

Institutionalized Stagnation in a media house: A Grounded Theory of Organizational Culture Dysfunction at a Media House in Zimbabwe

Dr. Calista Chikanya

Independent Executive Researcher

Email: cchikanya@gmail.com

Abstract— State-owned broadcasters in Southern Africa are being asked to behave commercially while still carrying the cultural legacy of a government department. This study examines the organizational culture challenges confronting a media house in Zimbabwe, a broadcaster that recorded a profit in 2019 followed by three consecutive years of losses, reaching record low in 2022 in 2022. A concurrent embedded mixed-methods design anchored in pragmatism was used. The qualitative strand comprised ten semi-structured interviews with senior managers, long-serving employees and former staff, analysed through Strauss and Corbin's open, axial and selective coding with analytic memoing in Atlas.ti and NVivo; saturation was reached at the eighth interview. The quantitative strand surveyed 208 employees (response rate 99.5%) on fifteen culture-challenge items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.973$). Survey results showed near-unanimous agreement that resistance to change (99.5%), leadership style (98.1%) and the difficulty of building a supportive work environment (97.1%) shape the media house's culture, while 92.8% rejected the claim that the media house nurtures continuous learning or addresses diversity and inclusion. Coding of 246 open codes produced the core theme of Institutionalised Stagnation: a culture of fragmentation, fear and neglect perpetuating paralysis. The study theorises an Entrenched Dysfunction Framework in which a Codification–Entrenchment Cycle, a Psychological Extraction Cycle and a Communication–Execution Failure Cycle lock the organisation into a pathological equilibrium. The findings imply that piecemeal reforms will fail unless leadership stability, psychological safety and fair resource allocation are addressed simultaneously.

Keywords— Organisational culture; Grounded theory; Public broadcasting; Resistance to change; Psychological capital; Zimbabwe media.

INTRODUCTION

Organisational culture, the shared values, beliefs, norms and assumptions that guide how members of an organisation think and act, is widely recognised as a determinant of whether strategy is executed or abandoned (Schein and Schein, 2021; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2020).

Estimates that only a minority of strategies are successfully implemented are repeatedly traced to poor communication and misaligned culture (Barends and Rousseau, 2022; MacCormack, Dunn and Kemerer, 2024). Public institutions are especially exposed because their cultures are often formed under monopoly conditions and political oversight rather than market discipline (Becerra Castro, Rodríguez Bolívar and López Hernández, 2024; Adinew, 2023).

The case organization, a media house in Zimbabwe, illustrates this tension. Although the commercialization framework anticipated that it would operate as a commercially viable entity, the entity has retained much of a parastatal mindset, with a government-appointed board, limited accountability and a five-year strategy (2022–2025) that has not been effectively cascaded to lower-level staff (Case Organization, 2022). Audited results (Case Organization, 2023) show a profit in 2019 followed by losses reaching record low in 2022. Audience survey data (ZAMPS, 2022) indicate that only 18% of the population use the media house's services and while 56% of audiences prefer foreign content. Previous work on Zimbabwe's public media has documented organizational conflict (Mapuvire and Mapuvire, 2021), digital adaptation (Lunga and Musvipwa, 2021) and crisis communication practice (Muchetwa et al., 2021), but the cultural mechanisms that sustain under-performance have not been theorized from within.

This paper addresses that gap. It answers the research question: What are the challenges associated with organizational culture at the media house? The paper makes two contributions. Empirically, it provides a triangulated diagnosis of culture challenges in an African media space, combining a census-scale survey with grounded theory interviews. Theoretically, it develops the Entrenched Dysfunction Framework, which explains why cultural dysfunction in mission-driven organizations becomes self-perpetuating and resistant to incremental reform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Levels of Culture and the Problem of Hidden Assumptions

Schein's model, which anchors this study, distinguishes visible artefacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions; it is the deepest layer that most strongly governs behavior and is the hardest to change (Schein and Schein, 2021; Dimitrov, 2021). Westover (2024) notes that organizations frequently invest in artefacts such as new logos, slogans and strategy documents while leaving the underlying assumptions untouched. Boikanyo (2023) shows that Schein's levels apply in African organizations, where hierarchy, deference to authority and political loyalty are frequently embedded at the level of assumptions rather than stated values.

