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# Aligning Organizational Culture & Collaboration Spaces

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**Abstract**

Over the years, workplace trends have pushed collaboration as the answer to a wide range of business challenges, claiming to solve everything from employee engagement to the need to innovate. With one of today's challenges being collaboration overload,<sup>1</sup> we need to be smarter about how to leverage working together at work. We need to honor the different ways we accomplish our best work, by ourselves and with others. Here, at Haworth, we always recommend starting with culture. Pairing the Competing Values Framework™ with understanding different modes of collaboration can start you on the path to providing the right kind of collaborative spaces in your workplace.

**Keywords**

- Culture
- Culture type
- Organizational culture
- Collaborate
- Collaborative
- Collaboration modes
- Innovation
- Focus

**Takeaways**

It's human nature to work together. Innovation and problem-solving rely on it. The ideal way to do this is in shared physical space. How can we best facilitate the natural drive to work together and do it safely? First, consider health and safety guidelines for shared spaces. Then, examine the existing and desired organizational culture and subcultures. Finally, build on how people behave in those cultures to create spaces that afford them intuitive modes of working together while still preserving individual activities.

Organizations remain viable as long as they innovate. How much innovation are you seeking? How quickly do you desire to achieve it? Leverage the Competing Values Framework of organizational culture to strengthen and evolve your organization for the desired outcome.

The physical workplace should reflect organizational goals and values. While people will gather to inform each other, connect socially, think strategically, and do work simultaneously to reach those goals, parts of the organization will have preferred ways of working together. Understanding and designing for these preferences will set the stage for your people to do their best work.

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1. Cross, Rebele, and Grant, 2016; Bernstein and Turban, 2018.

Both collaboration and individual focus work are essential ingredients to employee productivity and organizational innovation.<sup>2</sup> While it may seem like individual work is at odds with collaborative work, the organization that recognizes and honors the best way to leverage both for its goals is the one that succeeds at innovating.<sup>3</sup> Our research reveals that the environment for individual work can vary based on both the person and the task,<sup>4</sup> so how does collaboration vary? And, how do we best support it in a workplace? The key is in understanding how the organization’s culture informs its specific collaboration needs.

“It is important to understand how an organization works, its culture and competencies, before you can effectively design a workspace where innovation happens.”

Jeff DeGraff, PhD  
Professor, University of Michigan Ross School of Business

### The Role of Organizational Culture

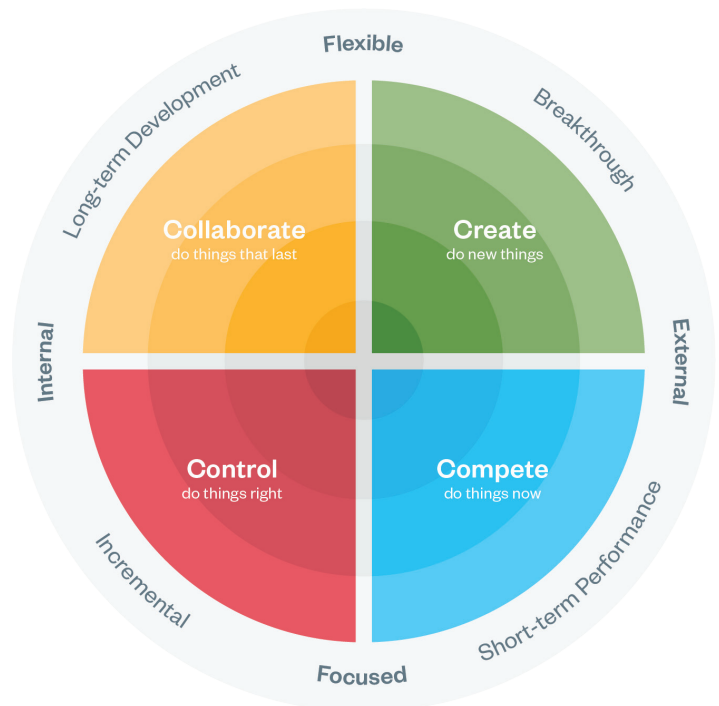
Organizational culture is a subtle, yet powerful undercurrent that guides worker behavior and is comprised of its artifacts, assumptions, and values.<sup>5</sup> It is the sum of leadership styles, procedures, goals, and many other characteristics that make an organization unique. One of the most powerful artifacts for an organization is its built environment—the space that communicates its values.<sup>6</sup>

The Competing Values Framework of organizational culture was developed with four core values, each representing competing or complementary approaches to innovation and effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> This legacy framework, supported by years of research,<sup>8</sup> continues to be an effective tool for understanding what makes organizations successful. It distills a wide range of attributes into four primary culture types:

1. **Collaborate cultures** seek long-term development; they tend to be open, friendly, and sharing. They are relationship-oriented and value teamwork, participation, and consensus.
2. **Create cultures** seek breakthrough innovation; they are dynamic, entrepreneurial, and creative. These organizations or groups are idea-oriented and embrace innovation, risk-taking, and being on the leading edge.

