When the Water Learns to Flow Uphill

On Culture, Memory, and the Audacity of Building What Has Never Been Built Before

---

Peter Drucker Challenge Essay Contest 2026

Professional Category

Theme: Culture between Tradition and Change

How does Culture drive Innovation?

Author's Note

Culture has a way of telling you what you are allowed to want.

I grew up in a country where the person who admitted they were struggling was quietly advised to pray harder, where the family that stayed together was the one that kept its pain inside, and where the gap between what people were living and what they were permitted to say aloud was so wide that most people never tried to cross it. That gap is what eventually brought me to mental health work. And it is what brought me to this page.

I am a mental health therapist and also the Executive Director of a mental health-focused nonprofit (which I will be referring to throughout this essay as UMI) I founded barely one year ago. This essay argues from inside a culture I belong to, a country I love, about a gap I am determined to close. Everything that follows is my most honest attempt at an answer to: how does culture drive innovation?

I. BEFORE THE WORDS, THE POSTURE SPOKE

A personal reflection

> *In Yoruba culture, you do not simply greet an elder. You become smaller. A girl drops to her knees. A boy prostrates fully, chest to the floor, forehead close to the earth. It is called ikunle and idobale, and it is taught before a child can fully understand what they are doing or why. You absorb it the way you absorb your mother tongue: through repetition, through correction, through the bodies of the adults around you demonstrating what respect looks like before anyone gives it a definition. I grew up doing this. I grew up understanding, at a level beneath conscious thought, that the space you are permitted to occupy is always relative to who else is in the room. Years later, I would find myself watching a version of this same logic play out in professional spaces. The deference performed, the disagreement swallowed, or the idea that died before it reached the table because the person holding it had already decided, from long cultural training, that this was not their moment to speak. I recognise it because I have done it. And because I am now, in a strange turn, trying to build something that asks people to do the opposite.*

There is a phrase I have heard more times than I can count since I began working in mental health in Nigeria. It arrives in different tones, from different mouths, but the message never changes: "*We don't do **that** here.*" Sometimes it is a soft deflection. Sometimes it is genuine bewilderment. Sometimes it is a wall, politely constructed but firm. It has come from teachers at school gates, from community members at outreach events, from well-meaning relatives of people who were falling apart and had been advised, by everyone around them, to pray it away. "That" in this case refers to therapy: meaning the deliberate act of sitting with someone trained to listen and saying aloud what you have only ever whispered to God or to the ceiling at 2am. Therapy is, in the dominant frame of many Nigerian communities, a foreign concept. It belongs to a world that is not ours. A cultural intrusion dressed in clinical attire. And yet, here I am. A mental health therapist, barely one year into building an organisation dedicated to making that very thing understood, accessible, and ours.

What *ikunle and idobale* taught me, and what every school gate and community hall has since confirmed, is that culture does not merely push back against new ideas. It decides which ideas are even thinkable in the first place.

Which brings us to the question underneath this essay: ***does culture innovate, or does culture resist?*** The answer is that it does both, simultaneously, and almost always in the same breath. Culture is the grammar of collective life. It determines what can be said, what must be left unsaid, what counts as progress, and what counts as betrayal. Every organisation, every society, every movement that has ever tried to change something has had to reckon with this grammar: learning to speak it fluently, or discovering, too late, that it cannot be bypassed.

II. THE CULTURE WE ARE WORKING AGAINST, AND WITH

A personal reflection

> *The first time a teacher at one of our school outreach programmes asked me why I was teaching children to be weak, I did not have a quick answer. She was not hostile. She was genuinely confused. In her understanding, emotional resilience meant learning to absorb difficulty without complaint. She had built her life on that understanding. Her students had been shaped by it too. The idea that examining a feeling could make you stronger rather than softer was, to her, a logical contradiction. I spent the drive home turning that conversation over in my mind, asking myself how you reach someone whose entire framework for strength is built in direct opposition to what you are offering. That question has followed me ever since.*

That teacher was not an outlier. She was a precise expression of the culture she had grown up inside, and that is exactly the point. Innovation literature tends to treat culture as a variable: something to be managed, adjusted, eventually overcome. The assumption underneath most innovation frameworks is that if you design the right programme or find the right message, adoption will follow. What this framing consistently misses is that culture is never simply an obstacle between a good idea and its destination. Culture is the terrain itself. Innovating without understanding it is like designing a ship without accounting for the sea.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz described culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[1] In practice, this means culture is not what people believe but the form through which belief becomes possible. And if culture is grammar, then an innovation that ignores it is not simply ineffective. It is illegible. That is a structural problem, not a messaging one.

In Nigeria, this plays out with particular force in mental health. The country carries a deep inheritance of communal care: the extended family as a system of distributed support, the elder as a living archive, the proverb as wisdom compressed into

portable form. There is an Igbo saying, *onye wetara oji wetara ndu*, which translates as: he who brings kola nut brings life. The act of bringing is the relationship and the relationship is the wellbeing.

