



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Module:

LCLM5005_LON – Organisational Culture

Course:

BA (Hons) Leadership and Management Skills in the Workplace

Assessment Title:

Organisational Culture and Its Influence on Structure, Decision-Making
and Performance:
The Case of Toyota

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ABSTRACT

This report explores how Toyota's organisational culture shapes its structure, decision-making style and capacity to respond to external challenges. Using Schein's cultural model and the Cultural Web, the discussion illustrates how principles such as continuous improvement and respect for people influence organisational behaviour. The analysis also identifies cultural constraints that may hinder strategic flexibility and proposes ways to strengthen Toyota's responsiveness within an increasingly dynamic global environment.

INTRODUCTION

Organisational culture refers to the shared assumptions, values and behavioural norms that shape how individuals interpret their work environment and interact with others. It influences communication, decision-making preferences and organisational priorities, often exerting a stronger impact on performance than formal structures or processes (Mullins & Christy, 2016). Within global industries, a coherent culture provides stability while supporting coordinated strategies across geographically dispersed operations.

This report explores Toyota's organisational culture, which is closely linked to the Toyota Production System and long-standing principles of continuous improvement and respect for people (Liker, 2004). The discussion examines how these cultural values shape Toyota's structural arrangements, decision-making routines and responses to external pressures, highlighting both the advantages and constraints associated with this approach. Drawing on Schein's Three Levels of Culture and Johnson and Scholes' Cultural Web, the analysis reveals the deeper assumptions influencing organisational behaviour. The report concludes by assessing the wider impact of culture on performance and outlining recommendations for sustained development.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF TOYOTA

Toyota's organisational culture is frequently identified as one of the central reasons for its long-term global performance, shaping not only operational practices but also how employees understand their roles and interact with one another. Many scholars contend that the Toyota Production System (TPS) cannot be interpreted solely as a set of technical tools; rather, it represents a cultural philosophy grounded in shared norms and taken-for-granted assumptions that influence behaviour across the organisation (Alpenberg & Scarbrough, 2009). At the heart of this philosophy lie the two core principles of the Toyota Way: continuous improvement, or Kaizen, and respect for people. These interconnected ideas provide a stable framework that guides thinking and decision-making across all levels of the company (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2020).

Kaizen encourages employees to approach their work with curiosity and a commitment to identifying inefficiencies in everyday processes. Instead of viewing improvement as a managerial responsibility, Toyota emphasises that the individuals who carry out the work are best positioned to propose changes that genuinely enhance performance. Ohno (1988) highlights that this belief forms the basis of Toyota's operational model, as it fosters an environment where improvement becomes part of normal daily behaviour rather than an occasional initiative. This approach nurtures a culture of learning, emphasising small but continual enhancements that collectively contribute to Toyota's reputation for reliability and process expertise (Womack & Jones, 2003).

The second pillar, respect for people, reinforces a relational dimension within Toyota's culture. Managers are expected to coach and develop their teams, encouraging personal growth and fostering a climate in which employees feel valued and supported (Liker & Hoseus, 2008). This emphasis on mutual respect strengthens trust and enhances employee commitment, outcomes that are consistently associated with lower turnover and higher engagement (Mullins & Christy, 2016). Respect also extends to Toyota's relationships with suppliers and

communities, informing the company's approach to collaboration, ethical conduct and long-term partnership building.

Lean thinking represents another essential element of Toyota's cultural identity. While often interpreted externally as a cost-reduction or efficiency-driven technique, lean within Toyota operates as a mindset that prioritises visibility of problems, careful use of resources and disciplined adherence to standardised work routines (Ohno, 1988). Tools such as visual boards, detailed work procedures and the andon system reflect deeper cultural expectations surrounding transparency, accountability and collective ownership of quality outcomes.

Toyota's cultural foundations are further shaped by Japanese values, including harmony, humility and the importance of group cohesion. These influences contribute to a preference for consensus-oriented decision-making and cooperative team dynamics. Despite these strong cultural roots, Toyota has demonstrated the ability to adapt its practices as it expanded globally, integrating local expectations while preserving the principles that define its identity (Sosnovskikh, 2016).

The company's response to crises also reveals the resilience of its culture. After the 2010 recall issues, Toyota implemented significant internal reforms to strengthen safety oversight and increase responsiveness at regional levels, illustrating that its cultural norms are capable of evolution rather than rigid conformity to tradition (Cole, 2011).