3. **Control cultures** seek incremental improvement; they are more structured and formal. They are process-oriented, and success means efficiency, dependable delivery, standardization, smooth scheduling, and risk management.
4. **Compete cultures** seek short-term growth; they are results-driven, competitive, and speed-oriented, unified by an emphasis on winning and reputation.

It is important to note that while all organizations will have a predominant culture, it is natural and necessary to have subcultures. The marketing department, for example, may resemble a Collaborate culture, while accounting is likely to exhibit a more Control culture. And, both could be embedded within an organization with an overall Compete culture.



People within and across subcultures need to work well with each other to meet their organization’s goals. If they can’t do this, their organization will be less effective.<sup>9</sup> Although groups may have preferred ways of working together, all will need to collaborate in various ways. Thus, in order to support and enhance collaboration, we also need to understand what brings them together.

2. Johnson and Scott, 2017.  
3. Johnson and Scott, 2017.  
4. Johnson et al., 2019.

5. Schein, 1990.  
6. Kupritz, 2017.  
7. Cameron et al., 2006.

8. Büschgens, Bausch, and Balkin, 2013.  
9. Cameron et al., 2006.

### Why We Gather: Collaborative Modes

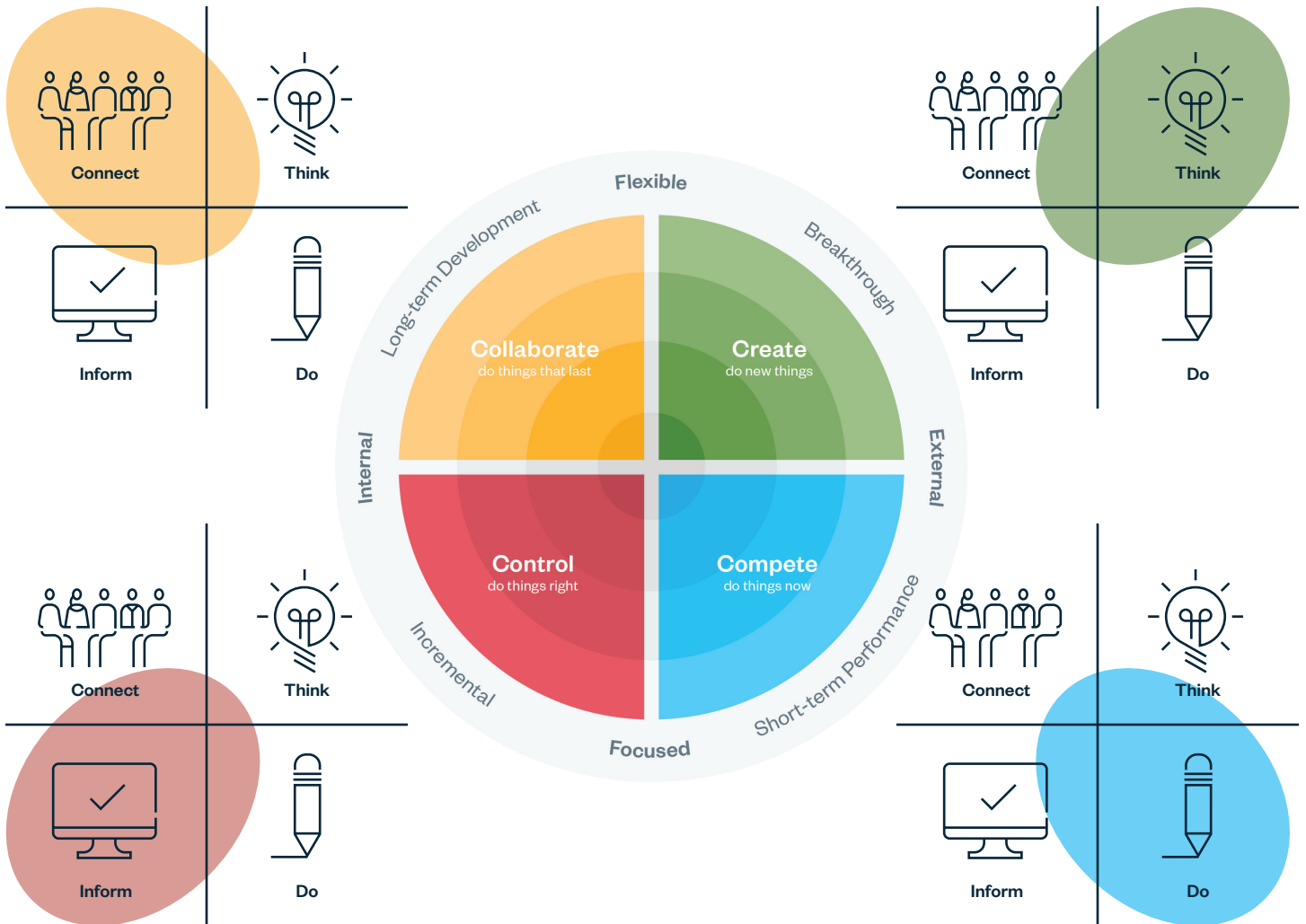
Research continues to build evidence that we are social and thrive in community.<sup>10</sup> We often accomplish more together than alone,<sup>11</sup> and these tenets are inherently intertwined in the workplace.<sup>12</sup>