However, these same structures have also become the architecture of a particular kind of suffering. When a child is struggling emotionally, the culturally sanctioned response is prayer, patience, or a firm instruction to be strong. Mental illness is frequently understood as spiritual failure, personal weakness, or a family matter to be resolved privately, precisely the conditions under which psychological distress compounds. The communal instinct that could be mental health's greatest asset has instead become the reason people do not seek help until the crisis is undeniable.

Peter Drucker wrote that culture eats strategy for breakfast.[2] What Drucker understood is that culture is the environment in which strategy either takes root or withers. In communities where psychological suffering is understood as a spiritual matter, a mental health organisation is operating outside its jurisdiction before it has even begun. The innovation challenge is therefore epistemic before it is anything else. The task is to expand what a community is willing to recognise as real.

And yet, framing all of this purely as resistance would miss something important. The same cultural instinct that makes Nigerians reluctant to acknowledge psychological vulnerability also makes them extraordinarily responsive to solutions framed around collective wellbeing. When mental health is positioned as something that affects your family, your children, your community's future, rather than as a private confession of individual weakness, the conversation changes. Doors open. That gap between resistance and responsiveness is where the work lives and where the innovation begins.

Table 1. *Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Innovation in Collectivist Societies*

Dimension	Orientation	Effect on Innovation	Nigeria (Est.)
Power Distance	High	Authority gatekeeps who can propose change	77 / 100
Individualism	Collectivist	Change must benefit the group to gain acceptance	30 / 100

Uncertainty Avoidance	Moderate-High	New approaches face resistance without trusted framing	55 / 100
Long-Term Orientation	Mixed	Tradition respected; pragmatic adaptation also possible	13 / 100

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., & Minkov, M. Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010. Nigerian scores estimated from Hofstede Insights country data.

III. THE STORY AS INFRASTRUCTURE

A personal reflection

> *There was a woman at one of our community sessions who sat at the back of the room the entire time. Arms crossed. Face giving nothing away. I had seen that posture before. It is the posture of someone who came because they were told to, and who has already decided that nothing here will be relevant to them. We were doing what we always do: telling true stories about what it feels like to be a Nigerian carrying things they have never been given permission to put down. At some point in the session, one of our facilitators shared something personal. Something specific. Something that did not sound like advocacy or awareness or any of the polished language that tends to make people feel observed rather than seen. The woman at the back uncrossed her arms. By the end of the session she was the last person in the room. She did not say much. She just said: I thought I was the only one. That sentence is the entire reason UMI exists.*

UMI has always been a storytelling platform. It is who we are, from the very beginning. Before there was a registered nonprofit, before there was a team, before there was any programme structure worth describing, there was a conviction that the most powerful thing a voice could do was tell the truth about what was happening inside Nigerian minds. We began with stories because it was the only place that felt true enough to begin.

There is a substantial body of research suggesting that narrative is not merely a vehicle for information but a form of cognition in its own right. The cognitive psychologists Roger Schank and Robert Abelson argued that "virtually all human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences."[3] What this means for mental health advocacy in a culture where psychological suffering has been assigned entirely different explanations is significant: before information, recognition must come first. A person does not open up because they have been given accurate data. They open up because something they have heard reflects something they have lived. The story creates the conditions. Everything else follows.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur argued that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative."[4] For communities whose understanding of psychological suffering is embedded in stories of spiritual attack,

family failure, or personal moral weakness, the most urgent innovation available is an alternative story. One that does not demand the erasure of the existing narrative but expands the imaginative space around it.

This is why UMI has consistently pushed back against pressure from institutional funders to treat storytelling as supplementary to the real work of service delivery. For this organisation, the story is the service. The permission a story grants a person to recognise their own experience is the first and most essential thing UMI offers. Take it away, and what remains is a programme built to reach people who already believe they deserve help. That is a far smaller and far better-served group than the one this work exists for.

IV. THE CULTURE WE ARE BUILDING

A personal reflection

> *I once sent a message to my team asking for honest feedback on a programme we had just run. Everyone responded. Everyone said it went well. Three days later, I found out through a completely separate conversation that two people had significant concerns about it, had discussed those concerns with each other at length, and had collectively decided not to bring them to me. When I asked why, the answer was simple and devastating: they did not want to seem like they were complaining. That moment taught me more about organisational culture than any framework I have since read. The problem was not my team. The problem was the air we were all breathing.*

Drucker described organisational culture as "the shared values and practices that determine how work actually gets done."[5] For UMI, I would extend that definition: organisational culture is also the shared understanding of why the work matters, who it is for, and what each person is willing to risk in service of it.

We built our internal culture deliberately, and this matters more than it might sound. Nigerian professional norms, including deference to seniority, the performance of confidence in the presence of genuine uncertainty, and the instinct to protect harmony over candour, can silently reproduce the very dynamics UMI is trying to disrupt in the communities it serves. An organisation that wants to create spaces where people feel safe being honest about their mental health must first become a team where people feel safe being honest about their work. One cannot exist without the other being built first.

