

Managing Employee Mental Health: The Role of Organizational Culture in The Hong Kong Context

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Abstract. The emphasis on workplace mental health is intensifying; nonetheless, a substantial disparity remains between policy execution and effective employee assistance. This study asserts that the "policy-culture chasm" emerges from the disregard for entrenched organizational norms, like the glorification of overwork and widespread shame, which hinder formal attempts. This research examines ways to overcome the gap through cultural calibration within the high-pressure culture of Hong Kong. Utilizing a qualitative, multi-case research approach, data were gathered through online surveys from 34 employees across four separate firms. The research identifies four cultural archetypes—"Robust," "Top-Down Transitional," "Fragmented," and "Conventional"—each exhibiting varying degrees of development. A significant discovery is the occurrence of "quiet avoidance," in which personnel in toxic environments consistently evade internal resources due to apprehension and distrust. The study concludes that effective treatments should be organized according to cultural preparedness. It presents a strategy framework for transformation: initially, tackle fundamental difficulties through Structural Change; subsequently, foster trust through Manager Enablement; and ultimately, enhance assistance via Resource Integration. This approach provides companies with a diagnostic instrument and a pragmatic guide for integrating authentic mental health support into their cultural foundation.

Keywords: Organizational Culture, Employee Mental Health, Hong Kong Workplaces.

1. Introduction

In recent years, workplace mental health issues have garnered significant attention from pertinent stakeholders. The post-pandemic era witnessed Great Resignation, Quiet Quitting, and Loud Quitting, making it important to assess employee satisfaction and well-being more seriously [1-3]. In 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) recorded a 25% increase in the global prevalence of anxiety and despair during the pandemic, exacerbating mental health issues in the workplace [4]. Research indicates that mental health difficulties have emerged as a significant factor in employee resignations [5]. Nevertheless, numerous businesses encounter difficulties in implementing good mental health programs. Research indicates that these results from organizational culture concerns, including cultural stigma, underutilization of services like Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and mismatch with workplace standards [6,7]. This underscores the necessity to examine the degree to which business culture influences workplace mental health and to enact suitable enhancements.

The current study indicates that business culture significantly influences employee well-being. Research indicates that excessive workloads, work-life imbalance, and the stigma associated with mental health discussions correlate positively with heightened stress, burnout, and employee turnover [8]. A 2023 study indicated that employees in firms with robust "always-on" cultures were 40% less inclined to utilize mental health resources due to concerns about seeming weak [6]. In contrast, cultures that emphasize psychological safety, transparency, and communal care exhibit more participation in well-being programs and less absenteeism [9]. However, whereas research has identified prevalent cultural barriers, few investigations examine how to alter these norms systematically to enhance mental health in a specific region.

Based on data from global research, sustainable mental health management necessitates cultural calibration—the intentional alignment of policies with profound cultural narratives and practices [10].



This study formulates a framework for Hong Kong enterprises to transition from superficial wellness programs to culturally embedded support systems, therefore enhancing employee well-being and facilitating more efficient corporate development.

2. Problem Statement

A disparity persists between policy implementation and the tangible support provided to employees. Since the pandemic, 81% of firms have intensified their emphasis on employee mental health. However, one-third of employees continue to perceive workplace mental health support as insufficient [11]. This disparity underscores a significant oversight: current mental health programs neglect the entrenched organizational cultural norms that hinder employees from attaining the well-being they merit.

Presently, investigations on corporate mental health have concentrated on individual-level interventions, such as mindfulness applications, while neglecting the organizational structure that diminishes the efficacy of these programs. Fear of discrimination from colleagues and superiors, social alienation, and feelings of inadequacy are significant factors that deter employees from getting assistance. These variables can adversely affect occupational well-being [3].

According to these critical problems, the two research questions are stated.

RQ1: How do implicit cultural norms undermine Hong Kong companies' organizational mental health policies?

RQ2: Which elements, such as performance assessments and meeting formats, have the most impact on organizational culture in Hong Kong?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative, multi-case methodology to compare organizational culture across several industries in Hong Kong, aiming to compare different types of organizational culture and give a personalized improvement plan for each of them.

