



Case study: Building our organisational culture

June 2024

Why we began this journey

Systemic Justice was established with a clear focus: to transform how the law works for communities that are fighting for racial, social, and economic justice. We are a little over two years into that vision, and we are proud of what we have achieved and learned since we embarked on our journey.

Building an organisational culture is delicate, intricate, and difficult work. Yet it is necessary and critical to organisational progress, to those we serve and to be able to safeguard those who work at our organisation. We decided from the inception of Systemic Justice that we would document¹ our journey of building the organisation and its culture and this first case study is part of that work.

We discussed at length the purpose and value of sharing our journey of building our organisational culture. We were also asked questions by those close to us, why we would do this when organisations seldomly share the honest realities of their journey with the outside world. It is often the case that organisations, whether they are NGOs, charities or companies, only share their success stories or express their views and opinions about their culture when they feel they have to, such as when stories related to their culture are reported in the press.

Mission and purpose driven organisations often suffer from having two faces, an internal and external face, their mission and purpose failing to be representative of their internal culture and workplace experiences. Knowing that you cannot give to others what you do not have, it was critical to us in being a different kind of organisation, to not fall into this contradiction and instead make sure that we operate from a position of genuine commitment to our values.

In reading this case study, you will get a sense of our how we went about the work, our successes, our highs, our failures, and our lows. We did not always get it right, but those learnings allowed us to course correct for the better. Some of us, including myself, also suffered harm on this journey and whilst I do not wish anyone to experience the same, it is important to highlight the realities of what can happen when there are dynamics that counter the progress we try to achieve.

We hope this is helpful to you if you are responsible for steering your organisational culture. We will continue our practice of documenting our work on this front, and will periodically share progress and lessons learned.

We wish you every success on your own journey of building your organisational culture.

Nani Jansen Reventlow
Founder

¹ See <https://nanijansen.org/blog> and <https://systemicjustice.ngo/blog>

1. Putting our values into action

In establishing Systemic Justice as a force for bringing about change in a way that is very different to many in fields of law and justice, we wanted to ensure from the beginning that our organisation was rooted in our foundational values. We defined these values as anti-oppression, intersectionality, and justice, and we examined how they can be used to determine the way we work, both internally with our team and externally with our community partners and other collaborators.

The question of how to truly embed our values across the organisation and in the way we work guided the development of our first policies and working practices. This included collaborative work at team retreats (in-person get-togethers for our remote team which take place three times a year) and with our Board. We saw intentionality and commitment from our team in building Systemic Justice differently. This included:

- People demonstrating a keen interest to join the team, expressing passion and a commitment to support our mission.
- Team members requesting and desiring shared responsibility for the organisation's overall impact and the sharing of 'power' that comes with working towards that.
- Much enthusiasm for the commitment to live the values of anti-oppression, intersectionality, and justice, and the impact of doing this on peoples' experience of the workplace culture at Systemic Justice.
- The only white leaders in the organisation, our Co-Head of Operations, Andreas, and our Head of Legal, Jonathan, undertaking anti-racism leadership coaching.

Lessons from operationalising our values

Despite our commitment and the successes we achieved, we also saw challenges in developing a work culture aligned with our values, including:

- A lack of leadership experience in this methodology and approach to culture building, as this is uncharted territory for many leaders. This was further challenged by capacity to focus on and create the change desired. This method of approach requires deep introspective and strategic work by leaders. It was difficult to create the time we needed and this work deserved, while simultaneously building our programmatic work and operational processes.
- An ongoing pull to keep doing 'business as usual', as the impacts of the systems we operate within continued to show up in and drive peoples' beliefs, perspectives, and behaviours. For example, we had to balance meeting the demands and needs of our community and partners. Our community partners come first and at times we were conflicted by prioritisation: even though we knew our values work would benefit our community and partners in the longer term, we had to prioritise their immediate needs at the time.
- What we call 'the sticky bit' which is the behavioural change required to operationalise the shared commitment to our values. We found that, at the individual level, the change to

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honour the verbal commitments made to help co-create the desired culture was challenging for some team members. We anticipated this challenge because this is often experienced when people try to change their behaviours and practices (such as quitting a habit). It requires continuous effort and commitment combined with acute self-awareness to prevent falling back into old patterns and habits.