Why we gather with one another at work can be distilled down to four reasons:<sup>13</sup>

1. To **connect** socially
2. To **think** together
3. To **inform** one another
4. To **do** something specific

While colleagues may interact in all four ways, one collaboration mode for a group is likely to stand out as preferred—best supporting their primary goals and activities. Since goals are driven by culture, they are often inferred from the culture type.

Let’s look at how organizational culture and collaboration needs may intersect.



10. Reis et al., 2000.

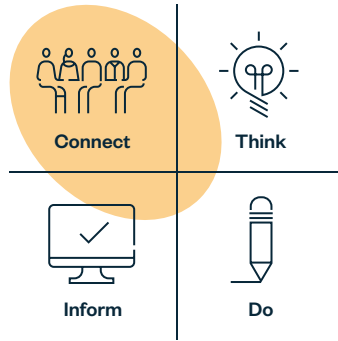
11. Sawyer, 2000.

12. Grant, 2008.

13. Mittleman, 2009.

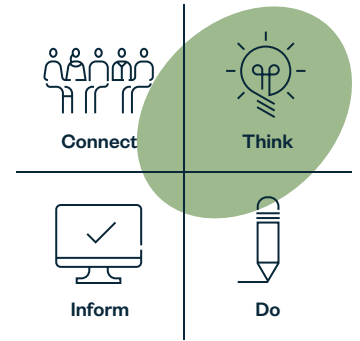
**Collaborate Culture**

**Preferred Mode: Connect**  
 This culture emphasizes the value of group work and often operates like extended families. Group spaces are most used frequently for informal meetings or get-togethers. They should be free-form and allow for a mix of activities. Additional spaces must also support workers as they meet for specific tasks, strategic sessions, and all-hands meetings.



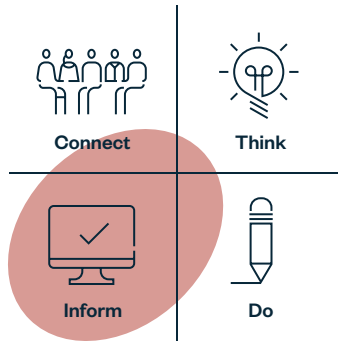
**Create Culture**

**Preferred Mode: Think**  
 Those with a Create culture take risks, focus on big ideas, and tend to be agile in their actions. Consider high-tech, advertising, or product development firms. Key spaces should be designed for creative problem solving—but remember that the results of these sessions must be presented and acted upon, which can require different types of spaces.



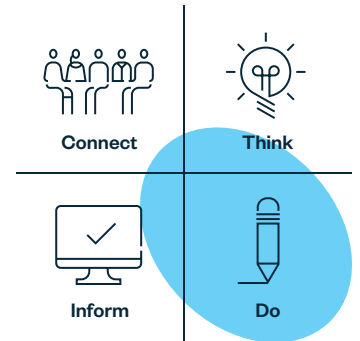
**Control Culture**

**Preferred Mode: Inform**  
 In a hierarchical Control culture, such as a government agency or major manufacturer with multiple levels of management, information may be most often delivered in a scheduled meeting or formal presentation. Still, groups might need to determine execution plans and are likely to have some social ties.



