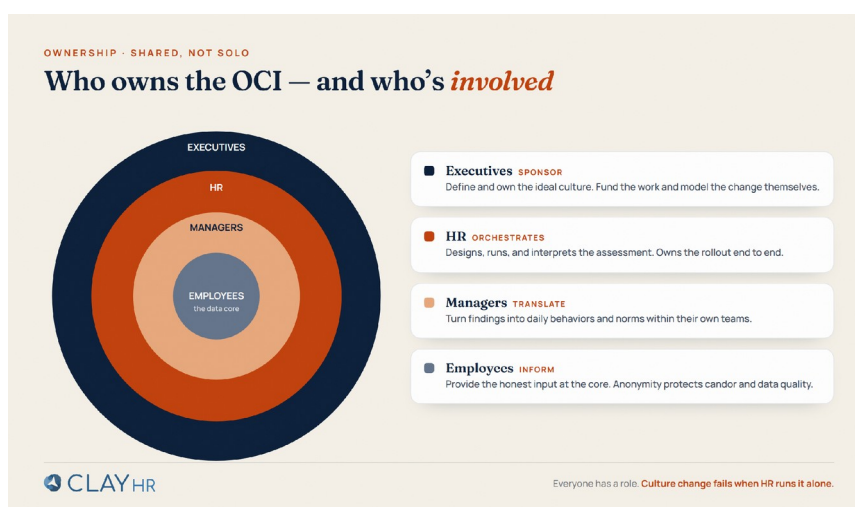


Figure 7 — Rings of involvement: employees at the data core, with managers, HR, and executives layered around them.

## Running your first OCI: a practical rollout

A first OCI is as much a communications exercise as a measurement one. People answer honestly only when they trust the process. A simple five-phase rollout keeps it manageable and credible.

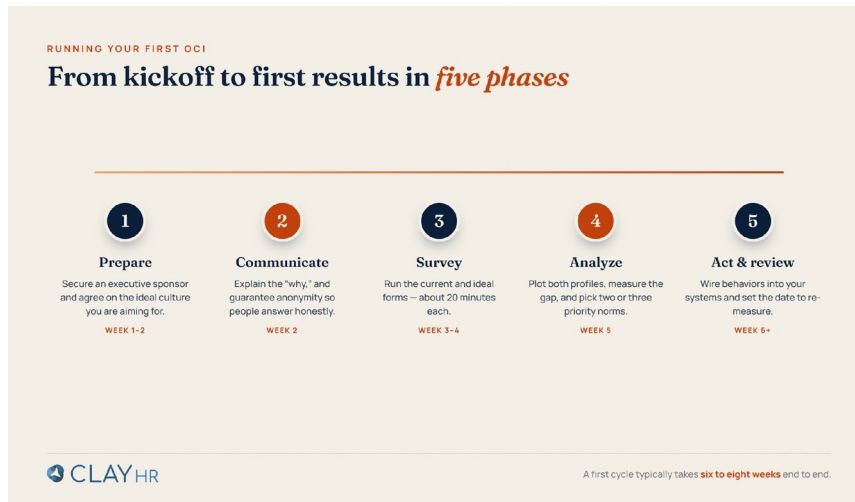


Figure 8 — A first OCI cycle runs in five phases and typically takes six to eight weeks.

### Practices that protect the result

- **Protect anonymity.** Report results in aggregate; never expose individual responses.
- **Brief managers first** so they can answer questions and prevent rumors.
- **Survey broadly.** Use a representative sample, or the whole organization for a true baseline.
- **Promise to act.** Tell people the results will be shared and acted on — then follow through.

## From survey to strategy: a six-step plan

A report changes nothing on its own. The shift happens when results connect to the systems where work happens — how people are hired, reviewed, promoted, and recognized. **If your stated value is collaboration but your review process only rewards individual heroics, the defensive norm tends to win out.**

### The six steps

1. **Share the results openly**, including the uncomfortable findings.
2. **Choose two or three priority norms**. Do not try to change everything at once.
3. **Translate norms into observable behaviors**. Define what “more constructive” looks like in everyday actions.
4. **Wire behaviors into your systems**. Update goals, reviews, recognition, hiring, and promotion.
5. **Assign owners and timelines**. Every priority needs a name and a review date.
6. **Review on a regular cadence** so progress stays visible in leadership meetings.