3.2. Data Collection & Sampling Strategies

This study administers an online questionnaire to thirty employees, encompassing leadership, HR professionals, and individual contributors from four local companies.

3.2.1. Company A profile

This organization has a robust, cohesive culture. All respondents are cognizant of well-communicated policies, and all reject the notion that a substantial policy-practice gap exists. The stigma is minimal, with individuals not apprehensive about job repercussions when addressing mental health issues. Out of the 7 employees requiring assistance, 6 (86%) utilized internal services, specifically the business EAP or their manager.

3.2.2. Company B profile

This company exemplifies a Top-Down Transitional culture. A pronounced disconnection exists between leadership and employees. Senior Leadership and HR (two responses) assert that the policies are well conveyed and efficacious. Conversely, all individual contributors (6 respondents) who are cognizant of the policies assert that they are inadequately conveyed, and 83% (5 out of 6) see a significant disparity between policy and practice. Among the 6 employees requiring assistance, none utilized corporate resources. 4 of them sought external support, while 2 refrained from seeking help due to fear or mistrust.

3.2.3. Company C profile

This firm demonstrates an inconsistent and fragmented culture. The evidence is disorganized and devoid of a definitive consensus, which constitutes a finding in itself. For instance, one manager and one individual contributor from the same team, identified by snowball sampling, indicate a favorable environment like that of Company A. Conversely, the remaining six answers indicate a culture akin to Company D, characterized by a lack of policy understanding, significant stigma, and an aversion to utilizing internal resources.

3.2.4. Company D profile

This firm embodies a Conventional Culture with deeply rooted problems. All responders lack awareness of any official policies. The stigma is exceedingly severe, with all those requiring assistance fearing repercussions on their careers. Consequently, of the six employees requiring assistance, 100% either pursued external assistance (four) or requested no assistance at all whatsoever (two). The predominant priority for change, chosen by a significant majority, is "Structural Change," signifying that the fundamental issues are burnout, workload, and a detrimental atmosphere.

Table 1. Profile of the four Hong Kong companies

Company	Overview	Valid responses
Company A	3.2.5. A progressive tech and design firm	9
Company B	A major real estate developer where leadership is pushing for change	9
Company C	A mid-sized logistics company with varying cultures across different departments	8
Company D	A traditional, high-pressure financial trading firm	8

The research will not pre-classify the organizations. Instead, a post-hoc examination of the gathered questionnaire data will establish the categorization of each company's culture, to ensure that the sample includes organizations with diverse organizational settings to guarantee the final framework's broad applicability.

The research is focused on employees' experiences about discrepancies between mental health legislation and the current workplace culture, the stigma associated with mental health, and behaviors connected with seeking support.

The questionnaire is designed to collect extensive data using several question formats, including single-choice, multiple-choice, and rating questions. This inquiry will address three primary domains: the participants' demographic information, their impressions of the company's workplace culture, and the elements impacting their organization's culture.

3.3. Data Analysis

Forty-two surveys were disseminated, and thirty-eight were retrieved. Four of these questions were considered invalid. As a result, 34 valid surveys are available for study. According to the valid respondent, which can be found in Table 1, the four companies are profiled and analyzed.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Pseudonyms will be utilized throughout the research to maintain the identities of individuals and organizations. Informed permission will be acquired, explicitly detailing the study aims and the utilization of the data. Participants have the ability to withdraw at any moment, particularly if they encounter any distress throughout the questionnaire or interview procedure.

4. Result & Discussion

This section delineates the conclusions obtained from the examination of 34 valid questionnaire responses from workers across four separate organizations in Hong Kong. The investigation sought to uncover cultural characteristics, comprehend the disparity between mental health policy and employee experiences, and ascertain priority areas for remediation.

4.1. Overview of Company Profiles

The data analysis allowed for the classification of the four participating companies into distinct cultural profiles based on their approach to and the employee experience of mental health support. These profiles range from a mature, supportive environment to a conventional, high-pressure culture where mental health support is largely absent.