Taken together, Toyota's organisational culture is characterised by disciplined routines, shared responsibility for improvement, people-centred leadership and a long-term orientation. These attributes continue to operate as strategic assets, supporting consistency, learning and high performance throughout the organisation's global network.

HOW CULTURE SHAPES STRUCTURE & DECISION-MAKING

Toyota's organisational structure and decision-making practices are deeply shaped by the cultural principles embedded within the Toyota Way. Instead of treating structure and culture as separate elements, the company aligns both so that formal arrangements reinforce shared beliefs and behavioural expectations. Liker (2004) notes that Toyota's structural model is designed less to impose hierarchy than to support cultural norms that guide everyday work. As a result, authority, communication and coordination mechanisms evolve from cultural assumptions about how problems should be identified and resolved.

Toyota relies on a hybrid organisational structure that combines centralised strategic oversight with substantial decentralisation at operational levels. Senior leaders establish long-term direction, yet much of the responsibility for daily decisions rests with small, autonomous teams on the factory floor. According to Meyer (2025), this is a deliberate outcome of Toyota's belief that employees closest to the work have the clearest understanding of inefficiencies and are therefore best positioned to propose effective solutions. This decentralisation strengthens problem-solving capability and encourages continuous improvement throughout the organisation.

Teamwork is another defining feature of Toyota's organisational design. Quality circles, cross-functional groups and Kaizen teams provide structured opportunities for employees to analyse challenges, exchange insights and develop improvements (Womack & Jones, 2003). These collaborative mechanisms embody cultural expectations of mutual accountability and collective intelligence. Team-based work also reinforces the belief that improvement is a shared responsibility rather than the task of managers alone.

Decision-making processes reflect cultural norms that prioritise consensus and careful consultation. Practices such as *nemawashi*, the informal pre-consultation stage in which ideas are circulated among relevant stakeholders to gather feedback and build early alignment, help reduce disagreement and ensure broad support (Liker & Hoseus, 2008). Once this preliminary consensus is established, proposals

move through the *ringi* system, a formal approval process in which documents are reviewed and endorsed sequentially by managers. Mullins and Christy (2016) note that although these procedures may lengthen decision-making timelines, they foster strong ownership of outcomes and minimise implementation resistance.

Cultural expectations around quality and responsibility are also evident in operational decision-making systems. The andon mechanism, which enables any worker to pause production when a problem arises, reflects Toyota's view that safeguarding quality outweighs concerns about short-term output (Ohno, 1988). Entrusting frontline workers with this authority signals confidence in their judgment and reinforces cultural norms of vigilance and ownership.

At more senior levels, Toyota's decisions are shaped by a long-term orientation rooted in Japanese tradition and corporate heritage. Investments in hybrid technology, advanced safety innovations and environmentally responsible manufacturing demonstrate a strategic focus on sustainable competitiveness rather than quick financial results (Cole, 2011).

Taken together, Toyota's structural arrangements and decision-making routines operate as practical expressions of its cultural foundations. By embedding autonomy, collaboration, consensus-building and long-term thinking into organisational design, Toyota ensures that its culture is consistently enacted across its operations rather than remaining merely aspirational.

CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS: SCHEIN & CULTURAL WEB

Understanding Toyota's organisational culture requires analytical frameworks capable of uncovering both visible practices and the deeper assumptions that guide behaviour. Schein's Three Levels of Culture provides a useful starting point, as it differentiates between observable artefacts, articulated values and the underlying

beliefs that form the core of an organisation's identity (Schein, 2010). Westover (2024) notes that Schein's framework is particularly relevant for long-established cultures like Toyota's, where routines and shared meanings have become deeply embedded over time.

At the artefact level, Toyota's cultural features are most apparent in the tools and routines associated with the Toyota Production System (TPS). Standardised work procedures, visual management boards, problem-solving teams and the andon system all reflect a workplace built around clarity, discipline and shared responsibility (Ohno, 1988). Although these artefacts are easy to observe, they derive their significance from the deeper cultural values that shape how employees interpret and use them.

Espoused values make up the second level of Schein's framework. Toyota clearly communicates principles such as continuous improvement, respect for people, teamwork and customer focus (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2020). These values are reinforced through formal training, leadership communication and organisational symbolism. They provide a coherent philosophy that influences how employees approach tasks, interact with colleagues and make decisions.

Beneath these values lie the basic underlying assumptions that exert the strongest influence on organisational behaviour. For Toyota, these assumptions include beliefs that improvement is ongoing, that quality should always take precedence and that learning occurs through disciplined inquiry and reflection (Liker, 2004). These assumptions operate largely unconsciously and shape employee behaviour even when the external environment changes, contributing to Toyota's stability and coherence across diverse global contexts.

