# Organizational Culture and Decision Making at Brava

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## GRATITUDE

"Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere."

*-- Chinese proverb*

My gratitude overflows for the generous, thoughtful and caring human beings who supported me every step of the way:

**To Archer:** You've shuttled kids, walked dogs in the rain, and cooked healthy, delicious meals. You've shouldered the burden of managing and running our house and survived my 5:30am wake-up-to-write alarm... all to help me juggle school and work with less stress. You've given me hugs, and more hugs, and reminded me of what I am capable of, even when I doubted myself. Most of all, you make me laugh with wild abandon when I need a reminder not to take life so seriously. I love you!

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a safe harbor of a job to pursue my passion and purpose, and I will be forever grateful. Mann Gulch and the Man on the Moon forever! Thank you.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brava (pseudonym) is the leading social network for athletes. Athletes track workouts, connect with other athletes, and compete against themselves and each other on popular route segments. In conversations with Brava's executive leaders in the fall of 2020, they identified excessive complexity in decision-making practices as a consistent problem for the organization. At that time, they were unsure which cultural practices might contribute to the challenges. Further, leaders sensed that employee burnout is a by-product of current decision-making practices. This study clarifies the issues and provides recommendations to improve decision-making practices in a culturally consistent manner.

To better understand the decision-making practices at Brava, research focused on group decision-making approaches, how organizational culture is defined and identified, and how culture influences decision-making practices. Decision-making research focused on three practices -- dialectical inquiry, devil's advocacy, and consensus decision-making -- to understand each approach's impact on outcomes and teams.

I selected Schein's Organizational Culture model because it provided a clear and meaningful way to delineate the components of organizational culture. I needed to identify the observable behaviors, espoused values, and basic assumptions within Brava's culture that impacted decision-making practices within the organization.

Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Framework and Spencer Stuart's Culture Framework helped identify common norms, assumptions, and behaviors

within different culture types and identify possible links between cultural beliefs, values, and decision-making practices.

This study utilized employee engagement survey data and employee interviews to answer three main questions about decision-making practices, organizational culture, and employee experience:

1. How do Brava employees describe challenges related to decision-making practices?

2. What organizational culture norms, assumptions, and practices contribute to challenges with decision-making practices at Brava?

3. In what ways (if at all) do decision-making practices lead Brava employees to experience burnout?

Brava employees shared that decision-making practices focus on consensus-building by ensuring all voices are heard, making the process time-consuming and meeting-intense. Decision-making practices also lack role and decision-maker clarity.

There are specific aspects of organizational culture that drive these decision-making practices. Observable behaviors including transparent communication, collaboration, aversion to risk and aversion to conflict, and the espoused value of camaraderie fuel consensus-driven decision-making practices. Basic assumptions including "people first" further reinforce consensus-building and the time-intensive nature of decision-making.

Founders highly influence start-up company cultures like Brava's (Schein, 1983) through their influence on the experiences of the founding group. Brava CEO Hooper's (pseudonym) strengths include his caring, relationship-driven nature and transparent communication style. Both approaches drive Brava's

decision-making practices. Employees appreciate and value Hooper's approach yet question its effectiveness as the company grows.

Brava employees are highly engaged yet experience burnout. There is no question that some of the burnout employees currently feel is related to Covid-19 issues. Employee interviews indicate that the consensus-building, meeting-heavy decision-making practices that worked when Brava was a smaller, predominantly face-time company are difficult to replicate in a rapidly growing, remote-first company, contributing to some frustration and burnout.

I have three recommendations. One, use Kotter's framework for change to guide the implementation of new decision-making practices. Two, pilot a simple framework to increase role and responsibility clarity in group decision-making. Three, alleviate meeting fatigue by conducting a meeting audit and developing new approaches for hybrid-work meetings.

## INTRODUCTION

*"Culture's importance cannot be overstated."*

-- Dr. Chad Hartnell, 2020

*"Ultimately, a company's value is no more (and no less) than the sum of the decisions it makes and executes."*

-- Blenko, Mankins, Rogers, 2010

In today's highly competitive and constantly evolving business climate, companies rely on strategy and culture as "the primary levers" to be successful and effective (Groysberg et al., 2018). While the concept of strategy is relatively easy to define, at its most basic, it is a plan of action to achieve a specific goal, defining culture is more challenging. Popular business magazines even use words like "elusive" (Groysberg et al., 2018), "amorphous…squishy…and intangible" ("The Wrong Ways to Strengthen Culture," 2019) to describe culture.

Kaplan et al. (2016) describe culture as "the system of values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape how real work gets done within an organization." They outline the importance of identifying business practices that support an organization's desired culture and detract from it. In doing so, organizations better understand the "intangibles" driving culture and can proactively determine how to evolve existing practices and behaviors to create the desired culture.

Yet culture is not the only driver of organizational performance. In a study of 350 global companies, Rogers and Blenko (2006) stated that "the defining characteristic of high-performing organizations is their ability to make good

decisions and to make them happen quickly." If organizational culture and decision-making are critical to an organization's success, I wondered how one might impact the other. More specifically, how does corporate culture influence decision-making? How might this be studied in an existing business?

Brava seemed like an ideal Capstone partner. The company is at an exciting inflection point, has a strong organizational culture, and wants to understand decision-making practices to improve them. Michael Hooper (pseudonym), co-founder, and CEO of Brava, is a good friend and mentor. We met in January 2001 when I was a second-year student in his Entrepreneurship course during the second year of my MBA experience. I am delighted to have the opportunity to potentially support Brava's future success through my capstone research and recommendations.

The purpose of this study is to offer Brava a deeper understanding of decision-making practices at the company and insight into the organizational culture assumptions, norms, and behaviors that drive decision-making practices. I also sought to understand if there is a link between decision-making practices and employee burnout at the organization. I close with recommendations on evolving the current decision-making practices to support Brava's continued success.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Founded in 2009, Brava is a social networking platform for athletes (Brava.com, 2021). Former college rowing teammates Hooper and Gold aspired to

create an experience that would "recreate that feeling of training with your friends to motivate you to new heights."

Today, Brava describes itself as "building the home for your active life." In July 2021, Hooper stated, "...being the hub of the connected fitness landscape, we provide the place for athletes to stay connected with their communities after the workout is over."

Brava users track workouts using the app. Like other social platforms, connected athletes can offer comments and "kudos" to each other on their activities. Users can also compare their efforts to other athletes based on their performance on "segments" on popular routes. Brava athletes -- runners, cyclists, swimmers, and other disciplines -- can use over 400 different types of hardware to record athletic pursuits and share them with other athletes in the Brava community (Woods, 2021).

Brava earns revenue through paid subscriptions ($5.00/month) and partnerships with companies that sponsor fitness challenges and subscriptions. Before 2020, Brava sold aggregated activity data in metro areas to urban planners and "active transportation advocates" to develop improved pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. In 2020, they made this service free (Brava blog, 2020).

In 2012, Brava had under a million athletes in its community ("Brava From The Beginning," 2012). Today, Brava's community includes over 92 million athletes (Brava company sources, 2021).  The COVID-19 pandemic led many people to seek solace from quarantine through physical activity, which catalyzed Brava's growth. In 2020, Brava gained two million new members each month (Brava company sources, 2020). Hooper shared that "close to 50 million Peloton activities have been

uploaded to Brava," highlighting the benefits of partnerships with fitness equipment companies (Woods, 2021).

Brava is venture-backed with 300 employees in San Francisco, Denver, Bristol, England, and Dublin, Ireland (Brava company sources, 2021). On November 16, 2020, Brava received $110 million in additional venture capital funding to support future growth and profitability ("Brava Said to Seek New Investors at $1 Billion-Plus Valuation," 2020).

Coming off a period of intense growth and development during a pandemic, Hooper and Brown (pseudonym) wanted to understand how Brava's organizational culture influences decision-making practices, how those practices might create burnout, and how decision-making could improve to support future business objectives.

In October 2020, Brava's leadership identified excessive complexity in decision-making processes and practices as a consistent problem for the organization. At that time, they were unsure which cultural practices might contribute to the challenges. Further, leaders perceived that a consistent by-product of existing decision-making practices is employee burnout. This investigation clarifies the issues and provides recommendations that might improve decision-making for the company.

In our first conversation, Brown described Brava as a highly engaged, "people-first company" and that the "culture is an extension of our CEO's personality." She sketched a culture built on a tendency to "bring people along," "to be there for everybody," and practices that demonstrate a high amount of communication across teams to "keep people in the loop." (M. Brown, personal communication, October 1, 2020).

Data from Brava's Q3 2020 CultureAmp employee engagement survey supports Brown's description: 88% of employees believe "Brava's leaders keep them informed about what is happening," and 98% of employees believe they "have good working relationships with people in my team."

Despite high engagement scores, Brown highlighted some challenging aspects related to decision-making. "People's opinions matter," and decision-making involves groups of people coming together to "align" and "to believe what others believe." (M. Brown, personal communication, October 1, 2020)

Brown expressed that when given a choice between a simple or complex solution, the culture favored "complexity." (M. Brown, personal communication, October 1, 2020) She wondered how this inclination might impact decision-making. For example, are unspoken cultural assumptions driving individuals toward elaborate decision-making approaches, even when unnecessary?

CultureAmp comments detailed the complexity. "I hope we can figure out how to simplify things in the way we work. It feels like we haven't quite mastered the art of letting go and trusting others - and we need to be 'brought along' with every decision. We are very bogged down in complexity. I'm not sure how exactly to solve it, but I hope we try to make strides so it all can feel a little lighter rather than every week feeling like a big lift."

Since January 2021, Brava's workforce has increased by almost 50%, from close to 200 in December to nearly 300 today. Further, the Covid-19 pandemic led the company to change from a primarily office-based culture to a remote one with employees scattered across multiple time zones. The potential consequences of not addressing decision-making practices as the company scales as a global, remote workforce include less-than-stellar business results and reduced employee engagement, burnout, and retention.

In later conversations with Brava employees, I learned that the product team recently implemented new processes to clarify and provide a more explicit structure for product-related decisions, including the "Green Light" meeting. At the time of this writing, this new process has completed one cycle, and therefore it

is too early to measure its impact on team decision-making. (Confidential interviews, personal communication, September 16-17, 2021)

After my initial conversations with Brown and Hooper, I wondered how Brava's decision-making practices might contribute to employee feelings of excess complexity. I wanted to understand how underlying cultural behaviors, values, and assumptions might be driving decision-making practices. Then, I sought to identify culture-specific ways to simplify and streamline decision-making practices to enhance the employee experience and business performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will briefly review key findings from the literature on three primary topics relevant to the problem noted above. First, I offer a brief review of the study of decision-making in organizations. Second, I review organizational culture literature to develop a clear definition of what it is and identify how it is measured and described. Third, I consider literature linking organizational culture and decision-making practices.