Figure 9 — The culture loop: measure, diagnose the gap, act, and re-measure as a continuous cycle.

## Why culture-change efforts fail — and how to avoid it

---

Most culture initiatives do not fail because the diagnosis is wrong. They fail in the gap between insight and action. Knowing the common failure modes is the best way to avoid them.

- **Leaving the data in a slide deck.** Fix: assign owners and dates before the readout meeting ends.
- **Trying to change everything at once.** Fix: commit to two or three priority norms and protect that focus.
- **Rewarding the opposite of what you preach.** Fix: align reviews, recognition, and promotion with the behaviors you want.
- **Leaving leaders out of the change.** Fix: start at the top; leaders model the new behavior first.
- **Treating it as a one-off event.** Fix: re-measure on a cycle and keep culture on the leadership agenda.

The organizations that succeed treat culture change as a **disciplined, ongoing program — not an event.**

# How HR technology accelerates culture change

Culture change is hard to sustain with spreadsheets and good intentions. The OCI gives you the diagnosis; technology lets you act on it at scale, every day, inside the systems your people already use. This is where a platform like **ClayHR** fits in.

It connects culture goals to the operational reality of work in four ways:

- **Align goals to behaviors.** Build constructive norms into Smart Goals and performance reviews, so the right actions get rewarded.
- **Surface culture signals early.** Read engagement, feedback, and recognition data so defensive patterns show up before they cost you talent.
- **Reinforce the culture you want.** Use recognition tools and continuous feedback to make constructive behavior visible and repeated.
- **Track progress over time.** Connect culture goals to real workforce metrics and live dashboards, not one-off survey results.

One clarification matters: **ClayHR does not replace the OCI.** The OCI is the diagnostic that identifies your strengths and gaps. ClayHR is the system that helps you operationalize, reinforce, and sustain the changes that close them. In short — the OCI shows you the target; ClayHR helps you hit it, and stay there.

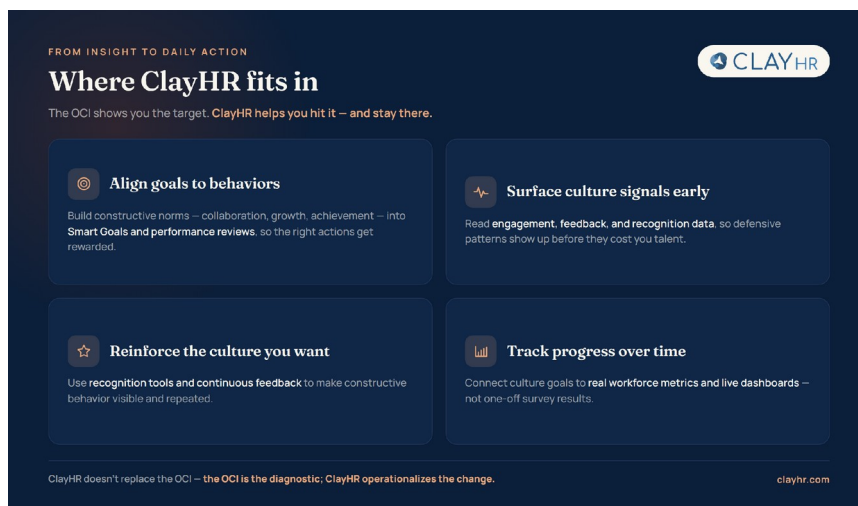


Figure 10 — Where ClayHR fits: from culture insight to daily action across goals, signals, recognition, and tracking.

## Measuring culture change over time

---

Culture change is an ongoing process, not a one-time project. The organizations that succeed treat it as continuous improvement — measured, reviewed, and reinforced on a steady rhythm.