Adaptive and Non-Adaptive Cultures

The adaptive culture perspective holds that cultures which value customers, employees and change outperform cultures that value stability and internal privilege (Pathiranage, 2022; Lee and Kim, 2022). Non-adaptive cultures are characterized by arrogance, insularity and bureaucratic inertia, and are associated with organizational decline (Denis, 2023). The Competing Values Framework similarly contrasts the flexibility of clan and adhocracy cultures with the control orientation of hierarchy cultures (Cameron, 2022). Tadesse and Debela (2024) argue that cultural inertia in public institutions produces strategic misalignment even when strategy documents are sound.

Culture, Leadership and the Workforce

Leadership is both a product and a producer of culture (Schein and Schein, 2021; Northouse, 2021). Zorlu and Korkmaz (2022) show that leadership in public institutions shapes cultural climate and communication flows. Resistance to change is better understood as a cognitive and emotional response to perceived threat than as simple

obstinacy (Armenakis and Harris, 2023; Khaw, Lee and Tan, 2023). Where employees experience prolonged strain without recognition, engagement collapses into withdrawal and burnout (Kahn, 2021; Schaufeli, 2022; Krekel, Ward and De Neve, 2024).

Research Gap

Most empirical studies of culture and performance originate in private-sector firms in developed economies (Kalogiannidis and Kotsas, 2021; Leso, Cortimiglia and Ghezzi, 2022). African studies of public broadcasters address political interference and funding (Direito-Rebollal and Donders, 2023; Mnguni, 2024) but rarely theorize the internal cultural mechanisms that convert political and financial pressure into organizational paralysis. The present study responds with an inductive, grounded theory approach triangulated with survey data.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopted pragmatism, which privileges the research problem over methodological allegiance and legitimizes the combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019; Morgan, 2021). A concurrent embedded mixed-methods design was employed, with qualitative and quantitative data collected in the same period and integrated at interpretation (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2021). The single-case design suited an in-depth examination of a unique national institution (Yin, 2021).

Population, Sampling and Participants

The population comprised the 485 employees of the media house at its five Harare sites (Case Organisation, 2023). Stratified random sampling across non-managerial, lower, middle and top management strata produced a target sample of 203 at 95% confidence and a 5% margin of error; 210 questionnaires were administered, 209 returned and 208 were usable (99.5% return rate). Respondents were predominantly male (70.2%), aged 31–40 years (51.4%) or over 40 years (45.7%) and held a first degree (50.0%) or master's degree (48.1%); 97.1% had more than ten years of industry experience. For the qualitative strand, homogeneous purposive sampling selected ten information-rich participants (senior managers, long-serving employees and former staff). Saturation was reached at the eighth interview, and two further interviews confirmed it (Fofana, Bazeley and Regnault, 2020; Daher, 2023).

Instruments and Analysis

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree), pilot-tested on 41 respondents (20% of the planned sample). The fifteen-item culture-challenges scale yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.973$ with a mean inter-item correlation of 0.722, indicating excellent internal consistency (Zakariya, 2022). Interview transcripts were analysed using Strauss and Corbin's three-stage coding—open, axial and selective—supported by analytic memoing and the use of Atlas.ti and NVivo for traceability (Charmaz, 2021; Sosa-Díaz and Valverde-Berrocso, 2022). Word-frequency and word-cloud analyses were used as sensitising devices rather than as evidence in their own right. Quantitative and qualitative results were integrated through methodological

triangulation (Gupta, 2021; Sim, 2024). Ethical clearance, informed consent and anonymisation of participants (P1–P10) were observed throughout.

RESULTS

Survey Evidence on Culture Challenges

Table 1 summarises responses to the fifteen culture-challenge items. Agreement was close to unanimous for items describing resistance to change, the influence of leadership style and the difficulty of creating a supportive work environment. Items describing developmental and inclusive practices were rejected by large majorities: 92.8% disagreed that the media house addresses diversity and inclusion, and 92.8% disagreed that it creates a culture of continuous learning. Only the item on under-utilisation of the corporate communication budget divided opinion, with 50.5% agreeing, 23.6% neutral and 26.0% disagreeing.