### Decision-Making

Decision-making practices in organizations serve different aims. Decision-making helps companies arrive at a specific outcome, create commitment within a group, demonstrate power, reinforce values and enhance connection, or a combination of these elements (Bolman and Deal, 1997). Some

organizations may prioritize decision outcome and quality, while others prioritize how decision-making rituals impact culture and connection.

Research tells us that specific practices enable different desired results. Schweiger et al. (1986) found that dialectical inquiry and devil's advocacy decision-making practices yielded the best quality decisions in a laboratory-based study. Yet, a consensus approach was best at "preserving harmony" and leads to a "greater degree of acceptance of decisions." They suggest that determining the best decision-making practice must consider *both* decision quality and decision-making context. Achieving a quality decision outcome in a laboratory setting among people who will not work together in the future is different from what might work for teams that must collaborate on a repeated, day-to-day basis.

Amason (1996) looked at how two types of conflict impacts decision-making and team effectiveness. He suggested that teams can improve decision-making by supporting the presence of cognitive conflict (i.e., differences in ideas and opinions) while discouraging affective (interpersonal) conflict. Doing so will enable a higher level of consensus and team cohesion. Murrrell et al. (1993) evaluated the effectiveness of consensus versus devil's advocacy. Findings suggest that the efficacy of either approach is dependent on the task.

Tjosvold and Field (1983) suggest that consensus-based decision-making increases acceptance of decisions by the group. In addition, they propose that "the complaint that consensus decision making is time-consuming and frustrating holds more when persons try to compete and outdo each other than when they work for mutual benefits." (p. 505)

Shared team decision-making control leads teammates to feel more satisfied with their team (Phillips, 2001). Forbes (2005) suggested that employees in entrepreneurial ventures who feel positively about shared decision-making practices are more inclined to share positive sentiments with leadership, reinforcing collective self-efficacy within the organization. Lechler (2001) looked at the quality of social interaction in entrepreneurial teams and deemed it an important, but not sole, factor leading to business success.

Flood et al. (2000) suggest that consensus-driven decision-making leads to better organizational performance. In addition, they indicate that CEOs with a transformational leadership style exert a positive influence on consensus decision-making by inspiring and motivating "team members to rise above their individual interests to embrace a shared vision of their work." (p. 414). However, consensus can be dangerous when groups seek to achieve it too quickly. (Buchanan and O'Connell, 2006).

Peterson (1999) investigates the influence of voice in procedural justice matters to understand group preference for consensus better. His findings suggest that groups that cannot reach an agreement may benefit from a majority rule decision process, reflecting the tension between all parties needing to feel heard versus the group's need to make a decision.

In a study of decision-making in eight high-tech firms, Eisenhardt (1989) identified "consensus with qualification" as a factor in high quality, fast decision-making processes. Consensus with qualification is an initial attempt to reach a consensus with all players. If the team cannot reach an agreement, the

suggested next step is for the CEO to make the final choice in concert with a trusted advisor, using team input as a guide. (p. 562)

Heffernan (2003) touches on a slightly different concept of "qualified consensus" in a conversation with Peterson. Drawing from research on small group decision-making, Peterson suggests that groups of ten or less do not benefit from majority rule due to the strength of discontent among the minority group. His version of "qualified consensus" means that while all parties might not agree with the decision, they "can tolerate the outcome; they can live with it." If this is not possible, he recommends that the leader has the final say on the decision.

## Organizational Culture

One way to examine decision-making in a company is to investigate it as a cultural practice of the organization. To do so, one must first ask, "What is organizational culture, and how can it be described and measured?"

The study of organizational culture became popular in the early 1980s. Several influential books and papers (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi, 1981; and Schein, 1985) illuminated organizational culture's impact on the success or failure of a company.

Schein's (2017, p.6) definition of organizational culture helps to clarify an amorphous phenomenon within organizations. Culture is "a pattern of shared *basic assumptions* that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and
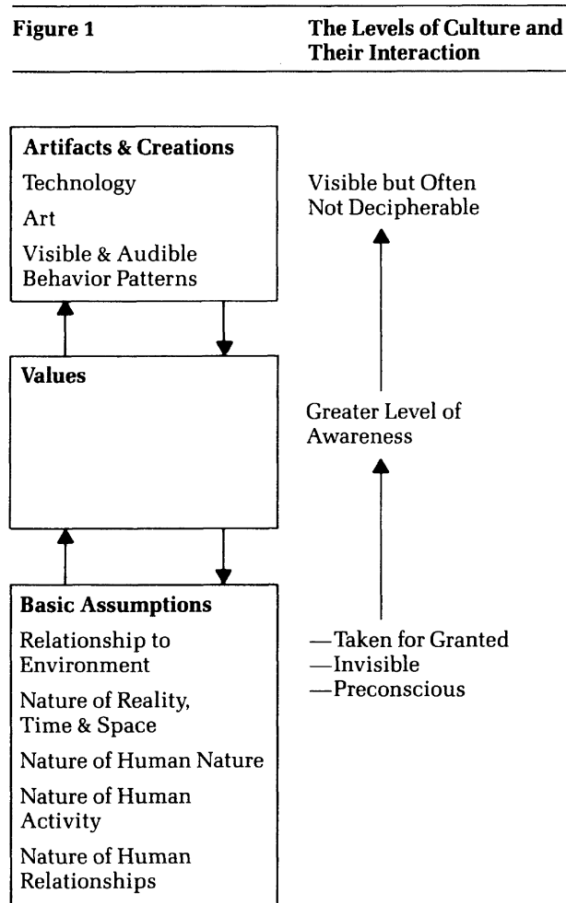
feel in relation to those problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of *beliefs*, *values,* and *behavioral norms* that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness."

Schein's definition unifies several elements of culture. It is shared (Glisson & James, 2002), it can be observed and experienced at both the group and organizational levels (Detert, Schroeder, & Mauriel, 2000), and reflects a set of "basic assumptions" akin to "theories in use" (Argyris and Schon, 1996).

Grosyberg et al. (2018) distill culture down to four key attributes in a comprehensive culture literature review. Members of a group *share* culture. It is *pervasive* throughout all levels of an organization or group, it is *enduring* and develops through shared experiences over time, and it is implicit and acts as a "silent language." (p.46)

Schein (1984) created an organizational culture framework with three categories: observable artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. Cameron and Quinn (2011) distinguish observable behaviors as a fourth category, separate from artifacts. In both approaches, artifacts and behaviors are considered visible culture examples.

**Figure 1: A model for organizational culture: Schein (1984)**

| Figure 1 | The Levels of Culture and Their Interaction |
| --- | --- |

**Artifacts & Creations**

Technology

Art

Visible & Audible
Behavior Patterns

Visible but Often
Not Decipherable

**Values**

Greater Level of
Awareness

**Basic Assumptions**

Relationship to
Environment

Nature of Reality,
Time & Space

Nature of Human Nature

Nature of Human
Activity

Nature of Human
Relationships

—Taken for Granted
—Invisible
—Preconscious

At the bottom of the figure are the unobservable elements, *Basic Assumptions*. These are the things that define our experience in the environment that we are generally unaware of until they are challenged or questioned. They may include "rules of the game," organizational identity, and ways of thinking. Schein (2017) describes basic assumptions as the "Cultural DNA" of an organization. It is shared early in the group's history and establishes a sense of stability about "how things are done."

As you work your way up, the cultural elements are more tangible and easy to observe. *Values* are the publicly-stated rules, policies, principles, and procedures that guide interactions in an organization (Schein, 2017; Deal and Kennedy, 1982).

*Artifacts and Creations* include tangible things like architecture and offices, clothing choices, logos, written artifacts such as mission statements, and the stories, rituals, and myths that accompany the experience of being part of an organization (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). Observable behaviors, or how people interact with each other in an organization, fall in this area. More specifically, this includes how employees communicate, engage with each other, and interact. (Schein, 2017) Together, these elements comprise an organizational culture.

Company founders significantly influence the development of company culture (Schein, 1983; Wilkof, 1989). Founders start companies to address an unmet need or opportunity with a new approach or solution. Their personal behaviors, values and assumptions influence the ways a founding team or group works together (Schein, 1983). As the team works together, people will leave and join, the context and tasks may change, but the underlying elements of culture remain (Wilkof, 1989).

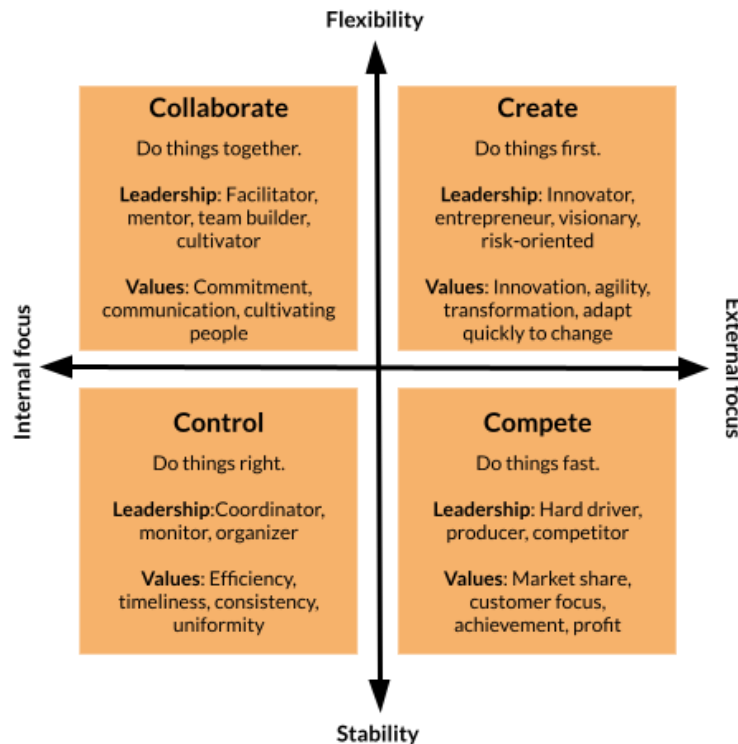## Decision-Making and Organizational Culture

Decision-making practices do not occur in a vacuum; decision-making's cultural context and ritualistic nature are important. According to Deal and Kennedy (1982), "...whether weak or strong, culture has a powerful influence throughout the organization; it affects practically everything — from who gets

promoted and what decisions are made, to how employees dress and what sports they play." (p.4-*5*) March (1989) described decision-making as "a highly contextual, sacred activity, surrounded by myth and ritual, and as much concerned with the interpretive order as with the specifics of particular choices." (p.14)

I first turned to Cameron and Quinn's Cultural Values Framework (CVF) to further understand how values and assumptions influence cultural decision-making behaviors and actions. Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Framework (CVF) has been used thousands of times across various industries, cultures, researchers, and dissertations (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). Howard (1998) validated the CVF to understand, compare, and evaluate organizational cultures, and Kwan and Walker (2004) validated the CVF as a way to describe and differentiate one organization's culture from another.

