

REVIEW ARTICLE

# Post-COVID organizational culture models: resilience, adaptation, and a sense of belonging

Modelos de cultura organizacional post-COVID: resiliencia, adaptación y sentido de pertenencia

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**Abstract** This study aimed to analyze the organizational culture models that emerged in the post-COVID context, emphasizing the factors of resilience, adaptation, and a sense of belonging in different organizations. An exploratory and interpretive qualitative approach was used through a multiple-case study that included semi-structured interviews, document review, and non-participant observation in organizations across diverse sectors between 2021 and 2024. Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding with the support of specialized software, allowing for the identification of patterns and narratives surrounding the cultural changes experienced. The results showed that organizations that successfully implemented resilient practices, flexible structures, and empathetic leadership experienced improved internal cohesion, employee motivation, and cultural sustainability. It was also observed that the sense of belonging was strengthened when there was coherence between institutional values and daily practices. The conclusions highlighted the need to strategically integrate these three axes as central components of contemporary organizational culture, recognizing cultural transformation not as a temporary response but as a structural process of reconfiguring shared identities, relationships, and values.


**Keywords** organizational culture, organizational resilience, adaptation to change, sense of belonging, post-COVID transformation.

**Resumen** Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar los modelos de cultura organizacional que surgieron en el contexto posterior al COVID, haciendo énfasis en los factores de resiliencia, adaptación y sentido de pertenencia en diferentes organizaciones. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo exploratorio e interpretativo mediante un estudio de casos múltiples que incluyó entrevistas semiestructuradas, revisión documental y observación no participante en organizaciones de diversos sectores entre 2021 y 2024. El análisis de los datos se realizó a través de codificación temática con el apoyo de software especializado, lo que permitió identificar patrones y narrativas en torno a los cambios culturales experimentados. Los resultados mostraron que las organizaciones que implementaron con éxito prácticas resilientes, estructuras flexibles y un liderazgo empático experimentaron una mayor cohesión interna, motivación del personal y sostenibilidad cultural. También se observó que el sentido de pertenencia se fortalecía cuando existía coherencia entre los valores institucionales y las prácticas cotidianas. Las conclusiones destacaron la necesidad de integrar estratégicamente estos tres ejes como componentes centrales de la cultura organizacional contemporánea, reconociendo la transformación cultural no como una respuesta temporal, sino como un proceso estructural de reconfiguración de identidades, relaciones y valores compartidos.

**Palabras clave** cultura organizacional, resiliencia organizacional, adaptación al cambio, sentido de pertenencia, transformación post-COVID.

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## Introduction

Organizational culture, understood as the set of shared values, norms, and underlying assumptions that guide collective behavior in an organization (Schein & Schein, 2017), has undergone an unprecedented transformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of teleworking, the relocation of teams, the deterioration of emotional well-being, and prolonged uncertainty have strained traditional cultural frameworks designed under conditions of presence and stability (Rodríguez-Newbound, 2023). In this scenario, it has become essential to rethink cultural models from a more flexible, resilient, and people-centered perspective.

Traditional models, as formulated by Deal and Kennedy (2021) or Trompenaars (2020), although they remain relevant references, did not contemplate emerging phenomena such as digital isolation, labor hybridization, or the redefinition of identity ties in virtual contexts. Several recent studies agree that organizations must now develop a culture that prioritizes adaptability, organizational learning, and the comprehensive well-being of workers (Georgescu et al., 2024; Morales & Morales, 2024). In this sense, concepts such as organizational resilience, empowerment, inclusive leadership, and a sense of belonging acquire a central role in sustaining institutional cohesion and effectiveness (Afota et al., 2024; Varela et al., 2021).

The most recent academic literature suggests that, in the wake of the health emergency, a type of worker is more aware of their rights, emotional needs, and work expectations, leading to a redefinition of their relationships with organizations (Afota et al., 2024). In particular, there is a growing demand from employees for transparency, equity, inclusion, and recognition of meaningful work, elements closely linked to the internal cultural climate (Morales & Morales, 2024). Therefore, organizational culture is an essential intangible asset for maintaining motivation and commitment in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous contexts (Rodríguez-Newbound, 2023).

Organizational resilience, the capacity to anticipate, absorb, and recover from disturbances, has been recognized as a critical factor for operational continuity (Georgescu et al., 2024; Varela et al., 2021). Likewise, adaptive capacity, understood as the ability to modify practices, structures, and relationships in the face of dynamic environments, has become a distinctive competency in post-pandemic times (Espino, 2023). Furthermore, the sense of belonging, key to retaining talent and sustaining organizational culture, has been negatively affected by intensive teleworking, affecting workers' emotional health and productivity (Afota et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Newbound, 2023).