### A simple cadence

- **Re-administer the OCI every 12 to 24 months** and compare each new profile against your baseline.
- **Watch leading indicators between cycles** — engagement, pulse surveys, turnover, and performance — for early signals.
- **Hold leaders accountable** for the norms on their teams, and recognize constructive behavior publicly.

### Getting started in 90 days

7. Secure an executive sponsor and agree on the ideal culture you are aiming for.
8. Run the OCI (current and ideal) and analyze the gap.
9. Pick two or three priority norms and define the behaviors that express them.
10. Wire those behaviors into goals, reviews, and recognition in your HR platform.
11. Set the review cadence and the date for your next measurement.

## How to put numbers on culture

Culture is a human topic, but it does not have to be a vague one. The OCI turns it into clear, comparable numbers you can track over time and share with leadership with confidence.

### How OCI scores work

Each of the 12 norms is scored and shown as a **percentile** against a large research database, from roughly the 10th to the 99th percentile. A high percentile means the behavior is strongly expected in your organization. For constructive norms, higher is healthier; for defensive norms, lower is healthier.

Percentile band	What it signals	Typical action
75th–99th	A defining strength	Protect it and build on it
50th–75th	Healthy, above average	Maintain and monitor
25th–50th	Developing	Targeted improvement
10th–25th	A watch area	Make it a priority

### Quantifying the gap

Put your current scores next to your ideal targets, and the gap becomes a number you can rank. The larger the gap on a norm that matters, the higher its priority.

Culture style	Current	Ideal	Gap	Priority
Constructive	45th	80th	+35	High
Passive / Defensive	70th	30th	–40	High
Aggressive / Defensive	65th	35th	–30	Medium

*Illustrative example. Actual OCI results are plotted norm by norm against Human Synergistics' research norms.*

### Three headline numbers to track each cycle

- **Constructive score** — aim to raise it over time.
- **Defensive score** — aim to lower it over time.
- **Gap-to-ideal** — aim to shrink the total distance to your target profile.

Pair these with engagement, turnover, and performance from your HR platform, and you have a complete, defensible picture of culture — in numbers.

# The healthy-culture checklist

Use this as a general guideline, not a scorecard. These fifteen habits describe what a well-measured, well-managed culture looks like in practice — in any organization. Read down the list and ask honestly: how many are true where you work today? Most teams find the first handful are already in place; the deeper habits are what separate a culture that is *talked about* from one that is genuinely *managed*.



Figure 11 — The healthy-culture checklist: 15 marks of a culture measured and managed well. The example shows 9 in place.

## The fifteen marks

#	Mark of a healthy culture	Status
1	Culture is defined by behaviors, not slogans	✓ In place
2	An ideal culture is explicitly agreed	✓ In place
3	Leaders model the norms they expect	✓ In place
4	Culture is measured with a validated tool	✓ In place
5	Feedback is safe and anonymous	✓ In place
6	Results are shared openly, not buried	✓ In place
7	A few priority behaviors are chosen	✓ In place
8	Goals & reviews reward the right behaviors	✓ In place
9	Recognition reinforces good behavior	✓ In place

#	Mark of a healthy culture	Status
10	Managers are equipped to shape team norms	Not yet
11	Culture metrics sit beside business KPIs	Not yet
12	Onboarding teaches the desired norms	Not yet
13	Progress is reviewed on a regular cadence	Not yet
14	Culture is re-measured every 12–24 months	Not yet
15	Accountability for culture reaches the top	Not yet

In the example above, **9 of 15 are in place**. There is no pass mark — the value is in the honest conversation each unchecked item starts.

#### IN CLOSING

## Culture is what you reward

---

Culture is not what you announce — it is what your systems reward. The OCI makes that visible and measurable; platforms like ClayHR make it changeable. The companies that win the talent race in 2026 will not be the ones with the best values statement. They will be the ones whose daily systems, gently and consistently, live it.

**ClayHR — an AI-powered HR platform helping organizations build cultures that perform. [clayhr.com](https://clayhr.com)**