Table 1. Employee perceptions of organisational culture challenges at the media house (n = 208)

Item	Statement (abridged)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
CHAL1	Resistance to change is a challenge at the media house	99.5	0.5	0.0
CHAL2	Leadership styles influence organizational culture	98.1	1.0	1.0
CHAL4	Fostering a supportive work environment is a challenge	97.1	1.4	1.4
CHAL7	Culture affects employee retention	97.1	1.4	1.4
CHAL5	Employee recognition is crucial for the media house's success	96.6	2.4	1.0
CHAL8	Culture affects employee engagement	96.2	3.8	0.0
CHAL11	Communication strategies are not clearly communicated	96.2	2.9	1.0
CHAL3	Customers are unhappy with how the media house conducts business	95.7	2.9	1.4
CHAL6	Culture affects employee morale	95.7	1.9	2.4
CHAL10	Corporate communication objectives are not clear	95.7	2.4	1.9
CHAL9	Culture affects employee productivity	94.7	3.4	1.9
CHAL12	No effective corporate communication action plan	94.7	3.4	1.9
CHAL15	Communication budget is not fully utilised	50.5	23.6	26.0
CHAL13	The media house addresses diversity and inclusion	4.3	2.9	92.8
CHAL14	The media house creates a culture of continuous learning	4.3	2.9	92.8

Agree = strongly agree + agree; Disagree = disagree + strongly disagree. Scale $\alpha = 0.973$. Source: Primary data (2025).

Theme 1: Describing the Culture—Contradiction and Toxicity

Participants described the media house's culture through sharply contradictory language. Aspirational descriptors such as "commitment to public service" and "fostering creativity" co-existed with "leadership failure",

"communication breakdowns", "toxic culture" and "employee demoralisation". Participants described adhocracy-like improvisation operating alongside rigid hierarchical control.

One memo labelled this a paradox of control: P3 described leaders who micromanage daily tasks such as content approvals while providing no strategic framework, so that "directionless rigour breeds unrealistic targets".

A second memo captured the gossip epidemic: when formal channels collapsed, P1 noted that "rumours spread faster than memos", making gossip a coping mechanism for information starvation that intensified mistrust.

A third memo identified a public service irony: P5 described resentment towards community projects because effort went unacknowledged, so that the public service ethos was used to legitimise overwork.

Axial coding organized the codes for this theme into five categories—Leadership Pathology, Communication Fragmentation, Toxic Social Dynamics, Structural Decay and Human Capital Erosion. Selective coding linked them in a closed loop: dysfunctional leadership → communication fragmentation → toxic social dynamics → structural decay → human capital erosion → reinforcement of dysfunctional leadership.

Theme 2: Challenges of Organisational Culture

The second theme addressed the research question directly. Seven sub-themes emerged from verbatim accounts (Table 2). Participants described fear-driven opacity, particularly on compensation, and a climate in which raising grievances was discouraged. Departmental "tribalism" restricted information flow and delayed joint projects.

A dominant internal group with privileged access to leadership was described as actively preserving the status quo and silencing reform-minded voices. Long-tenured employees were said to exercise informal ownership over resources, creating privilege tiers. Frequent changes in leadership produced "cultural whiplash", as each leader introduced a new style and set of expectations.

Table 2. Coding structure for culture challenges at the media house

Axial category	Illustrative sub-themes from interviews	Link to survey evidence
Leadership deficiency and instability	Frequent leadership turnover; impersonal treatment; susceptibility to dominant groups	CHAL2 (98.1% agree)
Structural fragmentation and silos	Departmental tribalism; hoarding of ideas and resources; delayed joint projects	CHAL11 (96.2% agree)
Culture of fear and stagnation	Discouraged grievances; dominant group enforcing status quo; resistance to technology	CHAL1 (99.5% agree)
Employee well-being and morale erosion	Lack of recognition; limited career growth; burnout; staff turnover	CHAL6, CHAL7, CHAL14
Systemic neglect and external impact	Service delivered "as a favour"; entitlement; declining customer trust	CHAL3 (95.7% agree)

Core theme: Institutionalised Stagnation—a culture of fragmentation, fear and neglect perpetuating paralysis.
Source: Primary data (2025).

