

TooREL Organizational Culture Tree™

Exploring Workplace Culture in Real Time

Just as a tree is sustained by its roots, workplace culture is shaped by **deep-rooted beliefs and assumptions that influence policies and systems, which then shape behaviors and norms and ultimately determine outcomes and impact.** By helping leaders explore the connections between these layers, the framework encourages thoughtful reflection, alignment between values and practice, and intentional action to cultivate healthier, more equitable, and thriving workplaces.

This activity is taken from the TooREL **Organizational Culture Tree™ Framework Toolkit**, used in TooREL trainings, leadership programs, and organizational assessments to support reflection, accountability, and sustainable culture change.

Understanding the Culture Tree

Organizational culture does not emerge by accident. It is grown from the roots up and shaped over time by beliefs, structures, and behaviors that influence how people experience their workplace. If we only focus on what is visible, without tending to what is beneath the surface, we risk recreating the same patterns in new ways. We may even call it a new policy or practice, or simply rename it, without creating meaningful change. *"Where have you seen this show up in your work?"*
"What changed in name, but not in experience?"

The Culture Tree illustrates four interconnected layers:

ROOTS: DEEP ROOTED BELIEFS & ASSUMPTIONS

The underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape how leadership, power, and decision-making operate within the organization.

TRUNK: POLICIES & SYSTEMS

The formal structures, policies, and operational systems that translate beliefs into organizational practices.

BRANCHES: BEHAVIORS & NORMS

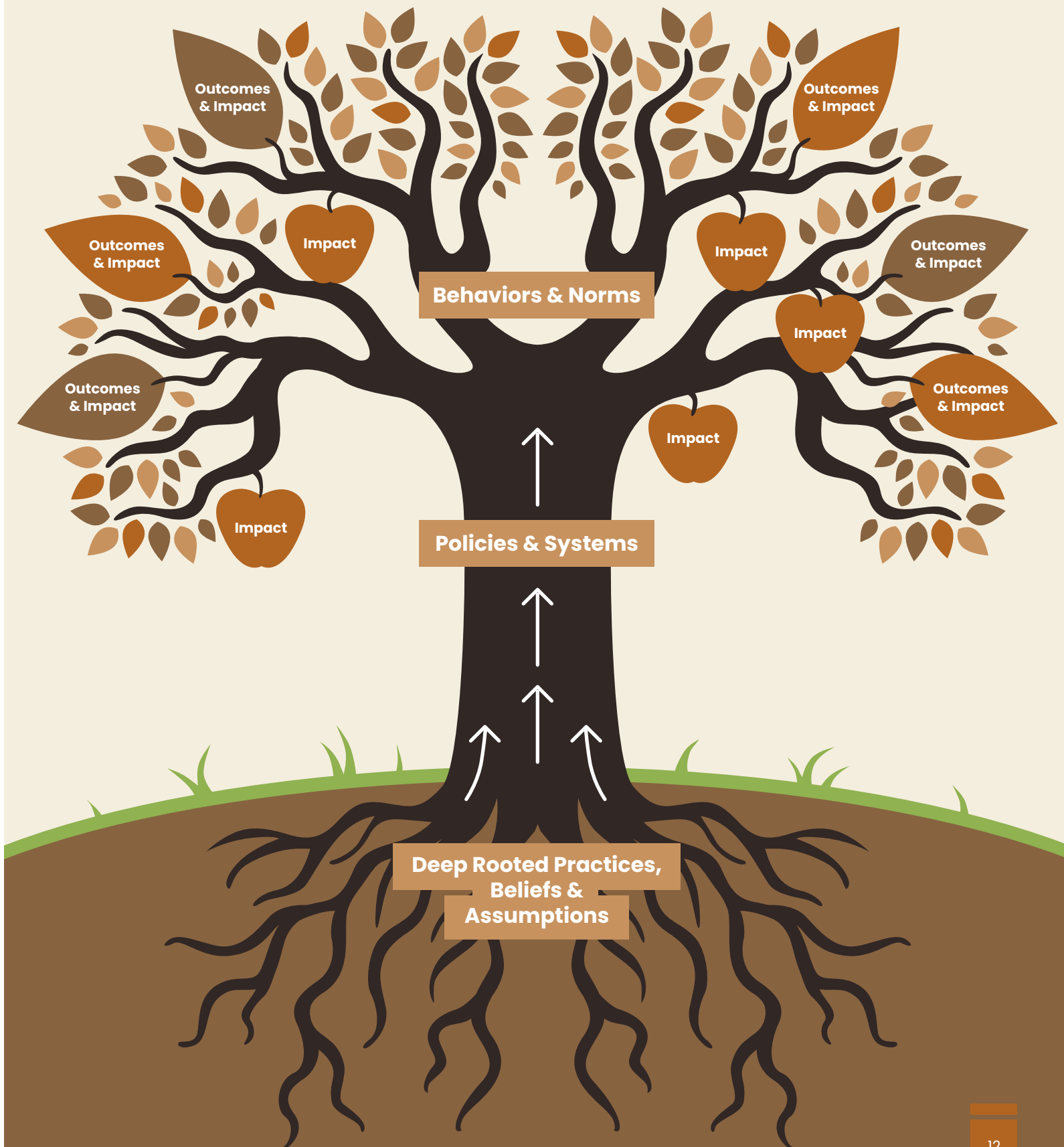
The everyday behaviors, expectations, and cultural norms that emerge from the organization's systems and leadership practices.