To develop the framework, Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) analyzed a list of thirty-nine indicators of organizational effectiveness defined by Campbell, Browns, Peterson, and Dunnette (1974). Through a statistical analysis process, they determined two main dimensions. An important note is that the assumptions that drive each side of both dimensions are opposite or competing in nature.

**Figure 2: Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Framework**



Adapted from Cameron and Quinn (2011) "Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture"

Along the horizontal axis (Figure 2), the framework indicates how the organization is *focused* -- is it more internally or externally oriented? Along the vertical axis, the framework assesses the organization's structure -- does the organization have a more flexible design, or does it rely on a more defined and controlled structure?

These two dimensions create four quadrants, representing four dominant culture types: Clan (Collaborate), Adhocracy (Create), Hierarchy (Control), and Market (Compete). Each quadrant outlines a specific set of effectiveness criteria representing what an organization values about its performance and what "doing the right thing" looks like.

Quadrants that are next to each other share one quality and differ on the other. Quadrants positioned diagonally from one another are opposite in what they value and how they operate. Brief definitions for each of the quadrants are as follows:

The Collaborate quadrant describes organizations that place a premium on teamwork, communication, participation, and consensus. Collaborate cultures are "friendly places to work" and place a high premium on investing in employee engagement and development to enhance cohesion and morale.

The Create quadrant describes organizations that focus on adaptability, flexibility, and creativity. Often these organizations create innovative new products and solutions and can quickly shape-shift and adapt to meet new challenges. These organizations focus on the individual, risk-taking, and experimentation.

The Control quadrant describes organizations with formal, structured approaches to their work. Rules, policies, and structures help drive the stable, predictable, and efficient results they seek. These organizations value timeliness, efficiency, and smooth operations.

The Compete quadrant describes organizations that focus on productivity, results, winning, and profits. Leaders are hard-driving, competitive, and demanding. These organizations are about being the best in class in their industry.

More recently, Groysberg et al. (2018) proposed a framework based on two dimensions: people interaction and response to change. (See Figure 3) People interaction ranges from independent to interdependent, and response to change ranges from a proclivity toward stability versus a penchant for flexibility. Within

the framework, they delineate eight different culture styles that describe the predominant drivers of an organization's culture.

**Figure 3: Spencer Stuart Organizational Culture Framework (Spencer Stuart website)**
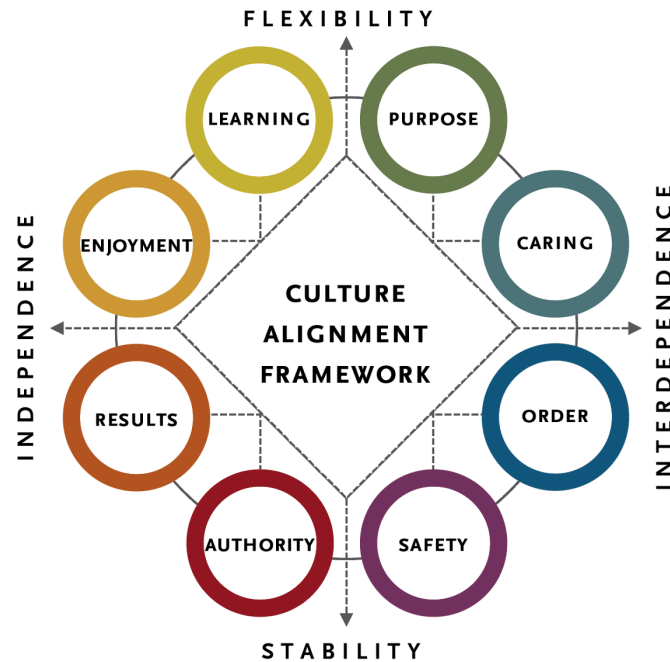


The Spencer Stuart culture framework, in addition to the Competing Values Framework, offers examples of how different cultural norms, assumptions, and behaviors manifest in organizations and suggests areas to explore in the data collection and analysis portion of this study.

I was particularly attuned to how different cultural styles might influence decision-making (See Appendix A). For example, caring cultures emphasize teamwork, collaboration, and trust, driving consensus-building and more time-consuming decision-making practices (Groysberg et al., 2018). Authority
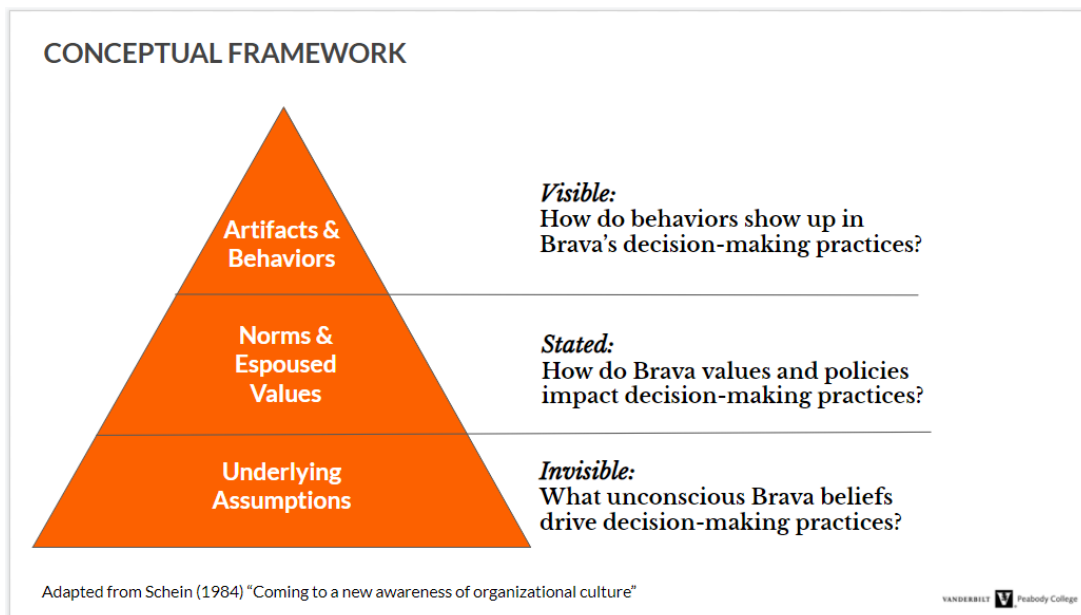
cultures are known for bold, speedy decision-making practices, which can lead to interpersonal conflict and a lack of psychological safety (Groysberg et al., 2018).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I used Schein's Organizational Culture model because it provided a clear and meaningful way to delineate the components of organizational culture. I needed to identify observable behaviors, espoused values, and basic assumptions within Brava's culture. The Schein frame led me to focus on the stated beliefs and espoused values at Brava because these would inform cultural elements that impacted decision-making practices within the organization.

Figure 4 illustrates how I applied Schein's model to analyze elements of Brava's organizational culture.

**Figure 4: Conceptual framework for this study**



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Artifacts & Behaviors

*Visible:*
How do behaviors show up in Brava's decision-making practices?

Norms & Espoused Values

*Stated:*
How do Brava values and policies impact decision-making practices?

Underlying Assumptions

*Invisible:*
What unconscious Brava beliefs drive decision-making practices?

Adapted from Schein (1984) "Coming to a new awareness of organizational culture"

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do Brava employees describe challenges related to decision-making practices?

RQ2: What organizational behaviors, values, and assumptions contribute to challenges with decision-making practices at Brava?

RQ3: In what ways (if at all) do decision-making practices lead Brava employees to experience burnout?

## PROJECT DESIGN

To better understand decision-making practices and the organizational culture assumptions, values, and behaviors that influence them, I recognized that I needed to hear from a wide range of employees about their experiences at Brava. Brown and I settled on a three-pronged effort to collect the necessary data: existing quarterly CultureAmp employee engagement surveys, a short organizational culture survey, and a set of semi-structured interviews with a subset of the employee population.

### CultureAmp Employee Engagement Survey Data

I started my preliminary investigation using the quarterly CultureAmp pulse survey data Brava collected over four consecutive quarters (Q4 2020 through Q3 2021). This existing data set represented nearly all employees and allowed me to

identify preliminary themes quickly during a busy and stressful time for the company.

Many corporate human resources teams use employee engagement surveys to inform strategies related to employee experience ("3 Common Misconceptions About Employee Engagement," 2019). CultureAmp is a popular online "employee experience" platform used by many companies, including Oracle, McDonald's, and Slack, to collect employee engagement data, execute performance reviews, and support employee development (CultureAmp website, 2021). In July 2021, Culture Amp had 4,000 client organizations (Shu, 2021).

Each quarter, Brava's People and Culture team sends the survey to all employees. The survey has an average participation rate of 89%. CultureAmp defines participation rate as the number of employees who complete the survey out of the total number of eligible employees.

**Table 1: CultureAmp Survey Data**

| Timeframe | Employee engagement score | Participation rate |
|---|---|---|
| Q4 2020 | 83% | 92% |
| Q1 2021 | 86% | 87% |
| Q2 2021 | 87% | 91% |
| Q3 2021 | 87% | 86% |

CultureAmp client companies can select from two versions of the employee engagement survey: the complete version, which includes over fifty questions, or

the "Quick" version, which contains eighteen questions. Survey questions are designed and validated by organizational psychologists and data scientists at CultureAmp. Each company can include or exclude questions to make the survey specific to their data needs.

The questions address engagement themes including Leadership, Innovation, Alignment, Teamwork & Ownership, Feedback & Recognition, Work and Life Blend, and Collaboration & Communication. Most of the survey questions utilize a 5-point Likert scale measure; some solicit open-ended, written responses. Example questions for each theme are in the table below:

**Table 2: Sample CultureAmp Questions by Engagement Theme**

| *Engagement theme:* | *Example CultureAmp survey question:* |
| --- | --- |
| Leadership | The leaders at Brava keep people informed about what is happening. |
| Innovation | We are encouraged to be innovative even though some of our initiatives may not succeed. |
| Alignment | I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work. |
| Teamwork & Ownership | Workloads are divided fairly among people where I work. |
| Feedback & Recognition | Generally, the right people are rewarded and recognized at Brava. |
| Work & Life Blend | I am able to arrange time out from work when I need to. |
| Collaboration & Communication | At Brava there is open and honest two-way communication. |

Survey respondents have the option to share additional commentary about the Likert-scale questions. For example, a question designed to measure an employee's commitment to staying at the company, such as: *"I see myself still working at Brava in two years' time,"* would have quantitative data (a 75% favorable score) as well as a set of qualitative data responses, such as this one: "As we keep adding more and more people, the sense of intimacy and community is getting diminished to me at least.  It'll be interesting to see how returning to office life affects that." Favorable scores are calculated by totaling the number of people who chose "Strongly agree" or "agree" out of the total number of people who responded to the question. (CultureAmp website, 2021).