**Compete Culture**

**Preferred Mode: Do**  
 Compete spaces must support workers as they drive to complete tasks quickly. Space should provide convenient access to shared tools and work, with ergonomic task seating. In addition, people will need areas that accommodate strategic thinking, presenting ideas, and connecting informally.



**Collaborative Mode Design Implications**

When designing spaces for collaboration, the activities performed, the length of time spent in the space, and the number of participants may vary according to the collaboration mode. The environment should be aligned to best meet the specific needs of the workers and groups involved. In addition to the collaboration modes, design decisions should entertain questions such as:

- Who will occupy the space?
- How often do people need to gather?
- Should the space be dedicated or shared?
- How many people should the space accommodate?
- What level of privacy is desired/needed?
- What are the acoustical considerations?
- How permanent or mobile should the space’s features and tools be?

All four organizational cultures need spaces that support all four collaboration modes. But the size, number, and arrangement of spaces required by a particular group will depend on their goals and the tasks they need to perform in order to reach their goals.

Certainly, facility and space planning are more complicated when based on the needs of specific group activities. But accommodating groups that occur naturally in an organization can cut down on costly physical changes over the long run. Planning around group needs also aligns the facility with the strategic goals of an organization by helping workers collaborate in ways that intuitively best suit their primary activities.

## Design Considerations

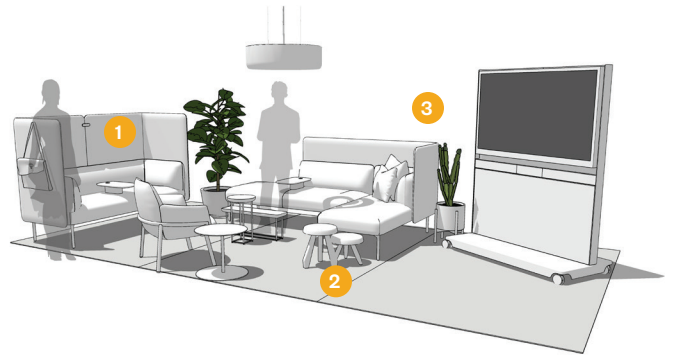
### Activities

### Considerations

#### Connect

- Finding common interests
- Chatting about personal experiences
- Connecting people with opportunities
- Sharing humor
- Enjoying discussion topics that are wide and varied
- Avoiding one-sided discussions
- Organizing group events
- Enjoying discussions that are not solution driven
- Socially adaptable in any situation

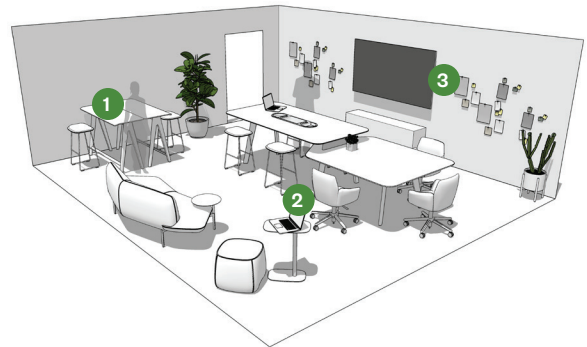
1. Impromptu spaces to sit and connect throughout the building encourage short conversations and idea sharing
2. Multipurpose spaces requires furniture that allows them to be arranged to suit a variety of activities
3. Where possible, soft seating and an element of residential design can be incorporated



#### Think

- Brainstorming
- Taking risks
- Developing broad strategies
- Starting new experiments
- Making sure it's never been done before
- Looking for patterns in information
- Generating different ideas
- Surprising everyone with a new idea
- Talking about future possibilities

