

The Office for National Statistics (UK) Culture Journey

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Abstract

The presentation describes the Office for National Statistics (ONS) approach to improving the organisational culture to support its Better Statistics –Better Decisions Strategy. It provides the context for transformational change, the diagnostic approach used to audit culture and the interventions introduced to nudge our culture from ‘good to great’.

Keywords

HRMT; Culture Journey; Culture Audit

The Office for National Statistics (UK) Culture Journey

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Summary

This paper describes the Office for National Statistics (ONS) approach to improving the organisational culture to support its Better Statistics Better Decisions Strategy.

It provides the background context for transformational change, the diagnostic approach used to audit our culture and the interventions introduced to nudge the culture from 'good to great'.

The Background context

In 2008, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was established. ONS is the executive office of the UK Statistics Authority and is the recognised national statistical institute of the UK. It is the largest producer of official statistics in the UK.

ONS produces statistics on a range of key economic, social and demographic topics. Key services include measuring changes in the value of the UK economy (GDP), estimating the size, geographic distribution and characteristics of the population (including statistics from the Census), and providing indicators of price inflation (CPI), employment, earnings, crime and migration.

Our mission is to produce high quality statistics, analysis and advice that helps Britain make better decisions and improve lives.

In 2015, a five-year strategy, Better Statistics, Better Decisions, was published. This was in response to the data revolution and the need to develop our data capability. The strategy outlined a step change in the way ONS worked to address Information Technology legacy challenges and build a fit for purpose organisation which would be relevant for the future.

As part of delivering the strategy, the ONS was reorganised into three Groups each headed up by a Director General. Data Capability, Economic Statistics and Public Policy and Population.

For the Economic Statistics Group, there was a need to address weaknesses in economic statistics to better measure a modern economy and to improve ONS's culture, capability and collaboration.

For the Public Policy and Population Group, the primary objective was to deliver a fundamentally digital Census in 2021, and to transform the production of population and other key social statistics using administrative data, reducing the need for surveys.

The Data Capability Group was established to support and enable radical change in both the Economic Statistics and Public Policy and Population Groups.

The focus in the initial years of the strategy has been on digital, workforce and data transformation activities. An Economics Statistics Centre of Excellence, and a Data Science Campus has been established.

Since 2015 we have made significant progress in our transformation journey and ONS is rapidly catching up with others in the world of data, analysis and technology.

The culture change agenda

The workforce transformation initially focussed on skills and capability; workforce redesign; and pay and reward modernisation.

Key initiatives included: Establishing a Learning Academy; Change Leadership Programmes were developed and rolled out; organisational change programmes were supported by HR professionals; a new pay model was introduced to support a more professional skill base workforce; a real time reward and recognition scheme was developed and introduced; a new Performance Management approach was co-designed with business areas and employees, which places the emphasis on regular check in discussions, future focused short-term goals, development plans and the traditional mid-year and end-year reviews and performance ratings were removed; introduction of workforce planning; Wellbeing initiatives; Diversity and Inclusion initiatives; and strengths based recruitment.

The HR function went through its own transformation. It introduced new capabilities to the team such as, People Analytics, Organisational Design and Development, HR Business Partners, Culture and Wellbeing, and Workforce Planning. Existing capabilities in Employment Relations, Pay and Reward, Policy and Diversity and Inclusion, Recruitment were strengthened through professional development (CIPD). This was required in order to support the wider organisation transformation.

The first organisational change centred around the redesign of the Digital and Information Technology services. Not only did the function restructure itself, it transformed its skill capability and improved the organisation's digital and IT capability. This was the first major organisational change programme that ONS had known and it was clear that not enough emphasis had been placed on the cultural and people aspects of change.

As a consequence of introducing a three Group organisational model in order to bring about change and transformation, all three groups started to work in isolation, and it was clear that a 'one office approach' was required.

A small Culture team within the HR function was established in 2017 to address this issue and a culture audit diagnostic took place.

Culture audit diagnostic

We started by asking our employees what they thought the culture of ONS was now and what it needed to be in the future. Our methodology team did an analysis and presented the findings in a 'Wordle' format (Annex A).

We then ran a series of focus groups with both employees and senior leaders to discuss further.

