

BEYOND THE RULEBOOK

Designing Policies that Build Trust,
Engagement, and Culture

SEAN BADIRU

Foreword by **Ahmed Ladan Gobir**, FCIPM, fnli

THE BOOK

In organizations across the world — and especially here in Nigeria — there is a silent but costly gap between what policies say and what culture feels like. On paper, the rules look perfect: well-worded, legally sound, and airtight. But in practice? They often land with a thud — disconnected, ignored, and mistrusted.

Beyond the Rulebook confronts this gap head-on. It challenges HR leaders, executives, and decision-makers to stop seeing policies as mere compliance documents and start treating them as cultural instruments — strategic tools that shape behaviour, inspire trust, and anchor engagement.

This book is not a “*copy and paste*” policy manual. It is not a set of laws to be followed word-for-word. The examples, rewrites, and recommendations you will find here are conversation starters, not final verdicts. The message is what matters: *policies work best when they are alive — adapted to your context, your workforce, your culture, and your business reality*. Take the spirit of the ideas here, apply them with wisdom, and write in the way that works for your people.

Through relatable stories, Nigerian-specific realities, and practical examples, this book unpacks the most common mistakes organizations make in policy-making — from one-size-fits-all rules to punitive tones, from reactive “*band-aid*” fixes to selective enforcement. It then offers a clear, empathetic framework for designing policies that work in the real world — policies that speak to people, not just paper.

Whether you lead a team of ten or an organization of ten thousand, this book will help you:

- Align policies with your stated values and lived culture.
- Replace mistrust and control with partnership and accountability.
- Communicate rules with empathy, context, and clarity.
- Build engagement into the very structure of your workplace.

This is not a book about HR paperwork. It is a call to action — to become culture architects who use policy as one of the most powerful levers for creating workplaces where people choose to stay, grow, and thrive.



THE AUTHOR

Sean Olabode Badiru is a strategic transformation consultant and thought leader in Strategic Re-engineering, Business Process Optimization, and Digital Transformation. With deep expertise in organizational strategy, operational design, and technology integration, he helps businesses and institutions reimagine their future, streamline operations, and thrive in complex environments.

As CEO of **Africa Tech Hub**, Sean leads a consulting and training firm that empowers organizations to achieve operational excellence and competitive relevance. His approach blends practical insight with strategic innovation, helping clients align vision, value, and execution.

He is also the founder of **SkillUp**, a talent development initiative committed to building a digitally fluent, future-ready workforce across Africa. Through SkillUp, Sean mentors young professionals, runs immersive learning experiences, and develops tools that bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Sean

Sean holds a Master's degree in Business Administration and a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering, complemented by executive education in Strategic Leadership and Management (University of Illinois), Intellectual Property Law (University of Pennsylvania), and American Contract Law (Yale University). His interdisciplinary competence is further strengthened by specialized certifications in Agile Project Management, Business Analysis, Human Resource Management, Digital Marketing, Cloud Administration, and Product Design—enabling him to operate at the intersection of strategy, technology, and people.

With over 20 years of cross-sector experience, he has trained and consulted for HR leaders, public servants, entrepreneurs, and faith-based institutions—delivering context-specific solutions that drive both efficiency and human impact.

Sean currently serves on the Governing Council of the **Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria** (CIPM). He joined the Council in 2023 as the elected Chairman of the Ogun State Branch and, in 2025, was re-elected directly into the Council—continuing his contribution to advancing people management and leadership across Nigeria.

A prolific communicator, Sean has authored books, workbooks, and newsletters on leadership, organizational change, digital transformation, human resource development, business innovation, and operational excellence. His teachings—shared through YouTube and LinkedIn—continue to inspire a growing community of professionals seeking clarity in today's noisy world.

Beyond the boardroom, Sean is a passionate educator, pastor, and mentor. He serves in various leadership capacities within **the Redeemed Christian Church of God**.

Bodebadiru

“

*Culture eats strategy
for breakfast.*

”

Peter Drucker

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FOREWORD

In every organization, policies are more than lines of text on paper — they are the visible expression of what leadership truly values. They either inspire trust and commitment, or they create distance and disengagement. And in today's world of work, where agility, inclusiveness, and human connection matter more than ever, the way we design and communicate policies has become a strategic advantage.

Beyond the Rulebook is timely, relevant, and practical. It challenges the long-standing habit of treating policy-making as an administrative exercise and calls for a deeper, more intentional approach — one that aligns policy with culture, and rules with values.

Sean has brought together experience, clarity, and a keen understanding of our Nigerian context to produce a guide that every HR professional and leader will find both thought-provoking and actionable. His message is clear: policy should not be a tool of control, but a framework for partnership, accountability, and trust.

As someone who has worked closely with Sean in his capacity as an Elected Council Member, the immediate past Chairman of the Ogun State Branch, and as Chair of our Young Professionals Committee, I have witnessed first-hand his passion for people development, his unwavering commitment to excellence, and his remarkable ability to translate ideas into tangible impact. This book embodies those same qualities — practical wisdom, cultural sensitivity, and a deep respect for the human side of work.

I encourage every HR practitioner, manager, and business leader to read this book and apply its insights. If we take its message seriously, we will not only improve our policies; we will strengthen our cultures, retain our best people, and create workplaces where both individuals and organizations can thrive.