FRUITS & LEAVES: OUTCOMES & IMPACT

The results of organizational culture, including employee experience, engagement, collaboration, effectiveness, and overall impact.

Because each layer influences the next, organizations seeking different outcomes must be willing to examine not only behaviors, but also the deeper systems and beliefs that sustain them.

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Above and Below the Surface

What shapes workplace culture and how it is experienced

These are examples and not an exhaustive list. Your reflections will be informed by your observations and experiences in your workplace.

Above the Surface (What We See & Daily Experiences)

This is what people often name as “culture,” but it is only part of the full story.

LEAVES & FRUITS:

OUTCOMES & IMPACT

- Staff retention or turnover
- Morale and burnout
- Trust (or lack of trust)
- Sense of belonging or disconnection
- Team performance and outcomes
- Innovation, creativity, engagement

BRANCHES:

BEHAVIORS & NORMS

- How people communicate with one another
- How conflict is handled (avoided, addressed, escalated)
- Decision-making in practice (who is heard, who is not)
- Feedback culture (safe, inconsistent, fear-based, growth-oriented)
- Day-to-day interactions and team dynamics
- How care is expressed, practiced, or withheld in daily interactions

TRUNK:

POLICIES & SYSTEMS

This is often where organizations focus on when trying to “fix culture”

- HR policies and procedures
- Leadership structures and hierarchy
- Accountability processes
- Compensation and promotion practices
- Workload expectations and role clarity

Below the Surface (What Shapes Everything Above)

This is the part that is often unseen, unnamed, and avoided, yet is influences everything above.

ROOTS: DEEP ROOTED PRACTICES, BELIEFS & ASSUMPTIONS

- What leadership truly believes about people, power, and responsibility
- Unspoken norms (what is rewarded, tolerated, or ignored)
- Experiences of race, gender, identity, and positional power
- Trust (or lack of trust) in leadership and systems
- Historical harm, unresolved conflict, or organizational trauma
- Values in theory vs. values in action
- Who belongs, who is centered, who receives grace, and who is marginalized

Together, these roots reflect deeper dynamics related to power, norms, identity, trust, history, values, and belonging that shape how policies and practices take form within an organization.

What This Means in Practice

These roots shape how policies are written, how decisions are made, and how people experience the workplace every day. Even when they are not openly discussed, they influence who is heard, whose perspectives are trusted, how accountability shows up, and how conflict or harm is addressed.

When organizations only focus on visible practices—such as policies, procedures, or behaviors—without examining these deeper roots, harmful patterns can continue unnoticed.

Meaningful and sustainable change begins when leaders are willing to examine the beliefs, norms, and histories operating beneath the surface.

How It All Connects in Plain Language

ROOTS SHAPE THE TRUNK

What we believe informs the policies we create

TRUNK SHAPES THE BRANCHES

Policies influence behaviors and expectations

BRANCHES SHAPE THE FRUITS AND LEAVES

Behaviors produce outcomes and impact

To shift workplace culture in meaningful ways, we must look beyond what is visible and tend to what lies beneath the surface.

Reflection

- What stands out to you?
- What feels familiar?