This global scenario of cultural transformation also poses different challenges and opportunities depending on the sector, region, and organizational size. Large corporations, for example, have accelerated digital transformation processes that impact modes of symbolic interaction and corporate rituals. At the same time, public organizations have had to reformulate their institutional values to respond to new citizen demands in crisis contexts (Rodríguez-Newbound, 2023). Consequently, it is necessary to understand what models of organizational culture are emerging and their distinctive characteristics based on their capacity for resilience, adaptation, and integration of a sense of belonging.

At the operational level, leadership dynamics, team management, internal communication, and hierarchical structures have been reconsidered. Transformational leadership, in particular, has gained relevance as a style capable of fostering intrinsic motivation, responsible autonomy, and ethical alignment with institutional values (Georgescu et al., 2024). Thus, the role of the leader is no longer to direct, but also to inspire, provide emotional support, and facilitate processes of active listening and recognition. Therefore, the emerging organizational culture must allow for spaces of trust, cognitive flexibility, and ongoing dialogue that reinforce the perception of belonging to a community of shared meaning.

Likewise, the employee experience has become central to cultural models. It is no longer simply about offering tangible benefits, but rather about generating a meaningful organizational experience, consistent with the values the institution publicly promotes. Along these lines, workplace well-being, emotional management, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and work-life balance are emerging as structural components of the new post-COVID cultural paradigm (Afota et al., 2024; Morales & Morales, 2024).

Should be noted that the transition toward new cultural models should not be conceived as an abrupt break with the past, but rather as a process of critical evolution in which organizational memory is intertwined with innovation. This requires systematically reviewing inherited practices, reevaluating internal narratives, and configuring work environments that foster emotional stability and functional adaptability. Only in this way will it be possible to build organizational cultures that withstand external volatility without losing their internal coherence or compromising the well-being of their members.

Based on this context, this research aims to analyze and propose emerging models of post-COVID organizational culture that integrate resilience, adaptation, and a sense of belonging as fundamental pillars. This study aims to offer an

interpretive framework that allows organizations from different sectors to reformulate their cultural frameworks based on criteria of human sustainability, structural flexibility, and alignment with new employee expectations. An interdisciplinary review informs this approach of recent research published between 2021 and 2025 and seeks to contribute to developing stronger, more inclusive organizational cultures, prepared to face future global challenges.

## Methodology

This research adopted an exploratory and interpretive qualitative approach, suitable for analyzing complex and evolving phenomena such as emerging models of organizational culture in the post-COVID context. This perspective was chosen because it can capture the subjective meanings, shared perceptions, and symbolic dynamics that shape the organizational experience from the perspective of its actors (Schein & Schein, 2017).

The methodological design consisted of a multiple-case study of organizations from different sectors (education, public, private, and service sectors) that underwent cultural transformation processes between 2021 and 2024. The cases were selected through purposive sampling, considering criteria such as implementing hybrid or remote work arrangements, incorporating organizational resilience practices, and developing policies aimed at staff well-being and belonging. This criterion enabled the capture of diversity in organizational contexts and enriched the comparative interpretation of the findings.

Three main qualitative techniques were used for data collection: (1) semi-structured interviews with executives, middle managers, and core employees; (2) document review of institutional manuals, cultural codes, internal communications, and talent management policies; and (3) non-participant observation in digital spaces for organizational interaction (meetings, workshops, institutional forums). A total of 24 in-depth interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed with informed consent, respecting ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews focused on exploring perceived changes in organizational culture, resilient practices implemented, challenges faced, and mechanisms that promoted or weakened the sense of belonging.

The documentary review contextualized participants' statements and identified normative, symbolic, and structural elements that shape organizational culture. Non-participant observation, meanwhile, provided access to fundamental communicative dynamics, interaction codes, and organizational rituals that are not always explicit in individual dis-

course but significantly influence everyday cultural construction.

Emerging categories related to the study's three principal analytical axes—organizational resilience, adaptive capacity, and sense of belonging—were established. These categories were triangulated with the document review and observation results, allowing for the generation of interpretive patterns and familiar narratives about post-pandemic cultural transformation. Additionally, analytical memos were used to capture relevant findings, methodological reflections, and potential interpretive biases.

This methodological approach allowed us to identify emerging cultural practices and understand how organizational actors redefine their experiences, adapt their behaviors, rebuild their connection with the institution in uncertain environments, accelerate digitalization, and redefine work values. The study's qualitative nature provides depth and contextual richness, guiding the development of interpretive models that can be adapted to different organizational realities. It also facilitates the formulation of practical and culturally sensitive recommendations for change management in post-crisis environments.