Ahmed Ladan Gobir, FCIPM, fnli

President & Chairman of the Governing Council
Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria

CONTENTS

Foreword	i
The Great Disconnect	1
The One-Size-Fits-All Illusion	5
The Punitive Trap	10
The Band-Aid Approach	14
Selective Enforcement	18
Ignoring Unintended Consequences	21
Missing the Why	25
The Paradigm Shift	30
The Four-Step Framework	34
Your Role as a Culture Architect	38
One Policy at a Time	42

A black and white photograph showing two hands holding two interlocking puzzle pieces. The piece on the left is plain white and has the word "Policy" printed on it. The piece on the right has a textured, marbled appearance and has the word "Culture" printed on it. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a computer monitor and keyboard.

Policy

Culture

 **THE**
GENESIS

1

THE GREAT DISCONNECT

Let's begin with a simple, honest question — and I want you to reflect on it in the context of your own organization: Have you ever come across a policy document that no one actually reads? Or worse... policies that sound like they were written in another decade? You know the type — impressive on paper, dressed in layers of legal grammar, but utterly disconnected from how work actually happens today. We've all seen them. Some of us inherited them. Some of us may have even written them — and at the time, they probably felt right.

For years, there's been this unspoken belief that once a policy is legally sound and well-worded, it's effective. Once it ticks the boxes, we assume it works. But you and I know that's not the full story, because a policy that looks right on paper can still fail in practice. It can be technically perfect — and still completely

disconnected from people. That's why we need a new lens. We need to stop seeing policies as mere tools for compliance and stop treating them like administrative obligations.

Instead, we must see them as cultural instruments — as levers, as strategic tools, as visible expressions of the kind of culture we are trying to build. When we treat policies as mere checklists, we miss the opportunity to shape behaviour. But when we treat them as vehicles for reinforcing culture, they do more. They drive engagement, they build trust, and they anchor retention. That's the shift we need to make — from writing rules to reinforcing values, from enforcing compliance to engineering culture.

Policy vs. Culture

Before we go further, let's be clear about what we mean. **Policy** is the written expectation — the *what*. It's the formal statement of how we expect things to be done. **Culture**, on the other hand, is the lived reality — the *how*. It's the unspoken norms, the daily behaviours, the shared language. It's what people do when no one is watching. Culture is not the handbook — it's the hallway.

Policies are not separate from culture; they are its formal, visible, structural expression. If you want to know what an organization truly values, don't just read its mission statement. Look at its policies. Look at what it promotes, what it tolerates, and what it ignores. Because a policy, on its own, is just words. But once people begin to live it, ignore it, or resent it — that's when it becomes cultural. That's where the real impact lies, and that's where policies either support culture... or silently sabotage it.

The Cost of the Disconnect

When there's a gap between policy and culture, you feel it — even if you can't measure it immediately. You may not see it in a quarterly report, but you'll notice it in disengagement, in rising attrition, in passive resistance, and in the slow erosion of trust. Take a simple example: a tech startup claims it values innovation — yet enforces a rigid 9-to-5 schedule, a formal dress code, and a seven-step approval process for new ideas. What does that say? It's not just poor policy — it's a cultural contradiction. It's dissonance between what we say and how we operate.

And here in Nigeria, these disconnects are amplified — by our diversity, our generational mix, our economic realities, even our tribal and religious sensitivities. When policies are written in isolation — without context, without empathy, without human insight — they don't just miss the mark. They alienate. They widen the gap between leadership and staff. They deepen disengagement. This is *The Great Disconnect*. It's not simply a flaw in writing; it's a failure of alignment. It's when policy says one thing... but culture feels something else entirely. And if we don't fix it, policies will continue to be ignored, culture will continue to be misunderstood, and our most valuable asset — our people — will continue to drift.

WHY POLICIES FAIL



2

THE ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL ILLUSION

One of the most common — and most dangerous — assumptions in policy design is what I call the *One-Size-Fits-All illusion*: the belief that one policy can work for everyone, in every department, in every location, at every level of staff. It sounds efficient. It feels clean on paper. But in reality, it fails. It fails us, it fails our people, and it fails the very culture we are trying to build. Why? Because Nigeria is not uniform. We are not managing just job titles — we are managing people, and people are complex. We work with a mix of age groups, ethnic backgrounds, languages, belief systems, educational levels, digital fluency, and socio-economic realities — all under one roof, all interpreting the same policy in very different ways. So, when we roll out a policy assuming it will land the same way in Lagos as it does in Owerri, Abuja, or Makurdi, we are not just taking a risk; we are committing a strategic misfire. That is a design flaw — an open invitation to disengagement.

Take a simple example: a remote work policy. On the surface, it sounds progressive — a signal of trust, a modern approach, a statement that the organization is flexible and forward-thinking. But have we considered whether the employee in Barkin Ladi, Sapele, or Ikire in Osun has reliable power? Have we factored in internet limitations? Have we thought about shared living spaces, family responsibilities, or even communal expectations that influence how and when people can work from home? Too often, we write policies like this:

“Employees may work remotely for up to two days a week. Availability must be maintained during standard working hours, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.”

On paper, it looks fair. In practice, it assumes everyone operates on the same playing field — a playing field that simply does not exist.

Now imagine a reworked version:

“Employees may work remotely for up to two (2) days per week. Approval shall be subject to the nature of the employee’s responsibilities and the operational realities of their location. Managers are expected to engage with their teams to determine feasible arrangements, bearing in mind connectivity, power supply, and team deliverables.”

Feel the difference? One is rigid and blind to context; the other is empathetic, flexible, and inclusive. One sets a rule; the other sets a direction. That’s the shift we’re talking about. And notice the structure — phrases like “approval shall be subject to” and “bearing in mind” reflect the kind of formal clarity our professional environment demands. They set a serious tone without being authoritarian, signalling that this is policy, not suggestion.