The HR team also used the Johnson and Scholes cultural web model to map the 'As is' culture to the 'To be' culture. (Annex B)

The 'To be' culture was cross referenced with the Better Statistics Better Decisions Strategy and a culture narrative developed. *Together creating an environment that is curious, collaborative, trusting, flexible, making ONS a brilliant place to work.*

The team then socialised the cultural narrative with the Senior Leadership stakeholder team and then developed a cultural framework model to visually explain how nudging the ONS culture from 'Good to Great' would support improved organisational effectiveness. (Annex C). The diagnostic analysis identified that on the whole the ONS culture was 'good' but it could be nudged to 'great'.

The cultural framework has allowed the HR teams to consider the cultural levers when developing new interventions and to focus on the priority gap areas.

Priority interventions

Role Model leadership

The first area that we prioritised was leaders as role models. We launched our own corporate SCS Leadership Development programme entitled 'Leading to learn'. The events which ran over three consecutive years focused on the skills needed for transformational, adaptive leadership to support leaders as they built a culture of resilience and wellbeing that would lead to optimum performance.

The development was then delivered to our middle manager community, with our Senior Civil Servants acting as role models and mentors.

To continue the momentum created by these events, we delivered quarterly awaydays for our senior leaders. These built on the transformational change theme and included subjects such as 'Developing a Growth Mindset' and 'organisational development'. The events also included high-quality guest speakers to ensure an external perspective and a range of diagnostics to aid self-awareness.

In 2017, we added to our leadership development offerings by developing and launching four corporate leadership Development Pathways, which provided a foundation of leadership and management skills and; two new High Potential programmes for middle leaders focusing on leading through change and promoting diversity of thought.

Creating a safe environment – anti-bullying and harassment

Our 2018 annual People Survey highlighted that 16% of our workforce considered that they had been subject to or had been witness to bullying or harassing behaviour. Our People Analytics team undertook a deep dive on the data and identified that there was an issue around the effectiveness of our working relationships that was causing a perception that there was a bullying and harassing environment. Under the legal definitions of bullying and harassment, we have very few formal cases and our zero tolerance to bullying highlights that where formal cases are raised, they are dealt with appropriately. This insight has enabled us to roll out an 'Optimising working relationships' workshop across the organisation to raise awareness of what

bullying and harassment is and how to improve working relationships. We have introduced Respect Contacts throughout the organisation to provide support for our employees to discuss issues on an informal basis.

Wellbeing with a focus on Mental Health

Since the introduction of our transformation programme, we have seen a rise in absence rates in areas undergoing organisational change. The main reason for this absence is mental health. This correlates with UK workplace trends and the increased emphasis on wellbeing in the workplace.

We have focused efforts on introducing Mental Health First Aiders and providing easily accessible information and support for our employees. Information is provided in a central hub, we have an Employee Assistance Programme, a Wellbeing network and many promotions and activities such as 'Step challenges', Wellbeing networking walks, health checks and Mindfulness and Resilience training.

We have also developed a Wellbeing Confident Leaders programme where senior leaders are asked to consider their workplace and the environment they create under the themes of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and resilience. The ask is for them to commit to improvements under each area to increase wellbeing at work. This programme highlights the importance of positive relationships and their positive effect on happiness and wellbeing in both work and life.

Principles based policies

A review of our policies highlighted that many of them were rules based and we needed to shift behaviours to making the right decisions based on individual circumstances. The language was negative, the policies were overly bureaucratic and not written from the perspective of helping our employees.

We have developed the most important HR policies to become principles based and provided training and support for line managers when introducing the new policies.

New Performance Management approach

Our previous Performance Management approach was traditional, based on mid-year and end-year reviews and linked to bonus payments. It was labour intensive, adversarial (people arguing about end year ratings in order to achieve a bonus) and disliked by both line managers and employees.

In order to support a culture where the focus is on future goals, having regular discussions covering wellbeing, performance, development, a design group was established to create a new approach. The design group was made up of members from across the organisation, input was crowdsourced through surveys and focus groups and trials undertaken before being fully introduced in 2018. The link between performance and pay was broken, with the understanding that everyone is performing well. Star performance and dips in performance are noticed and highlighted. There are support tools, guidance, training for new managers and localised support to embed the process.

Real time Reward and Recognition scheme

As part of the new performance Management approach, a real-time reward and recognition scheme was designed and introduced in 2018. There are, peer to peer nomination awards, team awards to reward collaboration, individual recognition awards for great work, and exceptional awards to recognise significant contribution to organisational objectives. Budgets have been devolved to local business areas and the overarching principle is that anyone can nominate anyone. The guidance has been developed to nudge consistency in application.