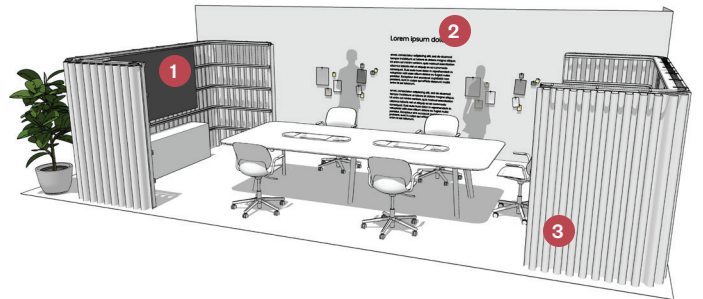
1. Dedicated team space to perform focus work and development of new ideas
2. Multiple opportunities and destinations throughout to work on various stages of innovation
3. Access to digital technology, analog, and inspirational project support



#### Inform

- Persuasively sharing information
- Getting an idea across
- Lecturing on a particular subject
- Keeping attention and building enthusiasm
- Conveying information to large numbers of individuals
- Providing structure and organization to materials
- Giving and gathering information

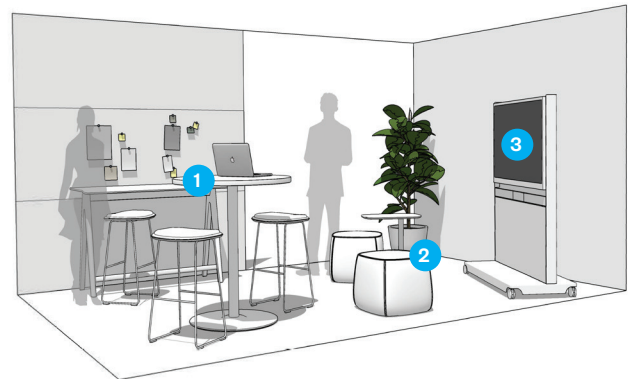
1. Access to digital technology for project support and development
2. Access to writable and tackable surfaces for displayed thinking and brainstorming
3. Acoustic privacy should be ensured to limit visual and auditory distractions



#### Do

- Keeping people accountable
- Improving productivity
- Successfully achieving milestones
- Quickly overcoming roadblocks
- Developing and keeping schedules
- Driving to decisions
- Choosing an idea
- Delivering results

1. Dedicated team space to perform focus work and development of new ideas
2. Multiple opportunities and destinations throughout to work on various stages of innovation
3. Access to digital technology, analog, and inspirational project support



## Common Features of All Collaboration Spaces

While every environment will have its own requirements, there are some commonalities. All well-designed spaces should provide appropriate ergonomic, analog, and digital tools. Occupants benefit from views of nature and access to daylight. And the overall layout of the floorplan should address appropriate adjacencies. In fact, it's particularly important that tactical execution spaces are located near individually assigned workspaces for speed, while strategic thinking spaces are located away from high circulation paths<sup>14</sup> to prevent (or at least minimize) distractions from and interruptions to deep work.

An organization's success is rooted in how well its people work together.<sup>15</sup> Since the workplace will continue to be where people gather to accomplish goals together, coordinating collaborative efforts with individual work needs<sup>16</sup> so that they align rather than compete is paramount. When designed with an understanding of organizational culture and different collaboration modes, individuals, the groups they form, and the organization within which they work can all be more effective.

### Contributors



**Brad Burrows**, AIA, IIDA, LEED AP, ID+C, NCARB, NCIDQ, is an architect who specializes in high-performance workplace strategies. With 26+ years of experience, he is a key link in leading global clients through research data interpretation and analysis, to help shape viable strategies and design solutions. As Senior Workplace Design Strategist and North America Strategy Manager for Haworth, Brad collaborates with clients to translate their organization's culture and business vision into an overall space concept strategy, aligning teams toward a common vision.



**John Scott**, LEED AP, NCIDQ, holds a B.F.A. in Interior Design with an emphasis on Interior Architecture. He has extensive workplace design experience, with specific expertise in workplace strategy, design development, and change management. As a knowledge leader for Haworth's Workplace Strategy team, John's focus is on the translation of workplace research into applied design, leading to the solution that best serves a client's strategic needs.



**Beck Johnson** holds a B.S. in Scientific and Technical Communication and an M.A. in Communication. With 15+ years of experience in social science research methodologies and as a Senior Research Specialist at Haworth, she conducts primary and secondary research at the intersection of human and organizational performance in the workplace.

Powered by Competing Values, LLC®, Haworth partners with the Innovatrium, a global leader in innovation, to leverage the Competing Values Framework as a key element in creating high-performing work environments known as Organic Workspaces.

14. Johnson et al., 2019.

15. Cameron et al., 2006.

16. Johnson and Scott, 2017.

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