This is how policy can support culture. When we say, “*Managers are expected to engage with their teams,*” we are not simply encouraging communication — we are reinforcing collaboration, using policy as a cultural and leadership tool. And importantly, this policy assumes employees are responsible adults who want to deliver; it is not built on suspicion. It is proactive, not reactive — anticipating environmental realities and integrating them into the solution. It also embeds process, ensuring approvals are consistent, and speaks to values like flexibility and results-oriented work. Most importantly, it communicates with context: “*bearing in mind connectivity and team deliverables*” tells employees we thought this through. It’s not a command; it’s a conversation.

Let’s consider a more sensitive example: sexual harassment policies. These are non-negotiable — absolutely necessary — but how we write them, especially in our Nigerian context, matters deeply. A typical imported policy might say:

“Any employee who experiences sexual harassment should report to the HR Department within 24 hours. Failure to do so may invalidate the complaint.”

On paper, this seems strong, clear, strict, legal. But in a society where reporting abuse can be culturally difficult, where shame, fear, and stigma are real, such a policy may end up silencing people. It might protect the organization legally, but fail the people emotionally.

Now compare that to a localized, culturally aware approach:

“The Institute maintains a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment. Employees who experience harassment are expected to report through any of the approved channels

— including line managers, HR, or the confidential whistleblowing platform. Reports will be treated confidentially and acted upon promptly. No employee shall be penalised for reporting harassment in good faith.”

That’s no longer just a compliance statement — it’s a declaration of care. It sends a cultural message: we understand where you’re coming from, we are listening, and we have built this policy for you, not just about you.

Here, every phrase carries weight. *“Approved channels,” “treated confidentially,” “no employee shall be penalised”* — these are professional signals that the matter is serious, that the organization means business, but in a dignified way. It’s a statement of values — dignity, respect, safety — built on trust, with a promise of consistency (*“acted upon promptly”*), and communicated with absolute clarity. This is proactive HR, not a reactive response to scandal.

The way we write policies matters — not just the content, but the tone. Not just the rules, but the relationship behind the rules. If we’re not careful, we end up writing policies that seem neutral on paper but feel cold, rigid, or disconnected in practice. And when that happens, trust erodes. Engagement declines. The very people we aim to protect and empower begin to disengage. That’s why we must stop seeing policy-making as an administrative exercise. It is a cultural act — the point where policy meets people, where structure meets sensitivity, and where intent must be filtered through human realities.

If we want policies that not only sound good but actually do good, we must design them with context, empathy, and deep cultural intelligence. That is the work before us. This is where we, as HR

professionals, must stop thinking like policy writers and start acting like cultural translators. Because what works in one context may need to be reworded, restructured, or reinterpreted in another. If we want policies that inspire action — not just compliance — we must lead with empathy, design with contextual intelligence, and ensure our structures resonate across cultures, generations, and lived experiences. And it begins by confronting *The Great Disconnect* and refusing to settle for one-size-fits-all answers in a world that is anything but uniform.

3

THE PUNITIVE TRAP

I've had the privilege of reading a few policies — policies that read more like warning letters than guidance, policies that sound like threats rather than support, policies that feel as though they were drafted in a courtroom instead of a workplace. The *“Don't be late,” “Don't access social media,” “Don't use your phone,” “Don't do this, don't do that”* statements that drip with suspicion. Often, it feels as though they were written not by HR, but by a disciplinary panel. And you can feel the tone — rigid, controlling, mistrustful.

The problem with this approach is that it starts with the wrong assumption. It assumes employees will misbehave unless they are threatened. It assumes people don't want to do good work unless they are policed. And when this becomes the default tone of your policy framework, everything else begins to unravel. Policies

shaped by fear will only create more fear. Policies built on control will breed resistance. Instead of structure, you get silence. Instead of engagement, you get resentment. Instead of trust, you get distance.

And when that happens, HR is caught in the crossfire. We become the face of these punitive policies — the ones delivering queries, issuing warnings, and managing conflict rather than inspiring performance. We stop being bridge-builders, advocates, and champions of culture. And that's a dangerous place to be, because once people stop seeing HR as fair, balanced, and human, they withdraw. They disengage. They stop trusting — and eventually, they stop growing.

In Nigeria, this problem is amplified by history. We operate in a society shaped by decades of authoritarian leadership models — in politics, education, religion, and corporate life. In many organizations, the default management style is still top-down, command-and-control. Power sits at the top, and everyone else is expected to fall in line. Without deliberate effort, our policies will simply reflect and reinforce that legacy. The result? A compliance culture. People follow the rules but never feel empowered to ask why. They behave, but they never truly belong. Your best talent plays it safe — or quietly starts looking for the exit.

The solution is to shift the lens and flip the script. We must stop writing policies as if people are the problem and start writing them as if they are partners. As if they are adults. As if they are capable of greatness, not just mistakes. Because when people feel heard — when they are involved in creating the policies that affect them — something changes. Engagement rises. Ownership rises. Retention rises. And HR? HR is repositioned as a trusted ally, a strategic voice for both the business and its people.

Let's take a practical example: the lateness policy. Too often, it's written like this:

“Any employee who reports after 8:01 a.m. shall be marked late. Three instances of lateness within a month will result in disciplinary action.”

This assumes the worst — that employees don't care about punctuality. It uses punishment as the motivator and leaves no room for context. Now imagine rewriting it as:

“Employees are expected to resume work by 8:00 a.m. daily. Where lateness occurs more than twice within a calendar month, the supervisor shall engage the employee to understand the root cause and provide support where necessary. Repeated lateness without just cause may attract administrative review, including formal queries in line with the disciplinary procedure.”