CultureAmp defines engagement as "…the levels of enthusiasm and connection employees have with their organization." It also measures employee motivation to "…take positive action to further the organization and a sign of how committed they [employees] are to staying there." (CultureAmp website, 2021)  The CultureAmp Engagement score is calculated using input from five questions. These questions are in the table below, with brief explanations from CultureAmp on their purpose.

**Table 3: Employee Engagement score composite questions, definitions, and benchmarks (source: CultureAmp website)**

| *Question* | *Explanation* |
|---|---|
| I am proud to work for COMPANY. | Informally called the "barbecue test" -- as in, would an employee be proud to tell someone where they worked if asked at a barbecue?<br><br>Scores on this question reflect brand and mission affiliation levels and can give insight into how your external brand is viewed by people internally. |

| | Benchmark: 80 - 90% |
|---|---|
| I would recommend COMPANY as a great place to work. | CultureAmp's Employee Net Promoter Score question. The eNPS launched in 2003. Some companies use it as their sole indicator of employee engagement.<br><br>Benchmark: 80 - 90% |
| I rarely think about looking for a job at another company. | Measures employee's current commitment to the company.<br><br>Benchmark: 55 - 60% |
| I see myself still working at [company] in two years' time. | Extends the time frame for measuring commitment.<br><br>Benchmark: 60 - 65% |
| [Company] motivates me to go beyond what I would in a similar role elsewhere. | Measures discretionary effort and assesses whether the company motivates people to do their very best.<br><br>Benchmark: 70 - 75% |

Brava's people team uses the Engagement score to benchmark its performance compared to similar companies.  Stein et al. (2021) explain that companies care about strong employee engagement because research shows it improves performance (Riketta, 2002), leads to decreased employee burnout (Meyers and Maltin, 2010), and reduces employee turnover (Porter et al., 1976). CultureAmp states that "...the average [engagement] score is somewhere in the 70%-75% range. A score of 80% is fantastic and above 85% is really all you might aim for."

In our initial conversations, Brown told me that Brava's employee engagement score was strong. Brava's employee engagement score was consistently mid-80% for all four quarters of the data I reviewed. Learning this early in the data

collection process suggested that further investigation would be necessary to identify what might create employee burnout and any link to decision-making practices.

For the purpose of my investigation, I separated the CultureAmp data into two types for my analysis. I used a selection of quantitative survey responses to get a preliminary sense of employee summative answers related to organizational culture behaviors, norms and assumptions, and decision-making practices. I eliminated statements that did not directly or indirectly connect to decision-making or my research questions. For example, I did not look at data for the statement, "I believe there are good career opportunities for me at Brava."

A detailed chart of what I did use, and how it corresponded to my research questions, is below:

**Table 4: CultureAmp Questions Mapped to Research Questions**

| *RELEVANT RESEARCH QUESTION* | *Likert Scale Statements in Survey* |
|---|---|
| RQ1: How do Brava employees describe challenges related to decision-making practices? | <ul><li>I have good working relationships with my team</li><li>I can voice a contrary opinion without fear of negative consequences</li><li>Other departments at Brava collaborate well with us to get the job done</li><li>I know what I need to do to be successful in my role</li><li>I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work</li></ul> |
| RQ2: What organizational culture norms, assumptions, and practices contribute to challenges with | <ul><li>Leaders at Brava keep people informed about what is happening</li><li>Leaders at Brava demonstrate that people are essential to the company's success</li></ul> |

| | |
|---|---|
| decision-making practices at Brava? | ● At Brava, there is open and honest two-way communication |
| RQ3: In what ways (if at all) do decision-making practices impact employees Brava? | ● Our culture promotes a healthy blend between work and personal life |

Employee responses to the questions noted in the table above were consistently in the 70-80% range. The relatively high scores did not suggest any apparent challenges or issues with decision-making. Therefore, given my interest in better understanding decision-making practices, I needed to use open-ended survey data and semi-structured interviews to understand how decision-making takes place at Brava and how culture might impact those practices.

**Table 5: Approach to Coding Open-Ended Survey Data**

| Coding Pass | Approach |
|---|---|
| First | Review open-ended responses for relevancy. Keep responses if the answer to any of these questions is yes:<br><br>1. Does this response include language about decision-making practices?<br><br>2. Does this response include data that points to basic assumptions, espoused values, or behaviors?<br><br>3. Does this response include data that explains employee sentiments about decision-making, complexity, or burnout? |
| Second | Read through all data to identify potential themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) |
| Third | Inductive codes using thematic analysis; then sort the temes |

| | |
|---|---|
| | using Schein's definitions (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). |
| Fourth | Review all data to test my findings and identify participant quotes supporting or challenging my conclusions (Yin, 2003). |

For the open-ended CultureAmp survey responses, I looked for data discussing decision-making practices or describing organizational culture basic assumptions, espoused values, and behaviors. To find relevant data, I read through the CultureAmp surveys four times. I eliminated open-ended responses that did not correspond to organizational culture or decision-making practices on the first pass. I did this by asking myself a set of questions. If the answer to any of the following questions was yes, I kept the data for coding:

1. Does this response include language about decision-making practices?

2. Does this response include data that points to basic assumptions, espoused values, or behaviors?

3. Does this response include data that explains employee sentiments about decision-making, complexity, or burnout?

I found the majority of data related to decision-making practices, organizational behaviors, values and assumptions, and employee sentiments about burnout in answers to three open-ended questions:

- What are some things we are doing great at Brava?

- What are some things we are not doing so great at Brava?

- Is there anything else you would like to share?

I read each response and began to note themes that potentially tied back to my research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) encourage a complete review of

data before coding to identify patterns within the data successfully. A table listing

key themes after my second pass is below.

**Table 6: Second pass, emerging themes**

| *RQ1: Decision-making practices* | *RQ2: Behaviors, values, assumptions* | *RQ3: Employee Concerns/Other* |
|---|---|---|
| Collaboration approaches | People first | Workload |
| Lack of prioritization | Work-life balance (positive and negative) | Overwhelmed |
| Leadership involvement | Generous benefits | Not enough staff |
| Need for process improvements | Flexibility | Aggressive work pace |
| Engagement and autonomy (lack) | Open communication | Access to resources |
| Too many meetings | Aversion to conflict | Burnout/exhaustion |
| Consensus seeking | PTO policies/Summer Time Off (STO) | Covid-19/work from home/remote work |

I drew on the themes I recognized as "emerging" (Merriam-Webster's Online

Dictionary, 2021) to note preliminary answers to each research question in a series

of analytic memos. For example:

> *RQ1: How do Brava employees describe challenges related to decision-making practices?*
>
> Employees cited consensus-seeking, frequency of meetings, a need for process improvements, a lack of prioritization when describing decision-making practices. I would like to understand better how decision-making takes place and how these practices come to life.

For my third pass, I used inductive coding to sort the emerging themes. I used Schein's definitions for Observable Behaviors, Espoused Values, and Basic Assumptions to sort the codes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For themes that did not fall into one of Schein's categories, I assigned them to one of three buckets. I used "Decision Making" for anything related to the practice of making decisions. "Employee Sentiments" classified the ways employees expressed work-related feelings and experiences in the survey. Finally, I noted themes that seemed potentially salient yet did not fit in any of the previously described code sets as "Other." The post-coding list of codes is below in Table 7, and the complete codebook and definitions are in Appendix D.

### Table 7: Codes, after Open-ended Survey data review

| Behaviors | Espoused Values | Assumptions | Employee Sentiments | Decision -making | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Collaboration | Anti-racism | Ambitious | Aggressive pace | | Covid-19 |
| Transparent Communication | Authenticity | Athleticism | Heavy workload | | Process |
| Consensus | Balance | Caring | Need more staff | | Rapid growth |
| Feedback | Camaraderie | Entrepreneurial | Stress | | The US vs. Global |
| In-person work | Commitment | Flexibility | Exhaustion & burnout | | |
| Meetings | Craftsmanship | Inclusive | | | |
| Remote work/WFH | Employee Benefits | Mission-driven | | | |
| | PTO/STO | People first | | | |
| | | Smart and | | | |

| | | intellectual | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Trust | | | |

## Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI)

Next, I used the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) (Cameron and Quinn, 2011) to measure Brava's current and desired organizational culture using the Competing Values Framework (CVF). The twenty-four-item survey measures six dimensions of organizational culture, including dominant characteristics, organizational leadership, management of employees, organization glue, strategic emphases, and criteria of success (Cameron and Quinn, 2011) to understand how the organization functions and what values drive the culture.

I created a twelve-question survey instrument using Qualtrics, a web-based survey tool to enable participants to complete the survey by laptop or mobile device.  Brown shared a link to the survey on a company-wide Slack channel to solicit responses from a random selection of employees. The survey was released pre-Labor day during a significant Summer Time-Off period. Unfortunately. the participation rate was low -- 6% (17 employees of 289). Given the small sample size, I drew on the limited responses to construct interview protocols and did not include the findings in my final analysis.

Armed with early findings from the CultureAmp survey data and the limited responses from the OCAI surveys, I developed questions for a set of semi-structured interviews designed to collect more detailed data.

## Semi-Structured Interviews

Cameron and Quinn (2011), Davis (2018), Patton (1980), and preliminary data findings from the CultureAmp and OCAI surveys informed my interview protocol. I used Patton's (1980) research to inform my choice to use a semi-structured interview approach. I used an interview guide to ensure I consistently asked each interviewee similar questions and to make sure I could make my limited thirty-minute interviews efficient and valuable for all parties.

Cameron and Quinn (2011) suggest asking a series of questions to flesh out a culture profile, including "What events reflect our organization's culture?" (p.104). I modified this question to focus on decision-making practices. I reflected on Cameron and Quinn's model, especially the critical qualities of Collaborate and Create cultures to understand how those qualities might present at Brava.

Davis (2018) proposed questions at the individual, team, and organizational levels to analyze culture. I chose to use those that asked about values and what they mean to the employee, how Brava rewards success, and what employees would change about the culture if they could.

