



January 2026 C-TEN Meeting

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Topic: **Culture Eats AI for Breakfast**

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## Executive Summary

Organizations often approach AI and digital transformation as technology challenges. In reality, the greatest barriers—and accelerators—are cultural. Research shows that cultures designed to enable collaboration, clarity, and individual agency are far more likely to realize value from AI and other large-scale change initiatives.

The strongest cultures share one defining characteristic: **they enable people to be successful.**

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### 1. Culture's Real Purpose

Culture is not defined by values statements, perks, or office design alone. Its core function is to create conditions where people across the organization can consistently succeed.

Organizations with strong cultures:

- Connect ways of working directly to employee success
- Reduce friction in decision-making
- Enable people to act without excessive approval or control

This focus on success—not slogans—is what differentiates high-performing cultures.

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### 2. Innovation Is Shaped by Environment

Innovation is influenced by **where and how people work**, not just who they are.

Research highlights that innovative organizations:

- Allow flexibility in work location and perspective
- Design spaces that enable people to work differently—even temporarily
- Encourage unplanned interactions across functions (“collisions”)

This is often misunderstood as advocating for fully open offices. In practice, high-performing organizations use **intentional collaboration spaces within a broader environment**, recognizing that different work requires different settings.

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### 3. The Collaboration Reality Gap

Most organizations believe they collaborate well. The data suggests otherwise.

While collaboration is strong **within teams**, it often breaks down:

- Across departments
- Across hierarchy levels
- When priorities compete

This pattern—referred to as “**awkward collaboration**”—results in:

- Silos and territorial behavior
- Slower progress on shared initiatives
- Missed opportunities for innovation

People are willing to help, but the unspoken priority is often the autonomy of their own group.

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#### **4. Why This Matters for AI and Digital Transformation**

AI initiatives depend on:

- Integrated data
- Cross-functional coordination
- Clear ownership and prioritization

When collaboration falters:

- Data remains fragmented across systems
- Teams agree in principle but fail to deliver
- AI and transformation efforts are delayed or diluted

These failures are rarely intentional—they stem from cultural and structural misalignment.

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#### **5. Reducing Friction by Reducing Cognitive Load**

Two practical interventions consistently improved collaboration:

##### **Clear decision roles (RACI)**

Defining who is Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed:

- Eliminates confusion and defensiveness
- Enables faster, more candid input
- Prevents unnecessary escalation

When people know their role, they engage more effectively and move on faster.

##### **Visibility into priorities and work**

Shared project management and transparency:

- Reduce assumptions and frustration

- Allow teams to adjust requests realistically
- Build trust across functions

When cognitive load is reduced, collaboration improves naturally.

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## 6. Why Change Slows Down

Large change initiatives often begin well and then stall. A common pattern:

- Decisions are made collaboratively
- Change creates discomfort downstream
- Issues escalate upward
- Senior leaders re-enter and reverse prior decisions

This reassertion of hierarchy—rather than complexity—is a major driver of delays and overruns. Clear decision ownership and follow-through are critical to sustaining momentum.

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## 7. Culture Change Happens Through Action

Culture does not change through announcements or rigid, multi-year plans.

Effective organizations:

- Identify a small number of **culture priorities**
- Run **practical “plays”** to shift behavior
- Learn quickly and adjust quarterly

Examples of culture plays include:

- Redesigning collaboration spaces
- Clarifying decision-making authority
- Creating forums to share AI experimentation
- Training leaders to address difficult conversations early

Progress comes from consistent action, not perfection.

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## Key Takeaways for CHROs

Organizations that succeed with AI and transformation:

- Design cultures that enable success across boundaries
- Reduce friction in collaboration and decision-making
- Increase individual agency while minimizing unnecessary control
- Treat culture as a system to be actively managed

**Culture is not adjacent to AI strategy—it is foundational to it.**