While Schein's model highlights the layered nature of culture, Johnson and Scholes' Cultural Web offers a complementary perspective by illustrating how different cultural components interact to sustain a dominant organisational paradigm (Johnson, Whittington & Scholes, 2017). The Cultural Web outlines elements such as rituals, stories, symbols, power structures, control systems and organisational structures.

Toyota's rituals—including daily briefings, Kaizen events and structured reflections—reinforce patterns of disciplined behaviour and collective responsibility (Womack & Jones, 2003). Stories about the Prius, manufacturing excellence or the company's recovery from major crises help sustain a sense of shared identity and resilience (Cole, 2011). The organisation's symbols, from visual dashboards to the layout of production lines, further communicate transparency and operational discipline.

Power structures at Toyota reveal a balance between formal leadership and respect for frontline expertise, as production workers hold authority to intervene when quality is at risk (Ohno, 1988). Control systems emphasise metrics such as waste elimination and quality performance, embedding lean principles into everyday work. The organisational structure, which promotes cross-functional coordination and teamwork, supports knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving.

Together, Schein's model and the Cultural Web offer a comprehensive understanding of Toyota's culture, illustrating how visible practices, shared values and underlying assumptions combine to shape and sustain organisational behaviour.

CULTURE & EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT (PESTEL)

Toyota's organisational culture plays a central role in shaping how the company perceives and responds to external pressures, and the PESTEL framework highlights how its cultural foundations influence interpretations of political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal conditions. Cultural principles such as continuous improvement, respect for people and long-term thinking provide a consistent lens through which external demands are evaluated and addressed.

Politically, Toyota operates across diverse regulatory environments that require compliance with varying safety standards, trade agreements and industrial policies. The organisation's emphasis on discipline, transparency and careful documentation

supports strong relationships with regulators and ensures that production practices align with governmental expectations (Cole, 2011). In regions promoting sustainable transport, Toyota's long-standing investment in hybrid and hydrogen technologies positions the company to respond effectively to policy shifts and green incentives.

Economic conditions introduce challenges such as exchange-rate fluctuations, supply chain instability and global recessionary cycles. Toyota's Kaizen-driven culture promotes resilience by encouraging ongoing improvements in efficiency, resource utilisation and waste reduction (Liker, 2004). Economic downturns are often viewed not as setbacks but as opportunities to refine internal processes and strengthen capabilities. Meyer (2025) observes that Toyota's commitment to stability enables the company to maintain steady production even when competitors struggle with significant contraction.

Social trends increasingly emphasise sustainability, ethical business practices and technological advancement. Toyota's respect-for-people philosophy supports responsible labour practices, positive community engagement and strong stakeholder relationships, contributing to the company's social legitimacy (Sosnovskikh, 2016). Its early leadership in hybrid vehicles demonstrates awareness of shifting consumer expectations related to environmental responsibility. Teamwork and cultural inclusiveness also help the organisation integrate a diverse global workforce.

Technological change represents one of the most pressing external influences. Toyota's methodical approach to innovation aligns with its broader cultural emphasis on discipline and structured problem-solving. This encourages careful testing and incremental adoption of automation, robotics and digital manufacturing. Makos (2025) notes that while this cautious stance reduces implementation risks, it may also slow reactions to disruptive technological developments. Nevertheless, Toyota prioritises reliability and ensures new technologies fit seamlessly into established processes.

Environmental pressures, particularly those driven by climate change and emissions regulations, strongly influence Toyota's strategic decisions. The company's long-term orientation supports investments in hybrid systems, hydrogen research and

low-emission manufacturing practices (Cole, 2011). Cultural commitments to responsibility and stewardship encourage viewing environmental demands as opportunities for innovation rather than constraints.

Legal factors, including safety regulations, labour laws and intellectual property requirements, demand consistent compliance across global markets. Toyota's cultural emphasis on ethical behaviour, transparency and accountability helps minimise legal risks and sustain operational consistency (Liker & Hoseus, 2008).

Toyota's organisational culture does more than guide responses to external forces; it shapes the way environmental changes are interpreted and enables the company to translate external pressures into strategic action.