The open-ended CultureAmp survey responses helped me identify areas that would be important to probe further in the semi-structured interviews. More specifically, I wanted to understand why employees described decision-making as consensus-seeking and time-intensive; I wanted examples of how Brava's ABC's and basic assumptions manifested in the day-to-day employee experience; and I wanted to understand the potential linkages between employee burnout, remote work due to Covid-19, rapid growth and decision-making practices. These initial

observations were used later in this process when I wrote questions for the interviews.

See Appendix B for my interview guide and Table 8 outlines the link between my research questions and interview questions.

**Table 8: Research Questions and Interview Questions**

| *RELEVANT RESEARCH QUESTION* | *INTERVIEW QUESTIONS* |
| --- | --- |
| n/a. Used to build rapport. | • Tell me a little about your work at Brava. What is your role, what team are you on, and how long have you been there?<br><br>• What do you love about this organization? |
| RQ1: How do Brava employees describe challenges related to decision-making practices? | • Walk me through how a recent decision was made that you were part of. If possible, select a decision that involved more than one group.<br>  ○ What were the steps?<br>  ○ How long did it take?<br>  ○ What felt good?<br>  ○ What do you wish could be done differently? |
| RQ2: What organizational culture norms, assumptions, and practices contribute to challenges with decision-making practices at Brava? | • Can you give me a tangible example of how Brava values come to life in the day-to-day work environment?<br><br>• What is the meeting culture at Brava like?<br><br>• What five words would you use to describe Brava -- the organization?<br><br>• What Brava values (ABCs) resonate most for you? Why?<br><br>• Tell me about "people first" -- what does that mean to you, and how does that influence how work is done at Brava? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • Tell me about how tenure at the organization impacts decision-making.<br><br>• If you could do one thing to improve the culture, what would it be? |
| RQ3: In what ways (if at all) do decision-making practices affect employees at Brava? | • This has been an extraordinary time in many ways (Covid) -- how has Brava's culture enabled the team to keep going? What has gotten better? What has become more challenging? |

Brown and I agreed that interviews would take place with ten to twelve employees representing a cross-section of gender, race, team, seniority, and length of service.

Brown emailed participants to describe my interest in studying Brava's organizational culture and decision-making practices. All invited interviewees said yes. A Calendly link with my availability allowed each participant to schedule their interview for a mutually beneficial time in September 2021.

Each interview was thirty to forty-five minutes long and took place using Zoom. Each discussion started with brief introductions, including the purpose of the study, a note about my connection to Hooper and Brava, a statement that all conversations would be held confidential, and a request for consent to record the interviews for transcription purposes. I chose not to share details on each person in this paper to preserve confidentiality. My research materials include a table tracking gender, race, tenure, level, and team to ensure that the purposive sample achieved my cross-sectional aim.

Within twenty-four hours of each interview, I used Otter.ai to create accurate transcripts, ensuring that each segment was correctly associated with the correct speaker and that the transcript matched the spoken words as accurately as possible. I then uploaded transcripts to Dedoose, a web-based app for coding qualitative data.

I coded the interview transcripts using the code set I developed when analyzing the CultureAmp survey data on the second pass. In my third pass, I identified additional themes that did not surface using my existing codes: Accountability; Conflict-averse; Fixed/risk-averse; Founder influence; Oldtimer vs. newcomer; Optimism vs. negativity; and Two sides of a coin.

**Table 9: Final Set of Codes**

| Behaviors | Espoused Values | Assumptions | Employee Sentiments | Decision -making | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Accountability | Anti-racism | Ambitious | Aggressive pace | Process | Covid-19 |
| Benefits | Authenticity | Athleticism | Heavy workload | | Founder influence |
| Collaboration | Balance | Caring | Need more staff | | Oldtimer vs. newcomer |
| Transparent Communication | Camaraderie | Entrepreneurial | Stress | | Optimism vs. negativity |
| Conflict averse | Commitment | Fixed/ risk-averse | Exhaustion & burnout | | Rapid growth |
| Consensus | Craftsmanship | Flexibility | | | Two sides of a coin |
| Feedback | | Inclusive | | | The US vs. global |
| In-person work | | Mission-driven | | | |

| Meetings | | People first | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PTO/STO | | Smart and intellectual | | | |
| Remote work/WFH | | Trust | | | |

To complete my data analysis, I read through all of the qualitative data (CultureAmp survey and Interviews) once more to test my findings and identify participant quotes that supported or challenged my conclusions (Yin, 2003). I wrote another analytic memo on October 1, 2021, to describe the patterns emerging from the data.

## LIMITATIONS

All empirical investigations have limitations, and this one is no exception. First, it is essential to acknowledge my relationship with Hooper since 2001, first as my professor, and more recently, as a friend and mentor. There is the possibility that due to this relationship, I would not be as forthcoming with my findings or observations that I might be with a stranger. To mitigate this limitation, each day that I worked on the project, I reminded myself of the potential for bias to ensure I completed all analysis and reflection with this awareness front of mind.

Another potential source of bias is that the pool of people interviewed was sourced by Brown. She may have unwittingly selected people who would help support her personal views on decision-making to influence the study's outcome. To mitigate this issue, we talked about the importance of reaching a broad set of

employees to avoid bias. Thanks to her involvement, I completed my interviews in a week, which was incredibly helpful given my research timeframe.

Rather than creating a stand-alone survey, I used existing quantitative and qualitative data from company-administered quarterly CultureAmp employee engagement surveys as preliminary data to inform my interview approach. While this offered the advantage of a data set already collected from a high majority of employees (average participation rate of 86%), I could not influence the questions asked. In an ideal study, I would have had the opportunity to include more specific questions about decision-making practices, which may have eliminated potential data validity and reliability concerns.

Finally, the OCAI survey had a meager response rate of 6%. Brava introduced a "Summer Time Off" policy to address Covid-19 related burnout across the staff, which meant that many employees were out of the office for an extended period when we sent the survey out. Therefore, the low response rate made the data unusable for anything other than a marginal complement to support the development of the interview protocol. If I were to attempt this study again, I would have tried to distribute the survey at a different time in the year to allow for a longer time frame to encourage participation.

## FINDINGS

After carefully reviewing four quarters of CultureAmp open-ended survey data and completing eleven interviews, I identified *seven* findings regarding decision-making practices and Brava's cultural influence. I also identified insights

related to Brava's rapid growth amidst an unprecedented time -- the Covid-19 pandemic -- that identify a potential link between decision-making practices and burnout. I organized the findings by research question.

**RQ1: In what ways do Brava employees report challenges with decision-making practices?**

## Finding 1

**Interviewees described decision-making practices that focus on consensus building by ensuring all voices are heard to allow everyone input, making the process time-consuming and meeting-intensive.**

Almost two-thirds of interviewees described decision-making practices as consensus-seeking. In one interview, a long-tenured employee shared that, "I think that 20 plus people need to weigh in on something...is tiring and very challenging...yeah, *lots of cooks in the kitchen*." In my notes, I observed that she seemed weighed down as she shared her perceptions -- I could feel her sense of exhaustion through the screen.

Another employee seemed relieved to share their frustration and surprise about the time-consuming nature of decision-making. They shared, "So, I would actually describe the *decision-making process as a spiral*...you'll come across the same things, several different times in order to get to a decision...you *keep looping* until you get to the point of you, basically talk to the maximum number of people that you can talk to without literally just posting it in a public Slack channel for everyone's opinion."

Another employee expressed concern about the length of time and number of meetings required to get to a successful outcome. They described the drive for consensus as being "...like *jury deliberation*...yeah, I think it holds us back."

A long-time employee explained, "...so first and foremost, I think we've always had a culture of aspiring to consensus. I think that's not a drawback, but a consequence of having a really egalitarian culture, where everyone's equal."

In my interview with Hooper, he acknowledged the volume of meetings and the connection to consensus-building. He explained, "...we used to have a lot of meetings because consensus-building takes a lot of meetings... the rate of meetings went up with the move to remote." He also described changes he's working to implement to reduce the number of meetings and reliance on consensus. "I think what's changed in the last three months is I've said, 'Look, I don't need to be in that meeting.'"

Throughout the interviews and CultureAmp surveys, employees suggested that Brava's meeting cadence is excessive. One shared that, "I would say the meeting culture as I've experienced it is quite heavy, meaning that each day there are lots of meetings...sometimes it feels overwhelming and like we need to meet to generate an ethos of consensus that is almost more important than the content of the meeting."

Another person echoed the need to gain consensus through multiple rounds of meetings. "There's quite a bit of not using meetings effectively...if we already

have a meeting that's pre scheduled somewhere, why are we creating another meeting with the same people on a different day? Most of my peers...their calendars are essentially blocked all day, Monday through Thursday and they probably do take meetings on Fridays as well...because they are in there, always trying to gain consensus."

One employee expressed significant frustration about how decision-making practices inhibited Brava's ability to execute its vision and strategy in a timely and responsive manner. They shared that, "We had a two-week antiracism accelerator in the beginning of September 2020. We decided we were going to do Free Tracker (pseudonym)... It should be available to everyone because safety is a human right. [Tracker] launched literally last week, a year later. What happened in between there? The fact that at a company with less than 300 people... it takes you a year to ship something... tells me that you've got some broken decision making."

## Finding 2

**Interviewees described a lack of clarity on decision-making roles and responsibilities.**

Several Brava employees pointed to a lack of understanding about who the ultimate decision-makers are in decisions. One Q3 2021 CultureAmp survey respondent stated, "Decision making lacks clarity. Who gets to make what decisions? How can decision-makers be supported and empowered to make tough calls without full consensus?"

Another employee described the lack of clarity and wondered if recent process improvements in the product side of the company addressed the real decision-making challenges. They said, "Understanding when a conversation is over and a decision has been made, or even if there's a disagreement, and here is the tiebreaker, is hard. We've recently gone through some process changes and built more formal processes around planning and decision making…we have a lot more structure, but there's still that same amount of confusion around who makes the decisions and why."

This same employee longs for "…very clear, really articulated roles and responsibilities and clear project plans" to allow teams to "spend more of our time in the fun part, which is the ideation and the building, versus the ambiguity of, who makes the decision, when, and where."

Another employee wondered if Brava would benefit from empowering specific people to have more weight in a decision than others. They said, "I think one of the fundamental things that slows us down is we don't operate by the principle of who is closest to the decision and best informed to weigh in on it…we were having this ridiculous conversation during the three year plan where we're talking about sport types we're gonna pursue. They asked, 'what do you think?' and I'm thinking, 'Why am I weighing in?' I can tell you that as a human being or an athlete, you should <u>not</u> be giving me airtime on that, because it just slows us down."