- A lack of reciprocity and acknowledgement of the need to contribute to, and not just ‘take’, from the benefits the culture creates (the relative freedom, flexibility, and trust we offer).

In consultation with our Board, we decided we needed to engage the expertise of a third party to support our objectives and to navigate the challenges we encountered. We engaged [Lea Jovy of Mission Equality](#), an organisation we found had the right kind of practical experience assisting mission-driven and values-focused organisations building their culture in an intentional way.

2. Building our culture

We did not shy away from our challenges. Instead, we were open about them with our team and everyone had the opportunity to share how these challenges made them feel, as well as their ideas and thoughts on the solutions to allow us to move forward. After an initial review of what we had in place, talking to members of our team, and understanding the challenges we had faced, together we agreed on a number of initial workstreams for Lea to focus on. These included:

- Alignment of operational values with our organisational values.
- Strategy for developing an employee experience roadmap, aligned to our values.
- An employee handbook, aligned to our values.

It became clear after a few weeks that the work we were doing needed to expand and deepen into additional areas. In our ambition to expand our impact with pace and substance, we were reminded that the journey of building a culture that is different and lasts, takes time. Whilst our journey was organic, Lea helped us develop our overarching roadmap for our culture building.

Better alignment of our operational values with our organisational values

While we already had a set of operational values, they did not fully align with our organisational values, hampering our ability and freedom to ‘live’ them. Our organisational values are:

- **Anti-oppression:** we challenge oppression (racism, queerphobia, ableism, sexism, xenophobia, transphobia) by confronting systems of domination, privilege, exclusion, and institutional violence.
- **Intersectionality:** we approach our work through an intersectional lens that centres how an individual’s social or political identity and personal characteristics can overlap and combine to create different modes of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression.
- **Justice:** we believe that justice means providing all individuals with an equal opportunity to enforce their rights, access remedies, and receive reparations for violations of their rights and to push for change before the courts.

We had originally identified the following operational values to help guide our working environment and how we behave towards each other as colleagues:

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- **Practising empathy and focusing on well-being:** We show empathy towards our colleagues and foster a safe and well-functioning team through the promotion of well-being and self-care.
- **Encouraging a community of care:** We look out for one another, and are willing to step in and support colleagues where needed.
- **Building mutuality and taking responsibility:** We build balanced relationships, where there is shared ownership, mutuality, and accountability. We distribute responsibility equally across the organisation.
- **Building trust and openness:** We promote working relationships that are built and maintained on trust. We are accountable to each other, with an open approach to working methods and clear lines of communication with our colleagues.
- **Practising forgiveness and learning from our mistakes:** We create space for people's growth, and we continue to learn by listening to each other and taking on people's feedback.
- **Encouraging creativity:** We encourage finding strategic and novel ways of approaching problems and our work.
- **Valuing quality and adapting to our workload:** We work to be the best we can be and take pride in our work. We shift into high gear when necessary and rest when we have the opportunity.

Working with Mission Equality, we refined these to:

- **Sustainable Working Practices:** We foster a sustainable approach to the way we work which allows us to deliver on our mission, without being at the expense of peoples' health and wellbeing. We invite each other to find the balance they need while achieving the standard of excellence we want.
- **A Focus On Growth & Learning:** We support everybody's individual path of growth to achieve their potential and deliver the impact they're here to achieve, and recognise how this contributes to the organisational culture we want to cultivate.
- **Fostering Trust & Transparency:** We operate from a foundation of trust in ourselves, in each other and in the organisation to deliver the impact we agree to work towards, together.
- **Taking Personal Responsibility:** We operate from a position of taking personal responsibility to show up in a way that helps ourselves, each other, and the organisation thrive.
- **Freedom Of Expression:** We encourage a culture in which we are free to explore our individual forms of expression and creativity, with the goal of finding strategic and new ways of resolving problems and finding solutions within our work.
- **Excellence Through Flexibility, Agility & Adaptability:** We approach our work with the goal of excellence and value flexibility, agility, and adaptability in our working practices to achieve this standard.

