

# The Hourglass Model

## *A framework for designing and deploying cultural change*

Most organisations approach cultural change as a communications challenge. They announce an ambition, cascade messages through leadership layers, and hope behaviour follows. It rarely does. Not because people resist change in principle, but because the conditions for change were never properly designed.

Before addressing how to change culture, it is worth being precise about what culture actually is. At InContext, we define culture as collective behaviour: the patterns of action, interaction and decision-making that characterise how an organisation actually operates, as distinct from how it describes itself. Culture is not values on a wall or a mindset to be trained. It is what people do, consistently, when nobody is watching and nothing exceptional is happening.

That definition has a direct consequence for how change must be approached. If culture is collective behaviour, then changing culture means changing the conditions that produce behaviour. You cannot instruct your way to it. You cannot communicate your way to it. What you can do is design an environment in which the behaviours you need become the natural, rational response for most people most of the time.

### **That environment is what we call context.**

By context, we mean the environment that leaders create around people. An environment that explains the direction of change, encourages the behaviours the organisation needs, reinforces those behaviours consistently over time, and makes clear which behaviours are no longer acceptable. A well-designed context does not tell employees what to think. It shapes the conditions in which new behaviour becomes the natural, rational response.

Creating that context is one of the most important things leaders can do in a cultural change effort, and it is a factor that is often underestimated. The InContext Hourglass Model is the framework through which that context is designed and deployed.

It treats cultural change as a structured process with two distinct phases, separated by a critical moment of commitment. Understanding this structure, and the discipline it requires, is what separates cultural change programmes that land from those that dissolve.

## THE MODEL AT A GLANCE

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The hourglass has two triangles and a pinch point between them. Each element plays a distinct and essential role.

## THE UPPER TRIANGLE: DESIGN

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Before any change is announced, three factors must be brought into balance:

- **Ambition:** how far the organisation intends to move
- **Ability to change:** the organisation's genuine capacity to make that move, including its leadership, energy and readiness
- **Price:** the disruption, discomfort and temporary loss of performance the change will cause

The sequence matters. Ambition comes first. It sets the direction and the scale of what is being attempted. The ability to change is then assessed honestly against that ambition. If the ability is high relative to the ambition, the price of change may be manageable and the conversation relatively straightforward.

But for any meaningful cultural shift, the price is never zero. Disruption is structural. Performance dips during transition. Familiar patterns of behaviour are challenged. This is not a problem to be minimised. It is a signal to be read.

Price is a diagnostic of seriousness. If leaders are unwilling to pay any price at all, they do not actually want change. They want the appearance of change. A zero-price ambition is not a modest ambition. It is evidence that the design phase has not been completed honestly. The organisations that sustain cultural change are not those that avoided the price. They are the ones that looked at it clearly, named it openly, and decided it was worth paying.

*In practice, cultural programmes fail most often not because the ambition is wrong, but because the price was never discussed. A loud start followed by quiet retreat is not a failure of execution. It is the predictable outcome of a design phase in which leadership commitment was never truly tested.*

If ambition and ability are significantly misaligned, one of two adjustments is needed: dial back the ambition, or build genuine acceptance for a high price of change. What cannot happen, if the programme is to survive, is proceeding as though the gap does not exist.

## THE POINT OF NO RETURN

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The pinch point of the hourglass is the moment senior leadership decides to move from design to action. The ambition is locked. Deployment begins.

This is not simply a communication event. It is a commitment. From this moment, the organisation cannot return to the design phase without a visible loss of credibility. That is what makes it a point of no return.

In large organisations, it is rarely a single moment. Wise leaders do not prescribe detailed ambitions for every division, department or team. Instead, they establish the overall direction and leave deliberate degrees of freedom for each part of the organisation to design its own version of that ambition. The result is a cascade of pinch points, each one a local moment of commitment, aligned with but not identical to the one above it.

*Full understanding, belief and commitment across the organisation does not happen at the pinch point. It happens, if it happens at all, through the quality of what follows it.*

What the pinch point does mark is the moment at which the responsibility for context shifts. In the design phase, context is built at the top: in the clarity of the ambition, the honesty of the price discussion, and the alignment of senior leadership. From the pinch point onwards, context must be built at every level of the organisation, simultaneously and consistently. That is the task of the lower triangle.

## THE LOWER TRIANGLE: DEPLOYMENT

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Once the commitment is made, three elements must operate simultaneously, and in alignment with each other and with the ambition:

- **Story:** Each leader must be able to tell a personal, authentic story that translates the ambition into meaning for their team. What is the change? Why does it matter? Why do I care about it? Why should you? What do we need to do now? This is not a scripted message. It is a genuinely held conviction, expressed in each leader's own voice.
- **Style:** Leadership behaviour must visibly reflect the ambition. The way leaders conduct meetings, make decisions, respond to failure, and treat people sends signals that are read constantly and remembered long after any communication. Style is not about personality. It is about the alignment between what leaders say and what they do.

- **Substance:** The decisions leaders take and the policies they put in place must reflect the ambition. Decisions about resources, priorities, consequences and people send unambiguous signals about what the organisation actually stands for. When substance contradicts the story, employees read the decisions and not the words.

The three do not work sequentially. They operate together, and their power is multiplicative rather than additive. When story, style and substance are aligned, and when that alignment is consistent across leaders, they create a context in which new behaviour becomes the natural response.

This is what a fitting context looks like in practice. Employees understand what is changing and why. They see that understanding reflected in how their leaders behave every day. And they find that the decisions taken and the policies around them reinforce rather than contradict the direction. When all three are present and consistent, the context does not feel like a change programme. It feels like the way things work here.

*Misalignment between any two of the three is corrosive. A compelling story delivered by leaders who do not walk the talk, or leaders who walk the talk but whose decisions point in a different direction, destroys credibility faster than the absence of change ever could.*

## WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

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The hourglass is a discipline, not a template. It does not guarantee cultural change; nothing does. What it provides is a structured way to ask the right questions at the right moment:

- Before the pinch point: have we been honest about the price? Do our leaders genuinely share the ambition, or are they performing alignment?
- At the pinch point: are we ready to commit, not just to announce?
- After the pinch point: are story, style and substance genuinely reinforcing each other at every level of the organisation?

Cultural change is not a campaign. It is a sustained, deliberate shift in collective behaviour, one that requires the same rigour in its design as any operational transformation. Context is one of the most powerful levers available to leaders in that effort. It is not the only one, but without it, the others rarely hold.

The hourglass model exists to make that task concrete. It gives leaders a structure for thinking about what they are building, and a discipline for the moment they commit to building it.