Geert Hofstede's cross-cultural research, conducted across more than seventy countries, identified power distance as one of the most consequential variables in how organisations actually function.[6] In high power distance cultures, which include most of sub-Saharan Africa, the distance between those in authority and those who are not is expected, respected, and quietly reproduced at every level. Agreement is frequently performed rather than felt. This is not dysfunction but rather a system doing exactly what it was designed to do: preserve stability and protect relationships. The problem, for an organisation like UMI, is that protecting relationships and

telling the truth are often in direct tension. And truth, in mental health work, is non-negotiable.

The practical response has been a set of deliberate, repeated choices: structured check-ins where each person is asked directly what they need rather than only what they have delivered; a standing agreement that disagreement in good faith carries no consequence; and a leadership posture, modelled as consistently as possible, of visible uncertainty. When I tell my team I do not have the answer to a problem we are facing, I am not confessing weakness. I am demonstrating that this is an organisation where uncertainty is permitted to exist in the open, rather than being dressed as confidence and passed back down.

This connects to what Drucker described as the central challenge of leading knowledge workers: creating conditions in which people's thinking can actually function.[7] Psychological safety, as researcher Amy Edmondson has shown, is the single most reliable predictor of team learning and innovation.[8] It cannot be mandated. It can only be demonstrated, repeatedly, until people begin to believe from evidence rather than instruction that it is genuinely safe to speak.

The daily negotiation between a culture that teaches caution and an organisation that requires candour generates no metrics and appears in no programme report. And yet without it, everything else rests on ground that has not been properly prepared. Culture, as Drucker understood, is not the backdrop to the work. It is the work.

V. WHAT CULTURE OWES THE FUTURE

A personal reflection

> *Someone asked me last year, genuinely and without unkindness, when I thought Nigerians would be ready for this work. It was not a hostile question. It was the kind of question that comes from someone who sees what you are doing, respects it, and is privately uncertain it will ever find the traction it needs. I understood the spirit of it. What I could not agree with was the premise. The question assumed that readiness is a state a culture arrives at before the work begins, like weather clearing before a journey. But in my experience, readiness is a condition the work itself creates. The ground does not become receptive and then receive you. You turn it, repeatedly, until it does.*

Culture, by its very nature, is conservative. It protects what has already been agreed upon. It moves slowly, it changes reluctantly, and it reserves its warmest welcome for ideas that already sound familiar. Mental health in Nigeria does not yet sound familiar. And yet the work continues, because the alternative, which is to wait for familiarity to arrive on its own, is an abdication.

Innovation, in this context, is not primarily about technology or capital or scale. It is about expanding what a community believes is worth paying attention to. What UMI is contributing to, through every story told and every programme facilitated, is a slow but deliberate expansion of what Nigerian culture considers thinkable. It is the only process that produces something durable. We have proof.

Drucker wrote that the purpose of management is to enable people to contribute to society.[9] What culture determines here is who gets counted as a contributor and what kinds of contribution are recognised as legitimate. Part of what UMI is building is a culture in which the person who tends to their psychological wellbeing is understood to be contributing, not retreating. In which the community that invests in mental health infrastructure is understood to be strengthening itself, not admitting weakness. That reframing, from deficit to investment, from shame to responsibility, is where the real innovation lives. Everything else is detail.

Drucker also wrote that the best way to predict the future is to create it.[10] For those building in contexts where the dominant response to the work is still bewilderment,

scepticism, or that familiar phrase; “we don't do that here”, creating the future becomes a deliberate decision to keep going before the world around us has agreed that going is worthwhile. This is what culture-driven innovation looks like.

This is how the water learns to flow uphill.

Notes and References

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.
2. Peter F. Drucker, as widely attributed; cited in Robert H. Waterman, *The Renewal Factor* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).
3. Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, "Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story," in *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story*, edited by Robert S. Wyer Jr. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 1.
4. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.
5. Peter F. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 455.
6. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 61.
7. Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 3.
8. Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 15.
9. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, 455.
10. Peter F. Drucker, attributed across multiple lectures and interviews from the 1980s onward; widely cited in management literature.

Generative AI Disclosure

In preparing this essay, I used a Generative AI tool (Chatgpt) to help organise my initial outline and generate a few structural prompts that guided my thinking before I began writing. All ideas, arguments, personal reflections, and written content are entirely my own. The experiences described, the analysis offered, and the conclusions drawn reflect my lived work and independent perspective as a professional.

Prompts Used

- "What are the key themes I should explore when writing about how culture drives innovation in a Nigerian mental health context?"
- "How should I structure an academic essay that weaves personal experience with organisational leadership and management theory?"
- "What subheadings would work well for an essay that moves from cultural identity to organisational culture to the future of mental health innovation?”