One recent CultureAmp respondent expressed concerns that the lack of clarity around who is involved in decision-making may lead to adverse business

outcomes. They described an aspirational goal to "double subscriptions in 2021" and an accompanying set of "product and marketing strategies which relied on the summer months to drive subscription growth." They went on to highlight the contradiction created by the announcement of "a Summer Time Off program which is forcing the product team to cut productivity estimates by 40%-50%. We need more synchronization and unity in how we set a vision for success at Brava and use it to manage our business day-to-day."

**RQ2: What organizational culture practices contribute to challenges with decision-making at Brava?**

When I take up Schein's lens of behaviors, values, and assumptions and look at decision-making practices, I see several ways that Brava's highly engaged culture impacts decision-making. These findings started by identifying a strong need for consensus-building in decision-making. This practice can be traced back to core elements of Brava's culture.

## Finding 3

**Interviewees described transparent communication, collaboration, aversion to risk, and aversion to conflict as behaviors that contribute to the highly consensus-driven decision-making process.**

Brava employees described behaviors and practices that support high levels of transparent communication, including the weekly All Hands meeting. One employee said, "I love the transparency with all hands, it's really awesome to hear everything going on in the company." Another said, "Our leadership, they show up...they're here, and you can slack them and you can email them, and they'll

respond...we're growing so fast...we could have cut all hands meetings and not have them every Tuesday, but I think that just speaks to our culture only because you're getting a download of what's going on in the business from our CEO on a weekly basis."

Interestingly, some employees seem to feel the frequency and content of the All Hands meeting is overkill. In the most recent CultureAmp survey (Q3 2021), someone said, "All hands is all about hype and going over information that has already been shared in an email. Why bother? It feels like we're been treated as children that can't read. It's boring to go over something again and again."

Employees talked about Brava's pre-Covid, in-office culture as being highly connected and familial. One employee described two rituals that fed the sense of connection and camaraderie: "I always joke that I thought one of the biggest parts of Brava's culture was that we only had pour over coffee...because people had to stop in the kitchen and make a cup, and then someone else comes up and you chat while you wait for your coffee and I was like if we ever get a real coffee maker, we're gonna lose this connected part of our culture...in the office whoever was new would bring in or make cookies and you go say hi [and they would say] hi, my name is NAME and I sit here and I do this and I brought cookies and you would say hi to them, and introduce yourself." She expressed concern that some of this connectivity had gotten lost in the reliance on Zoom chats and other pandemic-driven changes.

Cameron and Quinn (1991) characterize the Clan (Collaborate) culture as based on teamwork, corporate commitment to employees, shared values and goals, cohesion, and loyalty. In these cultures, "success is defined in terms of internal

climate and concern for people," and there is "...a premium on teamwork, participation, and consensus." (p. 48) Cameron and Quinn's description is highly consistent with what I observed about Brava through employee statements.

A few interviewees spoke to a resistance to change. One employee described a paradox, suggesting that, "...it is not a tremendously agile place. Their are strong poles that resist change...It's a place where openness to evolution and change is talked about often, and in many ways there are things that change, but in the systemic like how does this place work, despite intentions to change... there is this very, very strong lead weight as I see it...there's also resistance to change of 'wasn't it better when there were only 10 of us in a room'."

Another wondered if resistance to change might stem from a lack of trust that modifications to practices and processes would lead to positive outcomes. This observation seems especially important to note as Brava considers evolving and changing practices. This employee shared, "I think that kind of stems from a lack of trust in the organization that something will actually get better. 'I haven't seen this kind of thing get better in the past so why would it be different now'... I think I would describe it as we're very risk intolerant. There's some feeling of, 'I'm afraid of the risk of changing the thing.'"

Several employees pointed toward conflict-averse behaviors at Brava that may inhibit full and frank discussions during decision-making. They wondered if the aversion to conflict and honest feedback might be a potential downside to the highly connected and collaborative culture.

One describes, "We are so overly focused on positivity that the truth is often hidden. Those who want to bring it to light are either punished or just become

quiet and complacent." Another suggests that, "Our culture here tends to shy away from open and honest feedback. When we give or receive it, there is always a strong chance that it will be taken the wrong way (i.e., personally) or that it will be viewed as a personal failure and therefore a "ding" on someone's record." A third suggests that "...sometimes I think things go unsaid in a public forum."

## Finding 4

**Interviewees suggested that Brava's espoused value of camaraderie drives consensus-based decision-making practices.**

Brava's core values are named the "ABCs." Fifth on the list is "camaraderie," as described on the website: "We're equals, united by common goals. Our teamwork and respect for each other fuels our success."

The collaborative nature of Brava's culture was consistently mentioned. One employee described the way it manifested in how work is done. They said, "Yeah, I think I think that relationship building is more important to the work at Brava than it is at other companies where I have been in the past, that there's kind of a need to emotionally check-in and feel an extra closeness to the people that you're working with...almost an expectation that you're looking out for them as much as you're trying to get your own work done."

While some employees reported concerns about how remote and hybrid work inhibits camaraderie, others pointed to new ways leaders were working to instill camaraderie. "Brava from the top down said this is an important priority for us. We think that you should set aside some of your work to do things that create

moments for us to be together that are not related to your job or your work or your performance at work, that are just meant to kind of be with one another."

Another employee described how camaraderie manifests in the virtual working environment: "... it just is an incredibly jovial, supportive, generally very positive environment where I laugh and chuckle and smile many times a day for meetings, even without being in person, which is surprising."

The value of camaraderie, and associated collaborative, relationship-driven behaviors, may impact decision-making. As one employee described in the Q1 2021 CultureAmp survey, "The emphasis on collaboration has swung so far that in many cases we care more about the process than about outcomes and results. This may be an unpopular point of view, but it seems like we are so focused on keeping everyone happy that we will grind progress to a standstill in pursuit of employee happiness over all other goals."

**Finding 5**

**Interviewees described Brava's basic assumptions, including "people first" and "caring" and "inclusive" in ways that further reinforce consensus-driven, time-intensive decision-making practices.**

I read and heard the words "people first" repeatedly in the data that I collected. During the interviews, I heard it defined with remarkable consistency and was struck by this one most of all: "I love that Brava is a company that's always prioritized caring about its people, almost first, right? And has had moments when it's very clearly made decisions for the benefit of the people that work there, rather than the benefit of the company, which I think it's hard to do. I would love to see us succeed to prove that you can treat your people well and be a successful business."

Hooper's definition made this even clearer and exemplified how deeply a founder's values can influence those of the company they create: "...people first is a reminder that each one of us may be prone to taking approaches that aren't actually considering the people that we think are most important in our lives. And people first can be applied to a lot of different places. We definitely apply it to how we run our teams and what we try to do, how we communicate our level of transparency, but it applies to our product as well. We take time to really think to understand the athlete. We talk to them, we do a lot of research to understand them...those are really important inputs as opposed to what the opposite of people first might be, you know, business first, growth first. Success first. Those are, I think, more traditional lenses, you might say, in companies that are kind of in our set."

People first is further exemplified by generous employee benefits and people-friendly policies. This was of particular note throughout the time of this study, which took place during the pandemic. During our interview, Brown shared the motivations behind these actions: "...we had an opportunity to express what we believe really clearly through some of our approaches and policies...like the extra money we talked about [stipend for parents] or ... being encouraged to take three to four weeks off ...those things are really additive to the culture because they say, 'hey you matter to us, you know we're here for you.'"

When asked, "What are some things we're doing great at Brava," employees were effusive in their gratitude for the caring, familial nature of the company. One employee gushed, "The energy of the company + genuine care for one another is unparalleled to any other company I've ever been at. I'm beyond grateful to be surrounded by the team we have at Brava." Another exclaimed, "...Brava truly feels like a family and working here during the pandemic has felt so safe and caring. It feels like we continue putting the right things first for employees and are collectively leveling each other up on a regular basis."

## Finding 6

**The co-founder and CEO's interpersonal strengths -- caring nature, ability to drive consensus, transparent communicator, desire, and ability to connect with everyone -- profoundly influence Brava's culture, and therefore its decision-making practices. While beloved for these qualities and practices, there is some concern about how effective these practices are in a rapidly growing Brava.**

Hooper's leadership style and approach heavily influence core elements of Brava's culture. One employee, who joined within the last year, notes, "...I attribute

a large portion of the culture that is Brava now to Haney (pseudonym) and Hooper…I have never met a CEO or a co-founder, like Haney and Hooper ever, they're so humble. And I don't know if it's because they work out and they just, you know, are just happy, but that leadership, it just, it trickles down. And I think that's a big contributor to why a lot of people are happy at Brava…that's a big part of why Brava is the way it is."

One way this comes to life is in Hooper's high-touch, personal approach to staying connected with everyone in the organization, which came up repeatedly throughout my interviews. One employee pointed to how much time Hooper invests one-on-one with employees. They shared, "Hooper, is very, very accessible for a CEO so spends a lot of one on one time with people…he's really willing to go to very personal places with the company, which I think helps the people first mentality…"

Another employee expressed admiration about his approach, yet raised concern about how scalable his personal touch would be, especially in light of Brava's growth trajectory. They described, "He prides himself on knowing every single person and caring for them and it's a really beautiful thing but it's also hard to scale."

One employee described Hooper's weekly All-Hands comments as storytelling. They explained, "…it's almost like you've got a little essay written most Tuesdays -- a formal encapsulation of some of the broader themes that he's been thinking about and a desire to take the day to day to a place where it can become accessible and interesting to everybody." Hooper's storytelling might also be described as sensemaking, or what Weick (1993) described as, "…an ongoing

accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs." (p.635)

Groysberg et al. (2018) state, "Founders and influential leaders often set new cultures in motion and imprint values and assumptions that persist for decades." (p.46) Schein (2017) explains that by their nature, founder's bring a desire to "do something different" when they start companies, and it is that very drive that helps to catalyze the formation of culture.

In my interview with Hooper, I mentioned how others pointed to his ability to connect with others and actively listen to them as one of his superpowers and a core part of the Brava experience. I asked how he thought that might influence Brava's culture moving forward and any evolution that might take place as the company grows and changes.

He acknowledged his influence and how he was working to evolve decision-making at Brava in ways that would support the company's growth trajectory. He shared, "...we definitely operated too much on the 'Michael and I will talk and then then I'll know what I should do next.' It was hub and spoke and I'm really trying to move away from that...I don't have to be in every meeting...we're not all going to build a consensus around a decision through me."

Hooper's description of hub and spoke is reminiscent of Helgesen's Web of Inclusion, as Bolman and Deal (2017) described. In these organizations, the web is built from the center outward and consists of interconnected relationships. The emphasis is on accessibility, connection, and inclusive decision-making.