The difference is striking. The first is rigid; the second is structured yet empathetic. It keeps the formal tone — *“expected to resume,” “engage the employee,” “attract administrative review”* — but uses them to set expectations without hostility. This approach reframes punctuality as a shared standard, not just a rule. It is strategic because it prioritizes engagement before enforcement — the supervisor first seeks to understand, then to act. It is built on trust, assuming lateness could have valid reasons, and opens the door to conversation before judgment.

Consistency is preserved through phrases like *“in line with disciplinary procedure,”* which removes bias and creates credibility. Values are clear — respect, fairness, accountability. Even the qualifier *“without just cause”* shows balance: we are firm, but we are

fair. And because the policy is presented with context and empathy, it becomes more than a rule — it becomes part of the organization's culture.

4

THE BAND-AID APPROACH

We've all seen it happen. Something goes wrong on Monday, and by Tuesday, there's a brand-new policy — firm, harsh, and loaded with penalties. Someone abuses their lunch break, and by Friday, we have a 14-paragraph break-time protocol. A single late arrival? Suddenly, biometric monitoring is on the table. This is the reactive “*Band-Aid*” approach — policies created not from strategy, but from panic. Not from foresight, but from fallout. Not from principle, but from pressure.

Policies should respond to issues. We must act when problems arise. But the problem here is not that we respond — it's how we respond. When every policy is a knee-jerk reaction to one incident, what we build is not structure... it's chaos. We stop thinking long-term. We stop asking the right questions. We stop understanding

the system and start firefighting the symptoms. And over time, this reactive mode turns HR into a response unit — always managing consequences, never shaping culture.

The result is an over-regulated workplace where every move is policed, but no one feels empowered. People stop thinking for themselves, they stop taking ownership, and they stop engaging. Why? Because they are not responding to purpose — they are reacting to punishment. They are not guided by values — they are ruled by the fear of breaking the next rule. And that's not culture. That's compliance theatre.

Let's look at another familiar example: an employee misuses internet access during work hours — maybe scrolling through social media. The classic reaction?

“All personal internet usage is strictly prohibited during working hours. Any breach will lead to disciplinary action.”

On the surface, it sounds strong, decisive. But is that really the issue? Or is the person mentally disengaged? Is it boredom, burnout, lack of clarity, or poor management? A purely punitive rule treats the symptom, not the cause.

Now compare that to a policy that acknowledges human behaviour:

“Employees are expected to use office internet facilities primarily for work-related purposes. Occasional personal browsing is permitted, provided it does not disrupt productivity or contravene IT security standards. Repeated misuse may attract administrative sanctions in line with the organization's disciplinary policy.”

One says, “*We don’t trust you.*” The other says, “*We see you, we trust you, and we’re here to keep productivity on track together.*” This is the shift — from reactive rules to proactive strategy.

Notice the language in the improved version: “*expected to use,*” “*provided it does not disrupt,*” “*in line with the organization’s disciplinary policy.*” It’s structured, formal, and respectful — the professional tone we recognise in our environment — and yet it’s clear on expectations. There’s no drama, no emotional overtones, just well-framed professionalism. More importantly, it reinforces a culture of personal responsibility and productivity: We trust you... but don’t let it affect your work. That’s a culture statement, not just a rule.

This is also a trust-builder. The phrase “*occasional personal browsing is permitted*” changes the conversation entirely. We’re not prohibiting, we’re not punishing — we’re permitting, with limits. It signals maturity and partnership rather than suspicion and control. And it’s proactive: this is not a policy hurriedly drafted after catching someone on YouTube for six hours. It’s been thought through in advance — clear, firm, and balanced.

Consistency is preserved through “*administrative sanctions in line with the organization’s disciplinary policy,*” which ensures fairness and removes the risk of ad hoc enforcement. And the values are obvious: this policy balances performance and well-being. It accepts reality without ignoring responsibility. Finally, it communicates the why: *Productivity first. Security matters. But we understand you are human.* That’s context. That’s leadership.

So, the next time you’re asked to draft a new policy, pause. Ask yourself: is this solving the problem, or just reacting to it? The goal is not to keep stacking rules on top of each other; the goal is to

design systems that make many of those rules unnecessary. That's how HR stops being the firefighter and starts being the culture shaper.

5

SELECTIVE ENFORCEMENT

As HR professionals, we've been there — sitting through the policy rollouts, leading the trainings, handing out the handbooks, and hosting those awareness sessions. We've done it all, start to finish. But the truth is that a policy no one follows... a rule no one applies... a standard that lives only on paper... is just words.

Too often, we spend months crafting beautifully worded policies. They are elegant, legally sound, and airtight. But once they leave our desks and enter the real world of the organization, something happens. One person violates the rule and HR is expected to act — perhaps issue a warning, perhaps escalate to management. Fair enough. But then another person, often a high performer or a senior executive, breaks the same rule. Suddenly, the tone changes.

“Let’s manage it quietly.” “Let’s not rock the boat.” “Let’s handle it internally.”

And in that moment, something bigger than the immediate issue begins to unfold. Inconsistency sets in. Doubt starts to grow. Cynicism spreads. The organization begins to speak an unspoken truth: This policy doesn’t apply to everyone. It depends on who you are. And once that perception takes hold, credibility evaporates. HR loses the room — not necessarily because we created the double standard, but because we are seen as the ones holding the pen while it happens.

No one respects rules that only apply to the powerless. No one follows policies that protect some and punish others. When enforcement is selective, trust collapses — and it collapses fast.