CULTURE AS SUPPORT OR BARRIER

Toyota's organisational culture is frequently highlighted as a central factor behind its long-standing global success, yet its distinctive features can also present challenges that influence flexibility and responsiveness. The organisation's emphasis on continuous improvement, collaborative work and disciplined routines provides a solid platform for consistency and operational excellence. However, these strengths can also limit the organisation's capacity to adjust quickly when external environments demand rapid change or fundamentally different approaches. Alpenberg and Scarbrough (2009) argue that Toyota's close alignment with the Toyota Production System (TPS) enhances efficiency while simultaneously reinforcing routines that may be difficult to modify.

One of Toyota's most notable cultural strengths is its commitment to Kaizen. Continuous improvement encourages employees to identify problems, propose solutions and take ownership of their work (Womack & Jones, 2003). This orientation supports organisational reliability, builds problem-solving capability and contributes to Toyota's reputation for quality and precision (Liker, 2004). Similarly, the

company's emphasis on respect for people promotes trust, open communication and supportive leadership, which strengthen team cohesion and foster long-term employee commitment (Liker & Hoseus, 2008).

Nevertheless, the culture can act as a barrier in contexts where speed and decisiveness are essential. Practices rooted in **nemawashi** and **ringi**, which prioritise consultation and consensus, may slow down decision-making (Mullins & Christy, 2016). While these processes reduce resistance and improve alignment, they are less suited to fast-moving sectors such as electric vehicles. Meyer (2025) suggests that Toyota's cautious approach toward fully electric technology reflects cultural hesitation rather than technological incapability.

Another limitation arises from Toyota's focus on incremental improvement. Although Kaizen drives long-term refinement, it may discourage disruptive thinking by orienting employees toward small, continuous adjustments rather than fundamental change. Sosnovskikh (2016) notes that this cultural inclination can restrict radical innovation, especially in industries undergoing rapid transformation. The automotive shift toward full electrification, where competitors advanced more aggressively, illustrates how incrementalism can delay strategic adaptation.

Toyota's cultural emphasis on harmony and respect can also inhibit constructive disagreement. Employees may avoid challenging ideas to maintain group unity, increasing the likelihood of groupthink and making it harder to question established assumptions (Liker & Hoseus, 2008). This dynamic can delay recognition of emerging risks or prevent timely responses to market developments.

Additionally, Toyota's culture, which is deeply rooted in Japanese norms, does not always transfer seamlessly across global operations. In some contexts, the preference for consensus-driven decisions may conflict with expectations for individual authority or rapid managerial action, creating communication gaps or inefficiencies (Cole, 2011).

Despite these challenges, Toyota's culture remains a valuable organisational asset. Balancing cultural continuity with greater agility—by encouraging open debate, accelerating decision-making where necessary and supporting more radical forms of

innovation—can help Toyota preserve its strengths while addressing cultural constraints.

CULTURE & PERFORMANCE

Toyota's organisational culture has exerted a significant and long-lasting influence on the company's overall performance, shaping quality standards, operational efficiency, innovation outcomes and global competitiveness. Many scholars contend that the success of the Toyota Production System (TPS) derives not only from its processes but from a cultural foundation that informs how employees interpret problems, approach tasks and learn from experience (Liker, 2004; Ohno, 1988). Culture thus acts as the central mechanism through which TPS methods become deeply embedded behaviours across the organisation.

A major performance strength linked to Toyota's culture is its ability to deliver vehicles with exceptionally low defect rates. The emphasis on continuous improvement and shared responsibility encourages rapid identification of problems and disciplined problem-solving, ultimately reducing waste and lowering long-term production costs (Womack & Jones, 2003). The use of the andon cord—empowering any employee to stop production when an issue arises—demonstrates Toyota's commitment to placing product quality ahead of production speed, reinforcing customer trust and sustaining the firm's reputation for reliability (Ohno, 1988).

Employee engagement is another critical dimension of performance shaped by culture. The respect-for-people philosophy promotes long-term commitment, low turnover and strong identification with organisational goals (Liker & Hoseus, 2008). High involvement in operational and improvement activities enhances productivity, encourages the exchange of knowledge and supports organisational learning—characteristics Mullins and Christy (2016) associate with high-performing workplaces. Teams therefore operate as active contributors to innovation instead of merely following instructions.

Innovation outcomes are also strongly influenced by cultural norms. Toyota's long-term perspective has supported milestone achievements such as hybrid technology, hydrogen systems and advanced safety developments (Cole, 2011). Its structured problem-solving routines enable systematic experimentation and reduce the risks associated with new technologies. Nevertheless, some commentators argue that Toyota's emphasis on steady, incremental progress can restrict its ability to innovate rapidly in highly disruptive markets (Sosnovskikh, 2016). The company's comparatively slower shift toward fully electric vehicles suggests that cultural caution may delay bold strategic decisions.