A new Organisational Strategy

The Better Statistics Better Decisions Strategy is coming to an end. We are awaiting the arrival of a new National Statistician and the emerging strategy is being developed. Our Economic Statistics Transformation is nearly complete, and we are gearing up to deliver our Census 2021.

As HR Professionals we have used this time to 'Stand back to step forward'. We have looked at our gaps and recently developed a People Strategy to underpin the organisation's strategy and align all our HR activities.

We have identified that whilst some progress has been made in nudging our culture from good to Great, we still have gaps with people understanding the organisation's purpose, a common set of values and behaviours to bind us together as 'one office'.

As a result, we will recontract with the ONS Senior Leadership Executive team to scope out the next part of our culture journey.

Putting it altogether

We have many elements in place that are shaping our culture. Our focus now is on our narrative that will shape our organisational identity and story. We have focused on the mechanistic elements of change (which comes more naturally to a statistical organisation), however, we now need the balance of humanistic change, which will require a greater focus on symbols and stories. Our core purpose and values will be key to our success as will understanding our emerging strategy to ensure we continue to focus on the right things that will create the environment we need to deliver that strategy.

Annex A - Culture Wordle

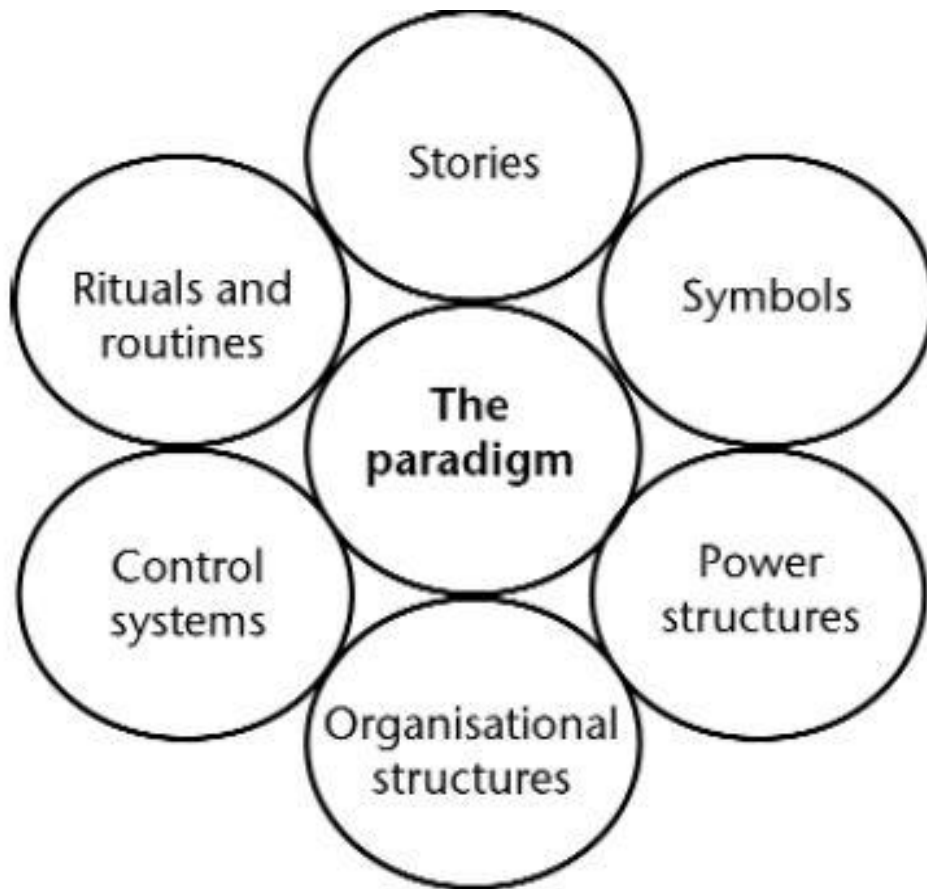
Q1 Three words to describe our culture today