Let’s consider another common example:

“All employees are expected to treat colleagues with respect. Harassment or bullying will not be tolerated.”

This sounds strong. But then a high-ranking team lead yells at juniors in meetings, belittles interns, and uses language that would make your compliance training blush — and nothing happens because *“he’s delivering results.”* That is selective blindness. And this is how cultures rot from the inside, even while the policies on paper look perfect.

So what’s the alternative? We must write policies with clarity, fairness, and courage — and then enforce them without fear or favour. The rewrite might sound like this:

“All employees are expected to treat one another with dignity and respect at all times. Disrespectful behaviour, including verbal abuse, harassment, or bullying — whether from junior or senior staff — will be investigated and addressed in line with the organization’s grievance and disciplinary procedures. Everyone deserves a safe and respectful workplace.”

Notice the weight of certain phrases. *“Whether from junior or senior staff”* is a clear statement that nobody is above the rule. *“Investigated and addressed”* is structure and authority — signaling a process that will be followed, not a mood-dependent reaction. The tone is professional, respectful, but unmistakably firm.

This approach aligns directly with sound policy principles. First, it makes impact. It defines the atmosphere we are building: one of dignity and mutual respect. Second, it is built on trust — telling employees that their experience matters and they can speak up without fear of bias. Third, it is proactive — anticipating challenges and setting a clear standard before they become problems. Fourth, it ensures consistency — *“in line with the organization’s grievance and disciplinary procedures”* guarantees that enforcement is structured and impartial.

And finally, it communicates values. Respect. Safety. Fairness. They are not implied — they are declared. The closing line, *“Everyone deserves a safe and respectful workplace,”* is cultural promise. And when promises are kept, culture strengthens.

6

IGNORING UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Sometimes, as policy-makers, we mean well. We are solving real problems. We have the right intentions. But intention is not impact — and when we fail to anticipate the ripple effects of a decision, when we don't pause to ask, *“How will this land on the people living it out?”*, we risk creating policies that fix one thing while breaking three others.

Let's take another familiar example. Leadership wants to boost productivity. So we roll out a policy: longer working hours, tighter targets, stricter reporting deadlines. On paper, it looks brilliant — bold, measurable, clean. But two months later, the picture changes. Burnout begins to show. Voices grow quieter in team meetings. Sick leave requests increase. Disengagement hangs in the air. Eventually, attrition follows. People are not only exhausted — they are detached. What started out as a performance initiative has

morphed into a well-being crisis. And where does that crisis land? Right on the desk of HR, where we're now managing stress cases, conducting exit interviews, and coaching line managers who have lost the ability to "motivate" their teams — because the real issue was never motivation, it was exhaustion.

This is what happens when we do not plan for the consequences we cannot immediately see. We solve the operational problem but miss the human impact. In the end, the policy designed to cure a headache ends up causing a heart attack.

Now, let's bring this closer to home in our Nigerian context, where inflation is real, transport is expensive, power is unreliable, and disposable income is shrinking. Imagine management decides to "cut costs" by removing lunch allowances, discontinuing the shuttle service, or quietly ending a monthly fuel subsidy. On the budget spreadsheet, it looks like a win. On the P&L, it feels smart. But for the employee, that decision is a financial blow — it could be the rent unpaid, the fuel tank empty, the school fee balance now delayed. And almost overnight, discontent begins to bubble. People start saying, "This company doesn't care." Not because of the cost-cutting itself, but because no one thought through the impact.

Here's how this often shows up in policy language:

"Effective immediately, the company will no longer provide lunch stipends. Employees are encouraged to make personal arrangements."

Short. Direct. But cold — completely disconnected from the economic pressures employees are facing. Now, let's rewrite it:

“In light of current economic realities and rising operational costs, the organization has reviewed its lunch subsidy structure. While direct lunch stipends will no longer be disbursed, employees may opt into a new voucher program in partnership with selected food vendors. In addition, flexible work arrangements are being considered to ease commute-related expenses. This decision will be reviewed quarterly in line with economic trends and employee feedback.”

The difference is striking. This second version reflects human-centered decision-making. It shows awareness. It anticipates the unintended consequences — and begins addressing them before the damage is done. The language is professional and firm, but also measured and dignified. Phrases like *“reviewed its lunch subsidy structure”*, *“opt into a new voucher program”*, and *“reviewed quarterly”* carry both authority and sensitivity.

From a policy principles perspective, this approach is strategic — balancing cost management with employee well-being. It builds trust by being transparent and offering choices rather than commands. It is proactive, preempting backlash by introducing alternatives such as voucher programs or flexible work arrangements. It creates consistency by scheduling quarterly reviews, giving employees predictability and signaling that leadership is listening. And it embodies values — empathy, economic awareness, and support — while communicating the change in a way that reduces panic and preserves morale.

The same principle applies to productivity policies. The old-school version might say:

“All employees must submit daily reports by 6 p.m. and must meet weekly KPI targets. Failure to comply may result in disciplinary action.”

Rigid, punitive, and blind to context. Now compare that to a strategic rewrite:

“To support team alignment and ensure clarity of progress, employees are required to submit brief daily reports by 6:00 p.m. and track progress on weekly KPIs. Where delays or performance gaps arise, employees are encouraged to proactively engage their supervisor to agree on recovery actions or support options. These expectations apply across all teams and levels.”

That’s the difference between a policy that drives performance and one that drives people away. The second version is still firm — “required to submit”, “applies across all teams and levels” — but it also signals trust and partnership: “proactively engage”, “agree on recovery actions”. It’s professional yet human, disciplined yet supportive. It sets a rhythm before performance becomes a crisis and ensures fairness by applying the standard to everyone equally.