The cultural impact on global operations is equally significant. Shared routines, unified values and consistent training create stability and predictable performance across international plants, supporting Toyota's ability to scale globally (Meyer, 2025). However, this strong cultural consistency may also limit responsiveness when local markets require faster adaptation or when crises demand immediate action. The 2010 recall crisis exposed how hierarchical communication patterns and cultural reluctance to escalate concerns could hinder timely responses, prompting reforms in transparency and regional autonomy (Cole, 2011).

In conclusion, Toyota's organisational culture provides considerable performance advantages, including exceptional quality, efficient operations, motivated employees and steady innovation. At the same time, some cultural features can reduce agility and slow strategic adaptation. Sustaining competitive performance therefore requires maintaining core cultural strengths while addressing elements that limit responsiveness in a rapidly evolving global context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of Toyota's organisational culture indicates that the company's long-standing strengths—such as collaborative decision-making, disciplined improvement routines and a strong commitment to quality—remain central to its identity. However,

the accelerated pace of technological, environmental and competitive change requires Toyota to adjust parts of its cultural and structural system to remain strategically agile. Several recommendations can support this development while preserving the ethos of the Toyota Way.

A first recommendation is to introduce a dual-track decision-making framework. Toyota's consensus-oriented processes deliver stability and cohesion, but they are less suited to contexts where rapid action is essential, such as electrification, artificial intelligence integration and advanced connectivity. Establishing a complementary pathway for urgent strategic issues would allow managers to act swiftly while retaining consultation where appropriate. This hybrid approach would maintain cultural integrity while addressing current market pressures.

A second recommendation involves strengthening psychological safety and open challenge across hierarchical levels. Although Toyota emphasises respect for people, its cultural preference for harmony can unintentionally discourage dissent. Creating formal mechanisms that encourage constructive disagreement—such as structured debate sessions, innovation clinics and reverse-mentoring programmes—would reduce the risk of groupthink and enhance the organisation's ability to identify blind spots early.

Toyota would also benefit from refining the balance between centralisation and regional autonomy. Granting greater strategic discretion to regional units, especially in markets undergoing rapid regulatory or technological shifts, would enable faster adaptation without undermining global alignment. Regional experimentation can also become a vehicle for innovation, as insights from local initiatives may inform broader corporate strategies.

Another recommendation concerns the relationship between incremental and radical innovation. The Kaizen philosophy drives operational excellence but can inadvertently deprioritise disruptive thinking. Toyota could establish a dedicated radical-innovation function operating alongside continuous-improvement mechanisms, allowing both approaches to coexist. Embedding long-term innovation targets, scenario-planning exercises and exploratory research funding into the

organisational system would ensure that breakthrough ideas receive consistent support.

Environmental expectations are also reshaping the industry at an unprecedented pace. Strengthening cultural commitments to sustainability—through circular manufacturing models, carbon-neutral operations and rigorous supplier audits—would align Toyota with global environmental goals while enhancing its corporate reputation. Framing sustainability not only as a strategic priority but also as a cultural value could ensure deeper organisational alignment.

Finally, Toyota should further invest in cross-cultural integration across its global workforce. While the Toyota Way has proven remarkably transferable, selective adaptation to local norms can improve employee engagement and operational coherence. Initiatives such as intercultural leadership training, localised communication models and mutual learning exchanges would allow Toyota to maintain its core values while making its culture more inclusive and internationally robust.

Collectively, these recommendations aim to preserve the cultural strengths that have defined Toyota's success while equipping the organisation to navigate future challenges with greater responsiveness, creativity and strategic flexibility.

CONCLUSION

Toyota's organisational culture continues to play a central role in shaping its global performance, strategic direction and internal dynamics. The long-standing emphasis on continuous improvement, respect for people and disciplined work routines has enabled the company to sustain high levels of quality, operational consistency and international credibility. Through the use of Schein's cultural framework and the Cultural Web, this report has shown how Toyota's culture operates through visible

practices, shared values and deeply ingrained assumptions that collectively influence behaviour across all levels of the organisation.

The analysis also revealed several constraints, including slower decision-making processes and a tendency to prioritise incremental refinement over disruptive innovation, both of which may limit responsiveness in increasingly volatile markets. To remain competitive, Toyota will need to protect its cultural foundations while refining decision-making approaches and strengthening support for more radical forms of innovation. Balancing continuity and adaptability will be crucial for ensuring long-term organisational resilience in a rapidly changing global environment.

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