The core theme, Institutionalised Stagnation, integrated these categories. "Institutionalised" signals that the dysfunction is embedded and self-reinforcing rather than a set of isolated problems. The triad of fragmentation (silos, communication breakdown, internal conflict), fear (a culture of silence, dominant groups and anxiety arising from leadership instability) and neglect (failure of strategic focus, disregard for well-being and abandonment of customer service) jointly sustains organisational paralysis.

Theme 3: The Human Cost—Erosion of Psychological Capital

The third theme showed how the culture is experienced by employees. Strategic ambiguity was a major demotivator. P3 observed that "morale is high but unproductive"; the memo on this motivation–productivity paradox interpreted it as performative labour, in which employees invest energy expecting impact but find only futility. P9 reported that "promotions travel faster via whispers than memos", indicating that gossip had become a form of shadow governance that allocates status and resources.

A further memo described a political inflation effect: where loyalty outweighed competence in advancement decisions, job insecurity bred learned helplessness and internal improvement initiatives failed despite staff awareness of what needed to change.

Selective coding produced the core theme Institutionalised Erosion of Motivation. The media house's culture was interpreted as progressively depleting four components of employees' psychological capital—purpose (eroded by strategic ambiguity), agency (restricted by entrenched hierarchy), recognition (weakened by inconsistent validation) and energy (drained by performative engagement). Disengagement thus emerged not as apathy but as a rational response to depleted resources.

Triangulation

The two strands converged. The survey's near-unanimous agreement on resistance to change, leadership influence and the absence of a supportive environment corresponds to the qualitative categories of fear, leadership deficiency and structural fragmentation. The strong rejection of items on continuous learning and inclusion corresponds to the qualitative evidence of exclusion, privilege tiers and limited career growth. Customer dissatisfaction (95.7%) mirrors the interview evidence that internal dysfunction becomes externally visible as poor service.

DISCUSSION

The Entrenched Dysfunction Framework

Integrating the themes produced a grounded theory labelled the Entrenched Dysfunction Framework (Figure 1). It proposes that decline in mission-driven institutions results from a Triple-Bind Mechanism of three interlocking cycles.