The real message here is this: policies are not just rules for a company; they are the terms of a social contract with your people. You can write that contract with a spreadsheet, or you can write it with empathy — but only one of those will build trust. The other will cost you more in the end. And as HR leaders, it’s our responsibility to lead with both policy intelligence and emotional intelligence, crafting not just rules, but strategy that works in the real world.

7

MISSING THE WHY

One of the biggest reasons so many policies — even the well-written ones — fail to land is poor communication. And when I say poor communication, I'm not talking about formatting or grammar. I'm talking about the failure to connect the dots. The failure to answer the “*why*.”

Too often, policies are written in isolation. They have no strategic alignment, no connection to the big picture, no link to the company's culture, and no thought about how success will be measured. We are writing policies, yes — but we are not solving anything specific. There's no clear diagnosis, no business case, no strategic clarity.

And so, we create a policy... and we drop it like a memo. No context. No explanation. No communication strategy. We don't

tell people why it matters, how it connects to business goals, or even what success will look like once it's implemented.

Naturally, what happens next? People ignore it and move on — not because they're rebellious, but because the policy feels random, disconnected from their day-to-day work. And when a policy doesn't make sense, when it feels irrelevant or vague, people default to informal norms — to what's familiar, to what culture allows, not what policy says.

That's when HR begins to lose credibility. That's when you start hearing things like, *"Abeq, this new process they brought will just slow me down. The way I've been doing it since is faster."* *"Honestly, I don't see the need for all these steps — my own method works just fine."* *"The policy is fine, but in this our work, e no go work like that."* And once that cycle begins — writing, enforcing, re-writing — nothing sticks. The problem isn't always that the policy has no purpose. Sometimes, it's that the purpose was never communicated clearly.

A policy without purpose is just paperwork. A policy without communication is a ghost — it exists, but it doesn't live. And a policy without relevance will never drive engagement, no matter how perfectly worded it is.

Take, for example, the introduction of a hybrid work policy. The typical version might read:

"Staff are permitted to work remotely on Mondays and Fridays. All requests must be submitted via email at least 24 hours in advance. Management reserves the right to approve or decline at its discretion."

Technically, it works. But strategically, it falls flat. There's no why, no link to productivity, no trust language, and no indication of how it supports either business performance or employee well-being.

Now compare that with this rewrite:

“Employees may work remotely on Mondays and Fridays, subject to their team’s workflow and client-facing responsibilities. Requests for remote work should be made at least 24 hours in advance via the internal platform or directly with the line manager. Managers are encouraged to review requests fairly and with consideration of both employee well-being and team effectiveness.”

See the difference? This version tells a story. It connects the dots. It answers the why without shouting it. Phrases like *“subject to workflow”*, *“review requests fairly”*, and *“consideration of both employee well-being and team effectiveness”* carry weight. They show structure, but they also show wisdom. That’s how we recognise a serious policy — one that is formal, clear, and thoughtful.

From a policy principles perspective, this approach is strategic: it reinforces values like focus, autonomy, and productivity. It builds trust by positioning the process as a respectful request, not an imposition. It is proactive — creating a rhythm for today’s realities rather than reacting to absenteeism. It embeds consistency — *“requests made at least 24 hours in advance”* eliminates drama and favouritism. And it aligns deeply with values: well-being, flexibility, and efficiency.

Most importantly, it’s communicated with clarity. It explains the *“why,”* linking policy to purpose, so that people can engage with it, not just comply reluctantly.

The real takeaway? We must build policies from the business outward, not from HR inward. We must write with purpose, not just for procedure. And we must translate policy into meaning through strong, strategic communication. Because when people understand the why, they engage. When they see the link between policy and purpose, they align. And when they see HR as a partner in strategy — not just compliance — they trust. And that trust, that alignment, that clarity... is what turns policy into culture.

**BUILDING
POLICIES THAT
BUILD CULTURE**



8

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

It's not enough to diagnose what's broken. The real question is: how do we fix it?

For too long, policies have been about control — about compliance, about limiting risk. In the traditional model, a good policy was one that left no wiggle room, one that closed every loophole. But in today's world of work — especially for organizations seeking to attract and retain top talent — that mindset is no longer enough. We need to see policies not just as rules to follow, but as reflections of who we are. Every policy should be a tangible expression of our organizational values.

Here's what that looks like in practice. Suppose one of your company's stated values is **Trust and Autonomy**. It makes no

sense to have a rigid 9-to-5 clock-in, clock-out policy for roles that don't require physical presence. You can't say *"We value trust"* and then show in practice that you don't trust people to manage their own time. Instead, the policy should align with the value:

"Our flexible work policy empowers employees to manage their work schedules to best meet the needs of their role and team. We focus on clear deliverables and project outcomes rather than fixed hours, trusting our team to communicate effectively and maintain accountability."

Or maybe your core value is **Employee Well-being**. Yet every time someone calls in sick, you require a doctor's note. No exceptions. No empathy. Just bureaucracy. In Nigeria, we know the stress — and the cost — of even getting to a hospital. The message, whether you intend it or not, becomes: *"We care about well-being... but only when it fits our paperwork."* A better approach would be:

"We recognize that well-being extends beyond physical health. Employees are entitled to up to five mental health days per year to rest and recharge. These days do not require a doctor's note or a detailed explanation. We trust you to use this time as needed to prioritize your health."

Simple. Human. Aligned.

This is the paradigm shift: when your values are clear and your policies align with them, you eliminate the tension between what you say and what you do. Employees notice that alignment. They feel it. They talk about it. And it becomes part of your brand — not just externally, but internally. Because in today's workplace, culture is the real contract. Not just the offer letter, not just the handbook. Culture is the deal.

