

THE CULTURE ICEBERG

Culture begins *above the waterline*. It doesn't end there.

Most culture conversations begin above the waterline. Leaders point to a behavior, a result, a phrase people keep using, or a decision that does not make sense. Those signals matter. But they are evidence of culture—not the whole of it.

The Culture Iceberg asks a more useful question: **What beneath the surface is making this visible pattern make sense to the people inside the system?**

Culture is experienced at the waterline

Employees do not experience culture as a list of stated values. They experience it through meetings, handoffs, recognition, silence, access, consequences, and the decisions leaders make when the stated value becomes inconvenient.

That is the waterline: where the conditions beneath the surface become real in everyday work. A value may be printed on a wall. Its meaning is learned when people see what is rewarded, resourced, protected, questioned, and tolerated.

ABOVE THE WATERLINE

What we can observe

Behaviors, language, decisions, rituals, and results give leaders signals to investigate.

BELOW THE WATERLINE

What gives it meaning

Beliefs, priorities, identity, history, power, unwritten rules, and shared meaning shape those signals.

Why an iceberg floats—and how it melts

The iceberg is not only a picture of hidden depth. The way real ice behaves in water says something precise about how culture holds its shape, and how it actually changes.

01 It floats because of what is underneath

When water freezes, its molecules lock into an open structure, making ice slightly less dense than seawater. That difference lets it float—but only about a tenth rises above the surface. Roughly nine-tenths stays below, and that submerged mass is what holds the visible peak up.

IN CULTURE

The behavior you can see is held up by what you cannot. Beliefs, history, and unwritten rules are not background—they are the buoyancy that keeps the visible pattern in place.

02 Cut off the tip, and more rises to replace it

Remove ice from the top of a floating iceberg and it doesn't shrink in the water—the whole mass lifts until the same share sits above the surface again. The peak returns, fed from below.

IN CULTURE

This is the surface solution: another reminder, another training, another accountability conversation. The behavior may shift briefly. The system underneath keeps teaching the old lesson, and the pattern resurfaces.

03 It was built over time, layer on layer

Glacial ice forms from snow that falls, compacts, and hardens over years. Each layer is pressed into the ones beneath it.

IN CULTURE

Every experience people have with leaders adds a layer. What a team believes about candor or authority today was compressed from many moments—not decided in one meeting.

04 Most melting happens below the surface

Icebergs lose much of their mass underwater, where surrounding ocean water warms and erodes the submerged ice. At the waterline, waves carve steadily into the edge. The change is gradual and mostly out of sight.

IN CULTURE

Lasting change comes from shifting the conditions people are surrounded by—what is rewarded, resourced, protected, and tolerated—conversation by conversation, at the waterline where culture is experienced.

05 When the base changes enough, it turns over

As the underwater base erodes, the iceberg's balance shifts. Eventually it can roll over—sometimes suddenly—bringing the ice that was hidden into view.

IN CULTURE

Change that looks sudden rarely is. When enough shifts beneath the surface, visible behavior changes all at once—and what was once unspoken becomes part of how people openly work.

The visible behavior may be reasonable

A team that does not speak candidly may not lack courage. It may have learned, through experience, that candor carries a cost. A manager who holds every decision may not simply need delegation training. The organization may reward control, punish imperfect judgment, or send conflicting signals about authority.

If leaders treat the visible behavior as the entire problem, they often apply a surface solution: another reminder, another training, another accountability conversation. The behavior may shift briefly. The system underneath keeps teaching the old lesson.

You cannot coach away a pattern the organization keeps reinforcing.

Go beneath the surface without losing accountability

Looking beneath the surface is not an excuse for poor performance. It is how leaders make accountability accurate. People remain responsible for their choices. Leaders are also responsible for understanding the conditions, signals, and power dynamics that make some choices easier, safer, or more rational than others.

BRITER holds both. Name the behavior clearly. Then examine what the organization may be teaching, rewarding, or protecting beneath it.

QUESTIONS TO CARRY

Before you act on what you see

- 01 What pattern is visible above the waterline?
- 02 What belief or assumption would make that pattern reasonable?
- 03 What history are people using to interpret the current moment?
- 04 Who has power here—and what unwritten rule does that power create?
- 05 What must change below the surface for a different behavior to last?

ONE THING TO TRY

Take one recurring cultural frustration and write it at the top of a page. Under it, list the beliefs, priorities, identity signals, history, power dynamics, and meaning-making that may be shaping it. Do not solve yet. First, uncover what the visible behavior has been carrying.

Explore the Culture Iceberg

Select each layer to see what it means, how it shows up, and the question to ask.

[OPEN THE INTERACTIVE →](#)