Q2 Three words to describe the culture we need to transform successfully

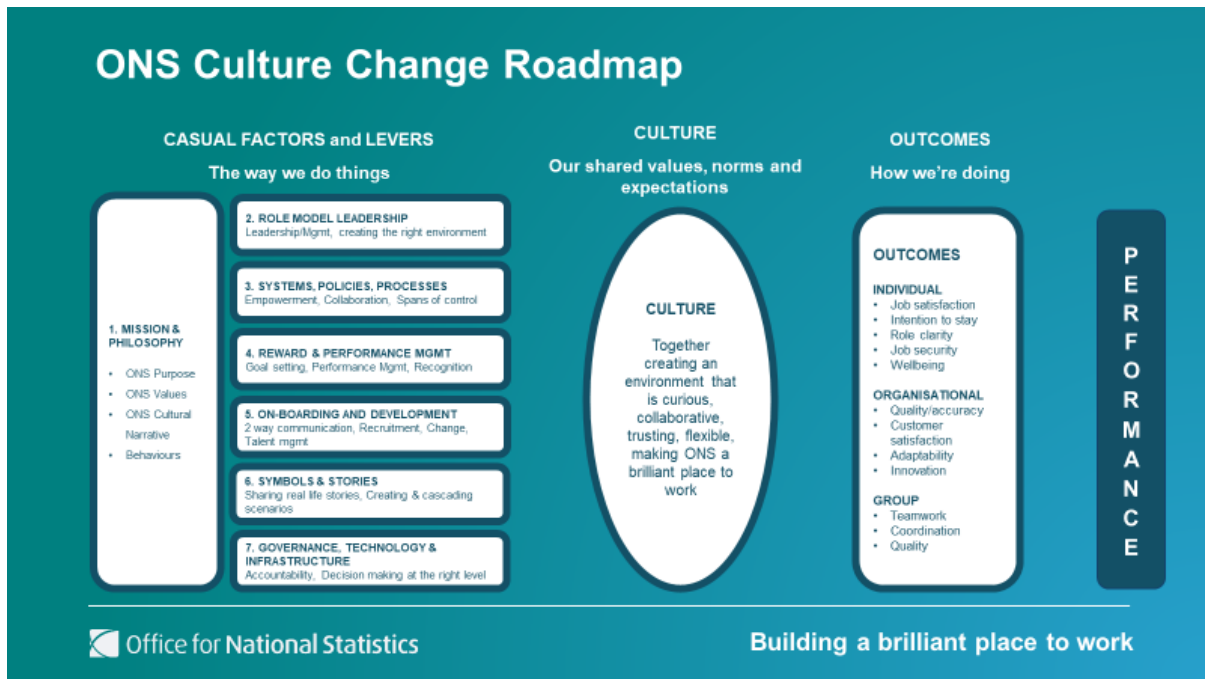


Annex B – Culture Web

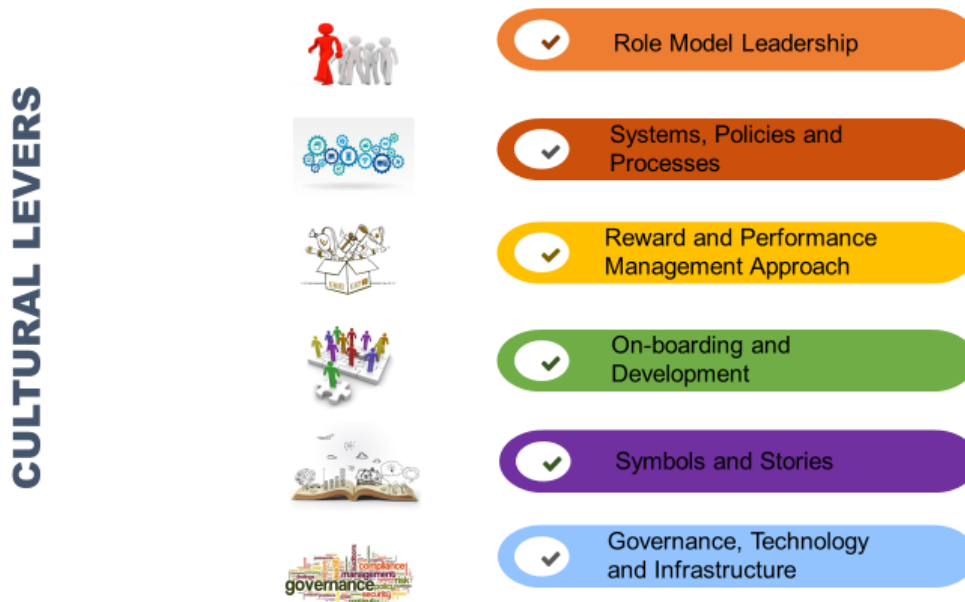


Johnson, G and Scholes, K (199) Exploring Corporate Strategy, 5th edition, Prentice Hall Europe

Annex C – Culture Framework



Annex D – Culture Levers



Annex E - Timeline of culture activity