He continued, "This is how I'm wired. You mentioned that this is my nature. This is what motivates me. The other side is what people are drawn to...that sense

of that feels really good when I'm connected with this person who really listens and cares...the relationship I have with this person seems to really matter to me. You get really, really close to me when you work with me. But that doesn't mean that that's the way we're going to actually do the work. We're not going to do the work with just that relationship. The work and the decisions can be separate from that relationship."

Hooper's self-awareness and openness to change were essential to note and will be a helpful input as Brava considers other ways to strengthen decision-making moving forward.

**RQ3: In what ways (if at all) do decision-making practices lead Brava employees to experience burnout?**

When Brown and I first connected, we talked about understanding what might drive complexity and leadership burnout at Brava. CultureAmp employee engagement scores indicate that Brava employees are highly engaged, yet the open-ended question responses and interview data suggest that employees experience burnout.  I do not attempt to dissect all of the contributors to burnout in this study. I did try to identify what, if anything, related to decision-making practices influenced employee burnout.

Brown and I often discussed how the last twenty-one months have been an extraordinary time for all due to Covid-19. There is no question that some of the burnout employees currently feel is related to Covid-19 issues. To help mitigate this, in July 2021, Brava instituted a "Summer Time Off" policy that requests "all

employees take some extended time off throughout the remainder of the year that suits theirs and/or their families' needs." (Rilovich, 2021).

Throughout my analysis, I came to recognize that feelings of frustration and burnout may also indirectly stem from decision-making practices.

## Finding 7

**Brava's consensus-building, meeting-heavy decision-making practices worked successfully in a smaller, predominantly face-time company of hard-core athletes located in SF. Today, they are cumbersome and difficult to replicate in a rapidly growing, remote first company that spans time zones, embraces anti-racism and diversity, and enables work from anywhere. These factors contribute to frustration and burnout.**

Covid-19 and rapid growth pushed Brava's in-person, office-based, collaborative culture to make significant changes. In March 2020, like many other knowledge-worker firms, Brava shifted to a fully remote working environment.

Not surprisingly, Brava's people-first, caring nature fueled the addition of several new benefits to support employees (parent stipend, light Fridays, ability to work from anywhere, even beyond the pandemic). By being highly responsive to employee needs, Brava may have unwittingly introduced obstacles to maintaining a strong sense of camaraderie across its workforce. For example, in-person practices like "Rookie Cookies," pour-over coffee, and Wednesday group runs (with everyone, including the CEO) that were core to the in-office Brava experience are no longer feeding camaraderie and connection.

Adding complication was the addition of nearly one hundred people to its 200-person staff and further global expansion into Ireland. What was once a

primarily SF-based, in-person culture was now a mostly remote company with many new employees, working across multiple time zones, leveraging virtual and digital tools to stay connected. Decision-making reliant on consensus-building becomes even more challenging when taking place over Zoom, with employees learning a new culture and new ways of working together.

One employee described how things today are different from pre-Covid, pre-rapid growth Brava. "When everyone was in San Francisco...before COVID 90% of the employees were in the Bay Area...it's really easy to build consensus when essentially everyone is right there. Now I don't know if SO AND SO is available, I can't physically see him so I have to send him a message, 'Hey are you free? Can we get on Zoom real quick?...' or we say, 'Should we cancel this meeting now until we can get this other person in, or do we just go with us right now and start talking?'"

One employee expressed a desire for more simplicity. "As we grow (and grow fast), I think we should focus on making things much more simple. Things like schedules (recurring large meetings) and processes."

Another aired fears about how remote working was inhibiting the sense of connections she previously felt with colleagues: "I feel less connected with my coworkers and Brava as a community than I ever have at Brava. What was one of my favorite parts of working here has become one of my least favorite parts of working here. Everything feels transactional."

Research by McKinsey's Bryan Hancock (McKinsey podcast, 2021), confirms this employee's experience. He shared that "... over the course of the pandemic...within your immediate team, communication and connectivity have gone up. But linkages across teams have gone down significantly." Communication and connectivity are core elements to Brava's decision-making practices today. It is logical that some employees may experience burnout as they continue to build consensus using digital tools.

Schein describes that growing cultures can lose the sense that "we are a family," (p. 210) and that a common culture can be harder to maintain. In the most recent CultureAmp survey, I noted an uptick in comments expressing concern about the effects of growth and remote-first work on the culture and ways of working.

One employee wrote, "Something I've noticed though is that Brava is a significantly different company today than it was at the start of 2020. I hope it's good, and I hope that everyone feels like they are all part of the same mission and goals. I don't think I've met more than half of the 100+ people we've hired in the last year, and I've worked with several working groups in that time. I feel like I should have run into more of them just from my line of work."

I noted the parallels between what Brava employees described and Schein's (2017) description of the "general effects of success, growth, and age" on a company. First, he explains how growth (and in Brava's case, Covid-19 and forced remote work) leads to a reduction in face-to-face interaction, and connections across

colleagues become less familiar. (p. 208-209) With the decrease in face-to-face interaction comes a need for more formalized communication processes.

In his interview, Hooper agreed that this intersection of rapid growth and remote-first work will drive a more straightforward process less reliant on consensus. "COVID driving everyone remote basically plus hiring a lot of people that are going to be remote full time long term even if we do go back to an office… it requires us to [recognize] that everything cannot be done by getting a group of people in a room together to talk about it."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Brava can evolve decision-making practices in three ways. First, Hooper and his leadership team can continue decision-making practice changes he initiated in early summer by following Kotter's framework for change. Second, Brava can pilot a simple framework at the start of the decision-making process to increase role and responsibility clarity. Finally, Brava can take steps to minimize the amount of time spent in meetings overall to increase energy and attention for critical decision-making meetings.

1. **Continue to execute decision-making practice changes introduced by Hooper in June using Kotter's (1995) change management framework. Leverage Hooper's leadership strengths as a caring, transparent communicator and referent power built through years of establishing strong relationships with the team to drive decision-making practice changes from the top.**

Hooper's influence and impact will be critical as Brava pushes to evolve its decision-making practices and the explicit behaviors, espoused values, and basic

assumptions embedded in its culture. As co-founder and CEO, his imprint on the existing culture is strong and vivid.

Brava oldtimers and newcomers will look to him for cues for how to behave, especially as Brava finds its way in the post-Covid environment as a 50% larger, flexible first organization. Schein (1984) notes "...leadership will always play a key role during those times when the group faces a new problem and must develop new responses to the situation...one of the crucial functions of leadership is to provide guidance...when habitual ways of doing things no longer work, or when a dramatic change in the environment requires new responses." (p. 9)

Kotter (1995) describes a seven-step framework for leading change. If Brava employs Kotter's approach to change, then the company should be able to successfully modify its decision-making practices in a way that is consistent with its culture.

Step one involves establishing a sense of urgency for why the change needs to happen. Hooper did this in his September comments by linking the need for change to Brava's growth: "We have added 120 people to our team since this time last year. That alone might make us move more slowly." As noted in the Findings, employees have noticed how growth impacts the Brava employee experience, including decision-making practices. Hooper wisely seeks to address uncertainty by connecting decision-making practice evolution to a reduction in growth-related stress.

Kotter's (1995) second step involves establishing a guiding coalition of teammates to support the change. In Hooper's remarks on 10/05/2021, he points to the insights and involvement of several employees either than himself when

describing decision-making practice changes. "I want to acknowledge the substantial contributions of Steve, Daniel, and the discussions they brought me into…"

Hooper, Brown, and Brava's leadership team should seek to build a large coalition of decision-making change champions to help reinforce the new practices he seeks to embed in the organization's DNA. I believe several of the individuals interviewed for this paper would be excellent change champions.

Kotter's (1995) third step points to the creation of a compelling vision of the future. He states, "A vision says something that clarifies the direction in which an organization needs to move." (p.4). Schein (2017) implores that the future vision must outline specific behavioral actions that describe "the new way of working" and that makes clear there is no going back to old ways.

As Brava moves away from consensus building toward decision-making with fewer voices and inputs, the company will need to think about how strongly-held assumptions like "people first" can be redefined in a way that supports this change. For example, people first might evolve from "all voices are heard, no matter how long it takes" to "decisions are made by leaders we trust to gather enough inputs to have the data they need to make a smart, swift decision."

Hooper and his team should continue to use the All Hands platform to describe the desired decision-making practices for the company clearly. At the September 23, 2021 All-Hands, he began to describe this new vision being specific about the behaviors that needed to change, including consensus building and the need to come to a full agreement:

Source: Hooper's remarks, 2021

- *Decision-making is not the same as consensus building.* When we decided to move the paywall I would say there were equal numbers of people at Brava who agreed with the decision as didn't agree with the decision. The important thing was that once we made the decision, people SUPPORTED the decision.

- *We spent time bringing everyone into the WHY behind the decision which helped.* However, it's up to each of us to find that place between disagreement and agreement that allows for 100% support of your teammates, your leaders, and ultimately, the vision that we are all working to realize.

New stories and myths will help to reinforce new cultural practices. Bolman and Deal (2017) and Schein (2017) tell us that stories help organizations to strengthen fundamental values and assumptions. During interviews, employees recounted stories about how Hooper would seek consensus when making decisions. If possible, Hooper should illuminate what "good" looks like by developing a compelling myth about how the June 2021 changes to decision-making practices were pivotal to Brava's success.  This new myth can begin to replace the ones about consensus-building.

Schein (2017) suggests that people successfully learn new behaviors, beliefs, and values by following the example of a role model with whom we identify and by using trial and error to create and test new approaches to problems. Highly respected by employees, Hooper has built strong connections across the company. This referent power (French and Raven, 1959) makes Hooper a role model who can help drive behavior change. Hooper can do this by visibly demonstrating new approaches to decision-making.

Kotter (1995) suggests that the new vision needs to be communicated and reinforced repeatedly to support the change. Hooper should circle back to these changes with regularity in the All Hands forum, as well as in his frequent one-on-one conversations with employees. Where possible, he should leverage his storytelling and narrative strengths to make the communications compelling and add meaning.

Kotter's (1995) model suggests short-term wins are instrumental in long-term change. Schein (2017) reminds us that culturally-driven behaviors successfully shift when the new approaches result in better outcomes, and people in the organization can share those experiences.

Hooper and other leaders should identify opportunities to employ the new decision-making practices in situations where successful outcomes seem highly likely. They can then highlight these wins to the company to reinforce the change.

Not surprisingly, Kotter (1995) suggests anchoring change in a company's culture. Specifically, he states employees need to recognize "...how the new approaches, behaviors, and attitudes have helped improve performance. When people are left on their own to make the connections, they sometimes create very inaccurate links." Sensemaking needs to happen frequently and repeatedly to reinforce change.

Kotter (1995) also points to the importance of all leaders, not just the most senior, to model and embody the new approaches. Hooper should utilize the strong connections he's built with his team to bring them along in embracing and incorporating changed decision-making practices to ensure strong adoption.