4.1.1. Company A: Robust & cohesive culture (9 valid responses)

This technology and design firm exemplifies a mature and healthy organizational culture. A striking 100% of respondents reported being aware of well-communicated mental health policies.

This indicates that none of the respondents perceived a substantial disparity between the company's articulated policies and the prevailing workplace culture. Out of the seven employees requiring assistance, six (86%) utilized internal resources, such as the company's employee assistance program (EAP) or direct communication with their manager. This indicates that employees experience minimal stigma and possess few apprehensions regarding the impact of resolving mental health issues on their employment. The literature research indicates that the corporation possesses a robust organizational environment.

4.1.2. Company B: Top-down transitional culture (9 valid responses)

This real estate developer is characterized by a significant disconnect between leadership's intentions and the reality for employees. While senior leadership and HR (2 responses) believe policies are effective, all individual contributors (7 responses) reported a starkly different experience.

Of the individual contributors knowledgeable about the policy, 83% (5 out of 6) perceived a substantial discrepancy between policy and practice. Among the six employees requiring assistance, none utilized company resources. Among these individuals, four pursued external assistance, while two refrained from seeking any support, attributing their reluctance to fear and distrust as primary factors in the questionnaire. This indicates that employees at the organization harbor significant skepticism towards the company's mental health policies.

4.1.3. Company C: Fragmented & inconsistent culture (8 valid responses)

This mid-sized logistics firm lacked a cohesive organizational culture. The findings indicated a significant disparity in employees' perceptions of the company's culture. The responses from a manager and an individual contributor in the submitted questionnaires suggested a favorable workplace climate within the organization. Nonetheless, the six remaining responses revealed that the organization lacked a definitive mental health strategy, leaving employees wholly dependent on external assistance or devoid of any support when seeking aid. The literature study indicates that the six respondents perceived the company's organizational culture as a high-stigma environment. This split reaction indicates that employees at the organization experience uneven and inequitable access to support.

4.1.4. Company D: Conventional & problematic culture (8 valid responses)

The traditional financial trading firm possesses entrenched issues inside its organizational culture. All six participants indicated they were oblivious to any established mental health policy inside the organization. All six employees (100%) indicated they would circumvent internal channels if they required assistance. Four individuals indicated they would pursue external assistance, whilst the other

two stated they would refrain from seeking help. All articulated apprehensions that pursuing assistance might adversely affect their professional trajectory.

4.2. Addressing the Research Questions

The cross-case analysis provides clear answers to the study's primary research questions, revealing systemic patterns in how organizational culture mediates the effectiveness of mental health support in the Hong Kong context.

4.2.1. RQ1: How do implicit cultural norms, such as the valorisation of overwork, undermine Hong Kong's statutory mental health policies?

The findings from Companies B, C, and D provide a compelling answer. In these organizations, a "policy-culture chasm" exists where formal support systems are rendered ineffective by deeply ingrained cultural norms. The data reveals several key mechanisms through which this occurs:

Pervasive Stigma and Fear: All employees in Company D who needed assistance were afraid of the consequences to their careers. Employees are effectively repelled by this terror, which keeps them silent and away from formal channels. This tendency is confirmed by a literature analysis, which shows that employees usually avoid HR-led initiatives out of fear that participation may jeopardize their chances of advancement in their jobs.

Lack of Trust and Policy Awareness: A significant loss of trust is visible at Company B as a result of the obvious disparity between the leadership's vision and the reality experienced by the workforce. Despite leadership participation, all employees in need of aid avoided internal resources. Poor communication exacerbates this suspicion; in Companies C and D, the majority of respondents were ignorant of the existence of policies. This means that without a culture of open communication and trust, even well-intended policies fall short.

"Quiet Avoidance" of Internal Resources: Employees in unhealthy environments clearly prefer outside assistance or none at all to company-provided resources, according to the findings. Of the 18 employees in Companies B, C, and D who need assistance, none of them accessed internal company resources. This is in line with a larger pattern in which traditional Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are frequently underutilized because of concerns about their confidentiality and independence. The actual extent of employee misery and the inefficiency of internal processes are concealed by this avoidance.