Let's take another value — **Continuous Growth**. You can't claim to value growth and then rely on a single annual performance review with a five-point rating scale and a checklist conversation. If growth truly matters, your policy should reflect development, not just evaluation. It might sound like:

“Our performance management is a continuous process built on growth and feedback. We provide every employee with a dedicated development budget and access to a mentorship program. Formal performance discussions are held quarterly, focusing on development goals and achievements — not a rigid rating system.”

Or consider **Diversity and Inclusion**. If your hiring still runs entirely on referrals from church groups, family friends, or old-school networks, you're likely reproducing sameness rather than diversity. A more aligned approach would be:

“We are committed to building a diverse and inclusive team. To ensure fairness, all resumes are reviewed blindly, and interview panels are diverse. Hiring decisions are based on structured, objective criteria and professional skills — to eliminate unconscious bias.”

This is policy as a strategic lever for the values you claim to hold.

The same goes for **Transparency**. If you say you value it but treat salaries like state secrets, you're sending mixed messages. Transparency doesn't end at mission statements — it shows up in pay. A transparent policy might say:

“Our compensation policy is transparent. All employees have access to salary bands for their roles and can view the

criteria for advancement. We hold regular All-Hands meetings to discuss our compensation philosophy openly and answer questions.”

That kind of clarity builds trust. And trust builds loyalty.

Finally, let’s talk about Integrity and Accountability. Too often, organizations focus solely on punishing bad behaviour, forgetting that true accountability also requires protecting those who speak up. Without that protection, what you create is not accountability — it’s fear.

Integrity goes beyond consequences; it’s about creating psychological safety. That means employees must feel confident that raising a concern will not lead to retaliation, and leaders must be committed to handling every report fairly and confidentially.

Your policy might say:

“We are committed to fostering a psychologically safe environment where every voice is valued. Employees who witness or suspect unethical behaviour are encouraged to report it without fear of retaliation. Our leadership team is accountable for modeling our code of conduct and ensuring all reports are handled with swift, fair, and confidential action.”

That’s how you live out integrity — not merely talk about it.

So whatever your organization claims to value, go back and test it against your policies. If the value and the policy are aligned, you’re building culture. If they’re not, you’re building confusion. And in today’s workplace — where culture is the real competitive advantage — confusion is something we simply cannot afford.

9

THE FOUR-STEP FRAMEWORK

Everything we've discussed so far boils down to one powerful truth: **policy is culture in writing**. If we want to change culture — if we want to deepen engagement and actually retain our best people — then we must start crafting policies differently. And not just differently, but deliberately.

Here's a practical, four-step framework every HR leader can use to transform policy into a strategic tool for building the kind of workplace people genuinely want to be part of.

Step 1: Audit and Align

Start with what you already have. Take a hard look at your existing policies and ask yourself one critical question: *“What kind of culture are these policies actually creating?”* This isn't about what's written on

the page — it's about what people actually experience because of it.

Gather real feedback. Run an employee survey. Host small focus groups. Review exit interview data. Identify which policies are outdated, which are confusing, and which feel misaligned with the values your organization claims to stand for.

Then, align each policy with a bigger cultural goal. Ask: *“What kind of workplace are we trying to build?”* and then ask again: *“Does this policy help us get there — or is it getting in the way?”* When policies and culture are out of sync, engagement will always suffer.

Step 2: Co-create, Don't Dictate

Too often, policies are crafted by a small group — HR, Legal, perhaps a senior executive or two — and then handed down like commandments. That era is over. Today's workforce wants to be part of the process. When they're excluded, resistance builds.

Instead, bring people into the room — literally and figuratively. Create a cross-functional policy review team with representatives from different departments and levels. Use anonymous surveys, town halls, and digital suggestion boxes. The more fingerprints people can see on a policy, the more likely they are to embrace it.

Co-creation not only drives acceptance but also builds trust and a sense of ownership. Involving employees in shaping the rules they live by sends a clear signal: *this is your workplace too, and your voice matters.*

Step 3: Communicate with Empathy and Context

Communication is not a memo. You can't simply drop a new policy into people's inboxes and expect instant understanding or compliance. Awareness does not equal adoption — and understanding does not guarantee engagement.

Policies need explanation, storytelling, and context. Hold a town hall. Run department-level Q&A sessions. Share the reasoning behind the change and the impact it aims to have. Use language that connects the dots between the rule and the values it supports.

For example:

“We’re introducing this flexible work policy because we trust you. We believe you know how to manage your own time and deliver results.”

When people hear that, the policy stops being an abstract rule and starts becoming part of their personal contract with the organization.

Step 4: Enable Leaders and Measure Impact

The success of any policy lives and dies with line managers. You can have the most progressive, well-written policy in the world, but if managers don't believe in it — or worse, if they act in ways that contradict it — the entire effort collapses. Managers are the culture carriers. They amplify what HR is building... or they silence it.

That means they need training, coaching, and tools. If you've introduced a flexible work policy but team leads are still measuring productivity by who logs in at 8:01 a.m., you haven't created

flexibility. Equip them to manage outcomes, not hours. Create forums where they can share what's working and what's not.

Finally, measure the impact. Policy is not *“set it and forget it.”* It's a living system. Track retention data. Monitor Employee Net Promoter Scores. Measure engagement across teams. Ask whether people are staying longer, engaging more deeply, and recommending your workplace to others. Then, review regularly — annually, biannually, or at whatever cadence fits your context.