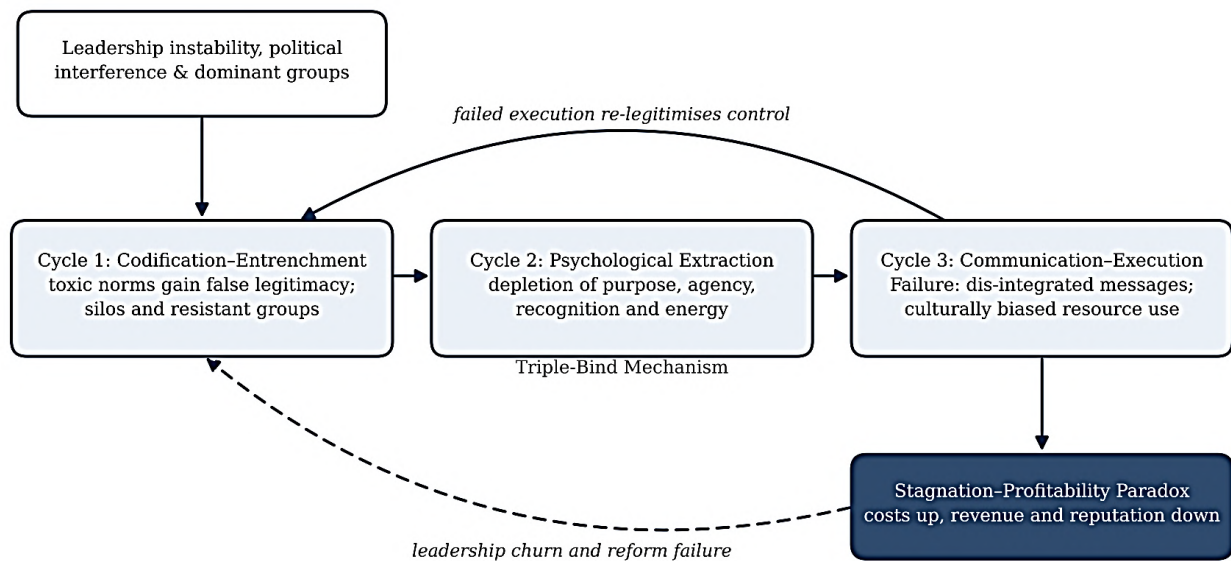


Figure 1. The Entrenched Dysfunction Framework derived from grounded theory analysis at the media house

The Codification–Entrenchment Cycle describes how toxic practices such as inequity and leadership neglect are written into formal routines, which gives them false legitimacy. Codification produces fragmentation and resistant groups that block reform. It draws on a Toxicity Amplification Loop: employees' coping strategies, such as conformity or reluctant complicity, are misread by the institution as validation. The Psychological Extraction Cycle treats the fragmented environment as an extractive regime that depletes employees' purpose, agency, recognition and energy, a dynamic the study terms the Psychological Resource Curse. The Communication–Execution Failure Cycle explains how fragmentation and depletion disable strategic execution: communication becomes dis-integrated and resources are filtered through cultural biases such as a "production-first" logic. Failed execution intensifies scarcity and fragmentation and feeds back into the first two cycles. The resulting equilibrium is stable, which explains why the media house can recognise its problems without being able to change them.

Relation to Existing Theory

The findings extend Schein's model by showing how dysfunctional basic assumptions become codified into artefacts and procedures, resource-allocation rules and promotion practices so that they acquire procedural legitimacy (Schein and Schein, 2021; Westover, 2024). They support the adaptive-culture argument that arrogance, insularity and internal privilege characterize declining organizations (Denis, 2023; Pathirana, 2022), and they illustrate what the Competing Values Framework would describe as a dysfunctional mix of control and improvisation (Cameron, 2022). Resistance to change at the media house was rooted in fear and power rather than ignorance, consistent with the cognitive and emotional perspective of Armenakis and Harris (2023) and with the leadership dependent resistance reported by Khaw, Lee and Tan (2023). The evidence on burnout and withdrawal is consistent with the engagement literature (Kahn, 2021; Schaufeli, 2022), but adds that, in politicized public organizations, withdrawal is reinforced by leadership's interpretation of silence as justification for further control.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Because the three cycles reinforce one another, interventions targeting a single symptom are unlikely to succeed. Three simultaneous moves are indicated. First, leadership stabilisation: leadership selection should prioritise vision, empathy and strategic competence over tenure or political affiliation, and leadership tenure should be protected long enough for cultural change to take root. Second, psychological capital restoration: recognition and reward systems, structured career development and continuous learning should be institutionalised, together with safe grievance channels that reduce fear. Third, de-codification of inequity: resource-allocation and promotion rules should be made transparent and merit-based, breaking the privilege tiers maintained by dominant groups. For policymakers, the findings indicate that governance reforms under the Public Entities Corporate Governance framework must address board–management interference if cultural transformation is to be sustained.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify the organisational culture challenges at the media house. Survey and interview evidence converged on a culture characterised by resistance to change, leadership instability, siloed operations, fear, inequitable resource allocation, weak recognition and limited learning. These challenges are not isolated: they form a self-reinforcing system, captured in the core theme of Institutionalised Stagnation and theorised as the Entrenched Dysfunction Framework. The study's main contribution is to explain why under-performing public broadcasters remain stuck despite awareness of the need for change: their dysfunction is codified, psychologically extractive and embedded in failed communication and execution.

The study has limitations. It is a single-case study of one media house, so findings are analytically rather than statistically generalisable. Survey data are perception-based and cross-sectional, and the very high levels of agreement may reflect shared grievance as well as shared experience. Future research should test the Entrenched Dysfunction Framework comparatively across public broadcasters in the SADC region, examine the role of political influence longitudinally, and develop measures of the three cycles for quantitative testing.

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