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These changes allowed us to better connect the organisational values to the operational values, allowing us to further bring these values to life in the way we work.

Operationalising our values

We began the work of operationalising these values at our team retreat in October 2023. We explored what 'living' these values might look like in practice. We asked ourselves questions about how we show up for and with each other, how we communicate with each other, and how we address challenges we might come across.

We considered these as a collective and examined what this would require from each of us as individuals. We focused on what role each person had to play to co-create our desired culture.

We collectively identified that living our values in practical terms meant exploring, practising, and honing specific skill sets, including communication, emotional management, and conflict resolution. We also identified our (support) needs and how to meet them. We acknowledged that doing this work required each of us to understand how skilled we are in each area and where growth was needed.

After the retreat, we introduced a process – Individual Paths of Growth – for us each to identify the areas we needed to focus on to be able to co-create the culture we wanted for ourselves and each other, and to document our progress. This required us to:

- Identify and express our own support and growth/development needs.
- Identify ways to meet these needs; either with requests for support from the organisation or things we would commit to addressing ourselves.

We began to work through this process individually with Lea, with the goal to share our paths with each other as a team.

Lessons learned from operationalising our values work

Even though the discussions and deep dive sessions focused on how we live our values and the culture we wanted to achieve, we encountered some challenges. At the retreat, Lea and the majority of the senior leadership team observed the following patterns which were unexpected:

- One of the senior leadership team aligned themselves with the rest of the team, separating themselves from the other senior leadership team members.
- We were informed of some staff blurring the focus of our workplace discussions and reflections. We identified professional immaturity and inappropriate behaviour. The discussion topics were far ranging and unexpected for a workplace professional setting, even within our different kind of organisation.

After the retreat, these patterns played out in ongoing harmful and damaging ways:

- An allegation of misconduct surfaced, made by one team member against another.
- A member of the leadership team used this – and other discomfort experienced from the work we were doing in this area shared by team members – as a power play and opportunity to criticise fellow leadership in what Lea observed and identified as a racially prejudiced way.

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As an organisation, with the values we have, we are committed to addressing incidents that occur on our watch as fairly, thoroughly, and equitably as possible and we brought in a carefully selected external investigation team to do this in relation to the misconduct allegation.

Beyond this, our Founder was met with acute, unjust challenges and criticism surrounding the culture building strategies. For example, despite leading the initiation of the organisational culture work, and explicitly and intentionally allocating time, space, and resources – including external support – to this work, her commitment to the culture building work was continuously challenged. These challenges were noticed and raised as a concern by other leaders and the external experts we had engaged to help us. We also witnessed DARVO (deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender), a reaction that a person accused of wrongdoing may display in response to being held accountable for their behaviour. DARVO involves the accused denying the behaviour, attacking the person accusing them and reversing the roles of victim offender such that they are positioned as the victim. This tactic is well-known to be used by people wanting to avoid accountability for racist behaviour in particular.

These experiences resulted in ongoing harm to our Founder. Even in the face of this, we addressed the issues in collaboration with the Board and leadership in a way that aligned with our values, with a particular focus on respecting dignity and fairness throughout the process.

3. Why and how this happened

You may be wondering – as we did initially – how and why we had to navigate these challenges, when we had been explicitly intentional, collaborative, and clear about creating a different kind of culture in alignment with our values. We dug deep and did the work to assess what had happened.

Andreas Reventlow, our Co-head of Operations, said numerous times: “In an organisation, a culture will simply just develop. It seems far more useful to be intentional about what and how this develops to support the organisation in achieving its mission”. But as we referenced earlier, intentions are one thing, bringing those to life is another.

With the intentionality and dedicated action that we committed to when we brought in Mission Equality to support us in this work, we now recognise that this organisational culture work challenged everyone deeply and, often, uncomfortably and it still does.