10

YOUR ROLE AS A CULTURE ARCHITECT

Now let's land this conversation where it really matters — you. Because everything we've discussed so far — policies, culture, engagement, retention — ultimately comes back to one central truth: the role you play as an HR professional.

We are not simply policy custodians, nor are we compliance officers buried in paperwork. We are not here just to implement what management decides. We are culture architects. We design the structures. We set the tone. We sit at the critical intersection between what the organization claims to stand for and what employees actually experience every day. And that role carries four clear responsibilities.

1. Be Custodians of Culture

Your first responsibility is alignment — not alignment on paper, but alignment in practice. Culture is not what's written in the handbook; it is what you tolerate, what you reinforce, and what you reward. It is shaped as much by what HR permits as by what it promotes... or chooses to ignore.

If your handbook says, *"We prioritize employee well-being,"* but managers are calling staff at 10 p.m., deadlines are unrealistic, and leave requests are quietly frowned upon, then the real message is: *"Well-being is optional — only until the work is done."* In those moments, silence is not neutral. Silence is a message. Silence is policy. Every decision we make — and every moment we choose not to act — shapes the culture more powerfully than any paragraph in a policy manual.

2. Speak Up at the Leadership Table

This is not the era for passive HR. We cannot afford to simply implement whatever is handed down. We must push back when needed. We must speak up when it matters — not with emotion alone, but with data, insight, and strategic reasoning.

You are the voice of the workforce, and you have the analytics to prove it. Use them. When a directive will damage engagement, say so. When a policy feels misaligned with values, raise it. When leadership is chasing short-term wins at the expense of long-term culture, challenge it. Policy may start on paper, but it lives — and either thrives or fails — in the choices we make every single day. As HR leaders, we are no longer just supporting culture; we are building it, one decision, one conversation, and one policy at a time.

3. Enforce with Consistency and Empathy

This is where credibility is either built or destroyed. You can write the best policy in the world, perfectly aligned with your values — but if enforcement is inconsistent, it loses its authority. When one person is penalized for coming late but another, perhaps a top performer, gets a free pass, the real message becomes: *“Our policies are flexible — depending on who you are.”*

Once people sense that kind of inconsistency, trust erodes quickly. Culture is not shaped by what’s written; it is shaped by what’s enforced. But enforcement is not the same as rigid policing. It must be delivered with empathy — firm, but fair. That means listening before acting, explaining before deciding, and applying the same standard to everyone while recognising the human context behind each case. When rules are consistent and humane, people don’t just comply — they respect the system and the people enforcing it.

4. Think Long-Term, Not Just Short-Term

The pressure to fix problems quickly can push HR into quick wins: morale is low? Give a bonus. Turnover is high? Plan a retreat. Engagement dipping? Buy pizza and call it “employee appreciation.” These things are not wrong — but they are not strategy.

Short-term fixes can calm the storm, but they do not build a better culture. They won’t retain your best people. They won’t sustain engagement. A quick bonus may mask low morale for a month, but if your promotion structure is broken, your feedback culture is weak, and career growth is unclear, the root problem remains.

The real question is: *What kind of workplace are we building — one year from now? Three years? Five?* Great policies don't just solve today's issues; they anticipate tomorrow's challenges. They create clarity, build stability, and give your best people a reason to imagine a future with you.

Being a culture architect means understanding that every policy, every decision, and every conversation is part of the blueprint for the workplace you are building. And if we approach that role with alignment, courage, consistency, empathy, and a long-term lens, we will not only write better policies — we will create cultures where people choose to stay, grow, and thrive.

11

ONE POLICY AT A TIME

So, let me leave you with this: our role as HR professionals — especially in a country like ours, in a time like this — is not just to manage people. It is to design environments where people can thrive. It is to be the architects of great workplaces.

And the policies we create? Those are our blueprints.

When we craft them with intention, ground them in our values, and align them with how we actually want people to feel, behave, and grow, something powerful happens. Policies stop being a checklist. They stop being a threat. They become a source of clarity, empowerment, and culture.

Let's remember: people don't leave organizations simply because of workload. They leave because of confusion. They leave because

of inconsistency. They leave because the stated values and the lived experience do not match.

But when your policies are aligned — when they reflect trust, growth, well-being, and fairness — people stay. They grow. They give their best. And they become your greatest ambassadors.

A Practical Challenge

Before the end of this quarter, pick one HR policy in your organization — just one — and ask yourself, honestly:

Is this policy helping or hurting employee engagement?

If it's helping, strengthen it.

If it's hurting, fix it.

If it's unclear, rewrite it.

But do not leave it untouched.

Because our legacy — yours and mine — will not be measured by how many policies we wrote, but by how many cultures we helped shape, and how many great workplaces we helped build, one policy at a time.

If You Remember Nothing Else...

- Policies must be strategic tools and cultural instruments — not administrative obligations, but levers for building the workplace you want to see.
- They must be built on trust, not mistrust — written with the assumption that employees are partners and capable adults.

- They must be proactive, not reactive — designed with foresight to address root causes, not just to put out fires.
- They must be consistently enforced — because a policy is only as strong as its application, and inconsistency breeds cynicism.
- They must be aligned with values — as tangible expressions of what your organization claims to stand for.
- They must be communicated with purpose and context — so employees not only know what the policy says, but why it exists and how it connects to the bigger picture.

We must stop seeing policies as mere compliance documents. They are, and should be, strategic instruments for shaping and reinforcing culture.

That is the work.

That is the calling.

And that is where real HR leadership lives.

“

*Take care of your employees
and they'll take care of your business.*

”

Richard Branson

