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Your employer brand is making promises, but can your workplace culture keep them?

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Businesses are under growing pressure to talk about culture, inclusion and employee experience. Before deciding what to say, leaders may need to answer a more uncomfortable question: can we prove it?

The journey of the employer brand used to be relatively simple. Choose the values, write the careers page, commission some photography and tell the story. Today's climate of radical transparency means candidates can access employee stories, workplace reviews and social media commentary long before they reach an interview. Workplace experiences are increasingly shared publicly and carefully crafted claims about culture can be tested against reality almost instantly.

It's not that employers deliberately misrepresent their culture. Organisations are arguably thinking more seriously about employee experience than ever before. The difficulty is that culture is complex, often ambiguous and much harder to change than it is to communicate.

A new direction of travel

It is easier to introduce baseline policies and one-off initiatives or focus on what your website says about your brand, than interrogate what your people experience. But these interventions are layered onto an existing culture rather than necessarily changing the conditions that created it. Policies can be rewritten overnight. The

behaviours people see rewarded, the decisions leaders make and whether employees feel safe enough to challenge them are much more stubborn.

This becomes particularly important when we consider women's equality and progression. An organisation can support flexible working, commit to gender-balanced leadership and have an action plan to close its gender pay gap. But the culture surrounding those commitments will ultimately determine whether they work. Who gets listened to? Whose leadership style is rewarded? Who is considered 'ready' for progression? What happens to career progression after maternity leave or a move to part-time working? These everyday leadership decisions are where equality commitments become meaningful or merely well intentioned.

Larger employers are already preparing for greater expectations around workplace transparency, including anticipated mandatory Equality Action Plans linked to gender pay gap reporting from 2027. The direction of travel is clear - publishing the problem is no longer enough, employers are increasingly expected to demonstrate what they are doing about it.

The Culture Credibility Calculator

It was against this backdrop that Lion & Mouse, with the support of the Women's Leadership Group, developed the Culture Credibility Calculator. Piloted across seven sectors, it helps organisations understand whether they have the internal conditions to confidently communicate their culture externally. For WLG, which exists to create greater access to leadership for women, the connection was important - meaningful progress in representation cannot be separated from the culture in which people are expected to progress.
As participation has grown, an interesting gap has emerged. Of the first 31 organisations assessed, only four reached the highest 'Ready to Lead' category. Fifteen were 'Building Momentum' and 12 remained at 'Early Stage'. Across individual measures, 'partly' is frequently the most common response. It suggests organisations are rarely doing nothing; more often, the foundations exist but are not experienced consistently enough to become credible evidence.

For leaders, that should shift the focus from the next shiny initiative to what actually happens at work, every day.

Look at the behaviours that receive recognition and those that carry an unspoken penalty. Ask whether employees can challenge a senior colleague without fearing the consequences. Follow employee feedback beyond the survey and examine whether people can see where it influenced a decision. Test organisational values against difficult moments, not simply the induction process. And consider who gets

access to opportunity, influence and progression, and whether that experience is consistent across the workforce.

These may be less marketable questions than launching a new wellbeing initiative. But they are also far more revealing.

Credibility doesn't mean perfection

None of this means organisations should wait until they have achieved some mythical perfect culture before communicating publicly. Every workplace has tensions, inconsistencies and areas it needs to improve.

Credibility requires enough self-awareness to understand the difference between the culture an organisation aspires to create and the one its employees experience today – and enough willingness from its leaders to act when the two do not match.

Because an employer brand will always make promises. Whether employees believe them is determined by the parts of workplace culture that never make it into the communications plan.