We learned that in an effort to be a different kind of organisation, our desire to be ‘all things’ to our team meant that we did not set and uphold firm boundaries from the outset. We assumed such an emphasis would not be required because we were all aligned in living our values based on our extensive discussions and collaborative work. However, as we have been reminded many times, when you give people what they think they have always wanted in a workplace – the flexibility, the freedom, and an opportunity to co-create an environment they *want* to work in – what people don’t realise is that creating a workplace environment and organisational culture is not simply the responsibility of the organisation or the leadership within it. While the organisation’s leadership is obviously responsible for creating the container – the framework and the guidelines for the environment that people work in – the way people actually work within that container is an individual and a collective responsibility. Individually through self-ownership, reflection, and personal development; and collectively through role modelling and speaking up when conduct and practice counter the mission we all signed up for.

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In practice, this means:

- To work in a 'psychologically or emotionally safe' environment every person in an organisation must embrace speaking up with candour and care. Every person must be open to learning and be allowed the chance to learn. Behaviours such as lashing out at people when they disagree with you or challenge your suggestions or refusing to acknowledge any part they might play in difficult workplace dynamics is counter to a psychologically and emotionally safe workplace.
- To work in a transparent environment requires every person to communicate clearly and transparently with the people they work with.
- To promote and build a culture to work flexibly, and benefit from being able to choose what works for you, requires professional maturity, respect, and compromise for everyone. This includes all team members and leaders alike.

In building our culture we invited and encouraged *everybody* to contribute and shape our culture, taking responsibility for *all* aspects of their roles – from the job they had been hired to do, to their part in co-creating a workplace that is committed to doing it differently, to honing the practice of self leadership as a necessary step to effectively leading others.

This requires deep work.

Because to build a different kind of organisation, we need to show up differently. Not in the way we've been required to by the dominant systems and cultures of the world of work today, which operate from a paradigm of power and control, but in a way which means we operate from trust and freedom, in ourselves and for others. Creating the culture we want to create requires each of us to:

- Understand which elements of the organisation's values we may find difficult 'living', and identify how we can balance and address these tensions.
- Be skilled at identifying our own needs for support to be able to do the job we're here to do and have the impact we want.
- Communicate effectively and skilfully so that our messages land in the way we hope and intend; and understand what to do when they don't.
- Manage complex emotions as we do this work because the themes we work with are some of the most challenging and conflict-laden themes in society today and we will – because of our own lived experiences – find some of it incredibly challenging on an emotional level.
- Become exceptional at leading ourselves (that is, be exceptional at planning, prioritising, and executing on our work) because operating from trust and freedom, means we don't need someone else telling us what to do, how to do it, or when to do it. And because self leadership is the prerequisite to leading others.

The people who were dismissed or left Systemic Justice over the recent period of deep organisational culture work did so because, ultimately, there was a difference in value alignment or because they were uncomfortable with being called to account, resulting in their inability to meet the expectations we set ourselves.

4. What we've learned from doing this work so far

Despite the challenges we've faced in doing this work, we have also learned an incredible amount about ourselves, our team, the organisation, and those around us. The following are some of the more pertinent observations we've made.

The challenge of ownership, accountability, and responsibility

Even when people appear to care about our mission and the work we do, when words do not align with actions, this lack of alignment begins to show in the minimal impact a person has in their role within the organisation.

Getting people to take full ownership – of themselves, of their work, of their impact – is a challenge many organisations face, and we are no different. This is an ongoing challenge we have faced at all levels, and acknowledging the systemic causes of this has been an important step in supporting people to address it at both the individual and collective level.

Organisational culture isn't just a side project or something to opt out of

We've also learned that culture is not and should not ever be considered as a 'nice to have', an 'add on' or something that is not fundamental to the fabric of an organisation and the way it works. It is not something you can 'do' as a side project; it requires deep and wide organisational change, at all levels.

The organisational culture, aka "the way we agree to show up and work around here" is not something that can be ignored. We have learned that we need to keep being even more explicit about the fundamental role our culture plays and sharing what that means for people who are interested in working with us to achieve our mission.

Explicit expectations do not limit freedom and choice; they *do* remove confusion and ambiguity

In valuing giving people freedom, we initially created unnecessary ambiguity, too much choice and therefore confusion. A recurring theme has been the impact of whether an aspect of the way we work is explicit or implicit.