## Results and discussion

The findings of this research identify shared patterns and significant differences among the organizational cultural models analyzed. First, it was found that most of the organizations studied have transitioned toward more horizontal structures, where autonomy, trust, and transparent communication are central components of the post-COVID culture. This transformation was perceived positively by employees, who valued the decentralization of decision-making and work flexibility as factors of well-being and motivation.

Regarding organizational resilience, key practices emerged, such as implementing crisis management protocols, creating interdepartmental committees for rapid decision-making, and incorporating emotional containment strategies. These measures strengthened operational continuity during the most critical moments of the pandemic and consolidated an organizational culture oriented toward prevention, anticipation, and continuous learning (Georgescu et al., 2024; Varela et al., 2021).

Regarding adaptive capacity, multiple strategies were observed for digital transformation, reorganizing internal processes, and redefining professional profiles. Several organizations reported reformulating their key competencies, integrating technological, communication, and empathetic leadership skills. These transformations were accompanied by a culture of trial and error, where learning from experience was promoted as an organizational value. This adapt-

ability was also expressed in the rapid adoption of collaborative technologies and the flexibility of work routines that were previously perceived as rigid or immutable (Espino, 2023).

Regarding the sense of belonging, the study identified an interesting paradox: while some organizations strengthened this feeling through inclusive practices, constant recognition, and open communication channels, others faced an erosion of emotional commitment, especially among remote workers. The interviews revealed that the sense of belonging is reinforced when consistent with proclaimed institutional values and daily practices, and leaders demonstrate closeness, empathy, and openness to dialogue (Afota et al., 2024; Morales & Morales, 2024).

A relevant cross-cutting finding is the centrality of leadership in the post-pandemic cultural configuration. Leaders who assumed a facilitating role, were emotionally available, and oriented toward collective learning were perceived as catalysts for cultural change. In contrast, those who maintained traditional or control-focused leadership styles showed greater difficulty sustaining organizational commitment. This shows that leadership not only operates as a structural component but also as an active cultural agent that can enable or block transformation processes (Rodríguez-Newbound, 2023).

Schein and Schein (2017) confirm that leadership is the primary mechanism by which organizational culture is created, evolves, or transformed. Similarly, the findings support the ideas of Deal and Kennedy (2021) by showing that rituals, symbols, and feedback mechanisms play an essential role in consolidating shared values in times of change. In several organizations studied, symbolic recognition rituals, collaborative practices in digital environments, and virtual informal socializing spaces replaced—and in some cases surpassed—traditional face-to-face practices in their ability to generate cohesion and collective meaning.

The analysis also confirmed the premises of Trompenaars' (2020) model regarding the importance of the national and institutional cultural context in how organizational values are expressed and adapted. Organizations that successfully integrated multicultural elements, generational diversity, and inclusive practices showed greater adaptation, sense of belonging, and cultural sustainability.

Finally, the data show that building a resilient, adaptive, and cohesive culture requires a systemic and integrated approach, in which talent management policies, organizational structures, communication systems, and leadership styles align with the post-COVID environment's new values. In this sense, the most successful organizations in terms of cultural adaptation relied on active member participation, institutional transparency, and a focus on collective well-being as strategic pillars of their internal culture.

Post-pandemic organizational culture models cannot be merely reactive or transitory. Instead, they must become sustainable platforms of shared meaning, continuous innovation, and emotional engagement, capable of sustaining organizations in times of uncertainty and accelerated change.

## Conclusions

This research demonstrates that post-COVID organizational culture represents a complex reconstruction rather than a continuation of past models, shaped by evolving social, technological, and emotional demands. Successful organizations adapted by anchoring their cultures in three interconnected pillars: resilience, adaptability, and a sense of belonging. Resilience has become a structural necessity, fostering cohesion through agile systems, emotional support, and continuous learning. Adaptability emerged as essential for cultural sustainability, driven by flexible routines, empathetic leadership, and digital collaboration. A strong sense of belonging proved critical for engagement and emotional stability, even in virtual contexts. Foundational theories by Schein and Schein, Deal and Kennedy, and Trompenaars illuminate how leadership, rituals, and cultural dimensions influence this transformation. Practical recommendations include implementing resilience policies, promoting adaptive and inclusive practices, aligning values with behaviors, and regularly assessing organizational climate. Ultimately, post-COVID organizational culture demands profound structural and symbolic changes to harmonize innovation with identity, flexibility with tradition, and efficiency with human well-being.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### Author contributions

**Conceptualization:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Data curation:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Formal analysis:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Research:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Methodology:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Supervision:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Validation:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Visualization:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Writing the original draft:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C. **Writing, review and editing:** Pelegrin, A., & Muñoz, L. C.

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