4.2.2. RQ2: Which intervention elements, such as performance assessments and meeting formats, have the most impact on recalibrating corporate culture in Hong Kong?

This study shows that the most effective treatments depend on the cultural maturity of an organization and are not universal. A distinct range of demands is revealed by the "Rank 1: Framework" preferences:

For Problematic Cultures (Company D): Structural Change was the priority. This suggests that superficial health programs (like mindfulness applications) are unsuitable and ineffectual in stressful, toxic workplaces. The first step is to address the root causes of stress, which include excessive workload, burnout, and a lack of psychological safety. This supports more general results that burnout, long hours, and high stress levels are common in Hong Kong workplaces and call for structural remedies.

For Transitional and Fragmented Cultures (Companies B & C): A combination of Manager Enablement and Structural Change were the focuses. This draws attention to two needs. The first step is to address the systemic causes of burnout. Second, middle managers need to be prepared to serve as a liaison between the everyday experiences of employees and the vision of senior leadership. They are essential for establishing the evidently lacking psychological safety and trust. Research backs this up, indicating that one of the most important steps in fostering a supportive atmosphere is management training.

For Mature Cultures (Company A): Through resource integration, structural change, and manager enablement, the emphasis switches to optimization. Once a foundation of safety and trust has been built, system improvement takes precedence. This entails empowering managers on a constant basis, proactively modifying workloads and procedures to avoid stress, and incorporating resources into everyday operations with ease.

In conclusion, the findings show that a company's cultural character is a significant factor in determining how well its mental health assistance works. Stigma and a lack of trust are the main causes of the large gap that still exists between policy and lived experience in many Hong Kong organizations. A customized strategy is needed to effectively close this gap, beginning with fundamental structural adjustments in troublesome cultures and progressing to manager empowerment and system optimization in more established settings.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key Contributions

This study contributes greatly to the domains of management and organizational psychology in the Hong Kong context in a variety of ways:

The research advances beyond a mere enumeration of obstacles by introducing four unique cultural archetypes: "Robust," "Top-Down Transitional," "Fragmented," and "Conventional." This typology functions as an effective diagnostic instrument for organizations to evaluate their cultural maturity regarding mental health.

This research concentrates on Hong Kong, offering customized, practical insights that include the region's distinct high-pressure work environment, which worldwide wellness models sometimes overlook. It affirms the necessity for culturally-adapted solutions.

A key contribution is the observation that interventions should be implemented gradually. According to the research, businesses cannot effectively implement superficial health programs unless they first establish psychological safety and address structural causes of burnout. The sequencing model:

(1) Structural Change, (2) Manager Enablement, (3) Resource Integration

It provides a strategic framework for enduring cultural development.

5.2. Limitations

This study sheds light on corporate culture and mental health in Hong Kong, although it has significant limitations. The small sample size makes the results exploratory rather than statistically generalizable. Furthermore, relying on self-reported online questionnaires introduces potential biases and lacks the contextual richness of interviews. The study's limited coverage on specific industries in Hong Kong limits its applicability to other sectors or cultures. Finally, its cross-sectional design provides just a temporal view, failing to capture the long-term evolution of corporate culture.

5.3. Future Goals

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, future research should aim to broaden and improve our understanding of this important topic. The following aims are suggested:

The theoretical framework must next be tested in real-world settings, namely among organizations classified as "Transitional" and "Fragmented". A series of longitudinal and intervention studies will be conducted to assess the framework's feasibility.

Subsequent research should combine qualitative methods, such as extensive interviews and focus groups, with quantitative surveys. This would allow researchers to collect extra information, increasing the accuracy of the results.

To improve generalizability, future research should include a larger and more diverse sample of Hong Kong businesses from a wide range of industries. Furthermore, a comparative investigation of other high-pressure East Asian economies, such as Singapore, Seoul, and Tokyo, should be included in the study to produce more relevant results.

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