We each have expectations of others; as an organisation, those expectations need to be made explicit through effective communication – for example:

- "This is the language we use when we talk about certain marginalised communities."
- "This is our general approach to communicating with people by email."
- "This is the kind of behaviour we expect at our team retreats."

While many things have – through our policies, processes, and guidelines – been made explicit, it became clear that a number of things have not.

Some of these may appear 'basic' to many – e.g. please show up on time for meetings and if you know you're going to be late, let people know – but in a remote organisation, what appears 'obvious' or 'common courtesy' to some, is not to others.

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Making the basics explicit is key for a growing, global team so that expectations are clear and people can operate effectively within them. Rather than limiting freedom and choice, they reduce ambiguity and confusion. And, equally, if anyone doesn't agree with our operating guidelines, they can also choose to work elsewhere.

Taking radical personal responsibility

One of the key concepts that was introduced was 'radical personal responsibility'. We've talked a lot about individual and collective responsibilities in this work – and how we each have an individual responsibility to work on the aspects of 'living the organisation's values' that we may find challenging. Specifically, in this work, we are required to:

- Communicate effectively.
- Manage ourselves (i.e. our reactions, responses, and emotions).
- Lead ourselves and others

We are required to do this and to do it intentionally to co-create a very specific kind of culture that also requires a lot of exploration, unlearning, and relearning of cultural, societal, and systemic patterns. We mentioned several times in this case study that this is 'deep' work. It is, but it is necessary and long overdue for employers and organisations that truly want to build an authentic, safe and sustainable culture. It can be an uncomfortable experience before it is enriching and liberating. It is not for everyone and that's ok, but as an employer we also know that the demand for an authentic, safe, and sustainable culture will only continue to increase as younger generations join the workforce.

Leadership as role models

As a leadership team, we know we must model what we want to see in the organisation; this does not mean we have no work of our own to do – we do. It does however mean that we have to remain fully committed, as leaders, to do this work and show up for it, especially when it's hard.

We are not always going to get it right. Reflecting on our own journey, we can take heart from an observation shared by a third party we engaged: *"I haven't seen an organisation or a leadership team as committed to creating an intentional, values-aligned culture as Systemic Justice and the leadership team are"*.

The commitment we've made as an organisation and leadership team means:

- We have invested significant resources in the organisational culture work; both in working with Mission Equality and other support and training we continue to invest in. This is alongside our existing commitments which include retreats once every four months, and consistently asking our team to let us know what support they need to have the impact they want.
- The majority of our leadership team is participating in additional support to do this work; this includes anti-racism work, leadership growth work, and more.
- Despite setbacks along the way, we believe the way we work determines the impact we can have in delivering upon our mission and we will continue to step in and step up in our commitment to building Systemic Justice as a different kind of organisation.

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Ultimately, when you begin to focus on the impact people are having in the kind of work we're doing and what is required to achieve greater impact, many people are woefully unprepared and ill-equipped to do this as it requires more than passion and vocal support.

We have seen how pervasive and deeply entrenched the perspectives and mindsets are of the current systems that dominate – and how unaware many of us are of the impact these have on each of us. This is where we believe it's necessary to dig even deeper, learn how to hold ourselves through the discomfort, and focus on nurturing and honing the skills that will help us each move through the challenges and have the impact we want.

Even those of us who believe we're aware, open-minded, and curious discover deeply embedded beliefs that keep us rooted in the cycles that perpetuate harm, no matter how much we intend otherwise. Breaking through this requires hard work, intentionality, perseverance and deep, unwavering commitment.

This is what we are committed to at Systemic Justice. It is – as we hope you can see – far more radical than it may seem at first blush. While anti-oppression language is becoming more common, the corresponding practice and codifying that through behaviours, actions and attitudes is not, and that is where real work is required.

We remain as committed as ever to building our organisation differently, to working individually and collectively to co-create a culture that allows us to do the meaningful, impactful work we're here to do, and to put the power of litigation in the hands of communities.