2. **To clarify decision-making roles and responsibilities, introduce the RAPID approach to define roles, increase accountability, reduce meeting time, and speed time to action.**

Findings suggest that Brava employees want more explicit decision-making roles and responsibilities. McDowell and Mallon (2020) indicate that organizations can determine decision rights by answering three questions:

- Who are the individuals or groups empowered to make decisions?
- What decisions need to be made?
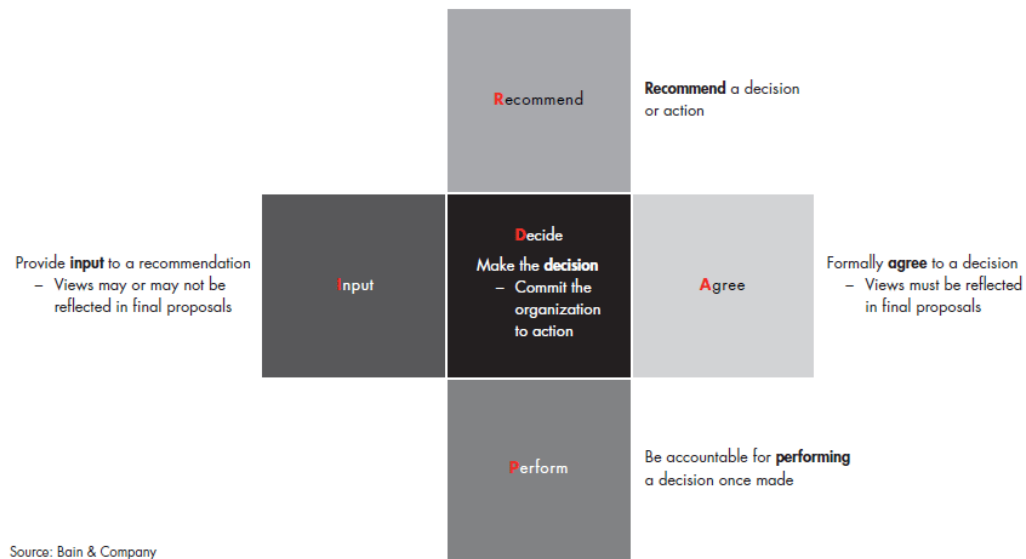- How do operating processes and tools help support decision-making?

Companies can use a variety of frameworks to clarify the "who" in decision-making. Each provides a slight evolution of RACI, a framework widely believed to have been developed in the 1950s by management consultants. Today, it helps teams guide decision-making as well as identify stakeholders for projects and tasks.

RACI is:

- Who is **Responsible** for doing the work?

- Who is **Accountable** for the decision?

- Who should be **Consulted** for input, information, insights, and perspectives?

- Who should be **Informed** about the decision and its outcome?

Bain and Company developed RAPID to help teams and organizations clarify roles and responsibilities in crucial decisions. Like RACI, RAPID includes a set of roles.

**Figure 6: Bain's RAPID decision-making framework**



Provide **input** to a recommendation
– Views may or may not be reflected in final proposals

**I**nput

**D**ecide
Make the **decision**
– Commit the organization to action

**R**ecommend

**Recommend** a decision or action

**A**gree

Formally **agree** to a decision
– Views must be reflected in final proposals

**P**erform

Be accountable for **performing** a decision once made

Source: Bain & Company

Smet et. al. (2021) offer DARE, a third framework intended to clarify decision-making roles in meetings used at McKinsey. They claim this model improves on RACI by addressing the need to make good decisions quickly. DARE is:

- **Decision maker(s):** the people who have the final vote.

- **Advisers:** give input and shape the decision.

- **Recommenders:** analyze, explore alternatives, and make a recommendation. McKinsey suggests it is helpful to gather data from a wide range of Recommenders, but not to have them all attend the decision-making meeting.

- **Execution partners:** get deeply involved in implementing the decision, and therefore must be informed. For speed and clarity, you will need the right ones in the room to ask clarifying questions and spot flaws that might hinder implementation.

If Brava applies one of these frameworks at the start of a future decision-making process, then the organization should be able to provide much needed role and responsibility clarity in a simple way.  Given the collaborative and caring nature of Brava's culture, I might lean slightly toward the RAPID model over the others because it identifies stakeholders who need to be bought into a decision even if they were not ultimately responsible for making it.

Brava should introduce the new framework as a pilot or test using IHI's Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) change approach. IHI encourages testing a change by "...developing a plan to test the change (Plan), carrying out the test (Do), observing and learning from the consequences (Study), and determining what modifications should be made to the test (Act)." (Plan-do-study-act (PDSA) worksheet: IHI, 2021)

I hypothesize that adding a simple practice of clarifying roles and responsibilities to the beginning of a cross-functional decision-making process will help address some of the concerns employees expressed in the surveys and interviews. After testing the approach with one group, Hooper and his leadership team can evaluate how well the process worked and identify ways to improve it before rolling it out more broadly in the organization.

3. **To alleviate meeting fatigue and improve energy and attention in critical decision-making meetings, consider the following steps:**

    a. **Conduct a meeting audit to identify what gatherings are truly required to achieve a successful outcome;**

    b. **Develop new information sharing practices and collaborative approaches to replace meetings that are solely for**

**information-sharing;**

   c. **Introduce new meeting norms as some employees return to offices and others stay remot**e.

As companies have become flatter and less hierarchical, collaborative approaches have become increasingly prevalent ("Too much togetherness? The downside of workplace collaboration," 2017). Sustaining these highly collaborative methods through the fully remote work practices of the Covid-era has challenged many companies, including Brava. As the pandemic evolves to an endemic and knowledge workers move away from fully remote work toward a hybrid model, there is an exciting opportunity to innovate and create new cultural practices and behaviors. If Brava can identify and develop some new practices to enhance decision-making in a hybrid working environment, then employee frustration and burnout due to decision-making should decrease.

One approach Brava might explore is to rethink their approach to meetings. Smet et. al. (2021) suggest redesigning meetings by asking questions including:

- Do we need to meet?

- If yes, what is the purpose of the meeting? Are we deciding? Are we discussing/brainstorming or information-sharing?

- What role should everyone play? (see Recommendation 2)

- What needs to be done in the office, and what can be done virtually?"

For meetings requiring brainstorming, idea-generating, or involving challenging topics, the Brava team might consider making those meetings happen in-person to facilitate connection and collaboration. They might also try to make in-office gatherings feel intentional, much in the way retreats and off-sites felt

special pre-Covid. For example, they might structure in-office days to include a mix of activities and events to spur collaboration, connection, and ideation.

Brava might rely on other approaches for routine information-sharing needs, including brief email updates or Slack channel summaries, pre-recorded videos to walk through slide decks using a tool like Loom, or virtual meetings. Brava relies on Slack to communicate across teams and could add a practice to ensure remote employees "hear" the output of an in-office conversation by noting the conversation and its outcome in a Slack channel.

When meetings are hybrid, meaning some people are in an office, and others are virtual, Brava should establish explicit norms and practices to ensure everyone feels equally included. The standards might consist of the addition of Zoom rooms to aid interactivity with remote employees or asking everyone who participates in the meeting to use their laptop rather than one large camera to minimize the presence of sidebar chats among the in-person set.

## CONCLUSIONS

I endeavored to help Brava understand its decision-making practices and to identify how its behaviors, values, and assumptions impact those practices. I sought to determine how, if at all, decision-making practices drove employee burnout. My findings suggest that decision-making practices are consensus-seeking, time-consuming, and lack clarity about who is responsible for making decisions.

Behaviors like consensus-building and collaboration, values of camaraderie, and underlying assumptions that Brava is caring and people first drive how work is done, including decision-making.

Brava experienced rapid growth while it switched from a primarily office-based culture to one that is remote first. The move to remote and the addition of new teammates challenged cultural practices that developed and were successful for a primarily in-person, smaller company. Growth and remote work have made decision-making increasingly complex, which impacts employee burnout.

Brava can evolve decision-making practices while supporting its culture by following Kotter's framework for change, led by Hooper and Brown, with support and buy-in from leaders throughout the organization. Brava can pilot a simple framework at the start of the decision-making process to increase role and responsibility clarity. As the world begins to move into the "next normal," Brava can alleviate meeting fatigue and improve energy and attention in critical decision-making meetings by conducting a meeting audit and developing new approaches to meeting in a hybrid-work landscape.

Based on what I've learned and experienced about Brava over the last year, I am confident that this team can make decision-making more simple and effective without losing sight of its people-first nature. I am eager to stay connected with Hooper, Brown, and the Brava team to learn how decision-making practices will continue to evolve and improve over the next year, especially as the world prepares to move into a post-pandemic chapter.

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## Appendix A: Advantages and Disadvantages of Spencer Stuart Culture Styles

| CULTURE STYLE | ADVANTAGES | DISADVANTAGES | RANKED 1ST OR 2ND |
|---|---|---|---|
| **CARING** Warm, sincere, relational | Improved teamwork, engagement, communication, trust, and sense of belonging | Overemphasis on consensus building may reduce exploration of options, stifle competitiveness, and slow decision making | 63% |
| **PURPOSE** Purpose driven, idealistic, tolerant | Improved appreciation for diversity, sustainability, and social responsibility | Overemphasis on a long-term purpose and ideals may get in the way of practical and immediate concerns | 9% |
| **LEARNING** Open, inventive, exploring | Improved innovation, agility, and organizational learning | Overemphasis on exploration may lead to a lack of focus and an inability to exploit existing advantages | 7% |
| **ENJOYMENT** Playful, instinctive, fun loving | Improved employee morale, engagement, and creativity | Overemphasis on autonomy and engagement may lead to a lack of discipline and create possible compliance or governance issues | 2% |
| **RESULTS** Achievement driven, goal focused | Improved execution, external focus, capability building, and goal achievement | Overemphasis on achieving results may lead to communication and collaboration breakdowns and higher levels of stress and anxiety | 89% |
| **AUTHORITY** Bold, decisive, dominant | Improved speed of decision making and responsiveness to threats or crises | Overemphasis on strong authority and bold decision making may lead to politics, conflict, and a psychologically unsafe work environment | 4% |
| **SAFETY** Realistic, careful, prepared | Improved risk management, stability, and business continuity | Overemphasis on standardization and formalization may lead to bureaucracy, inflexibility, and dehumanization of the work environment | 8% |
| **ORDER** Rule abiding, respectful, cooperative | Improved operational efficiency, reduced conflict, and greater civic-mindedness | Overemphasis on rules and traditions may reduce individualism, stifle creativity, and limit organizational agility | 15% |

## Appendix B: Interview Guide For Brava One On One Interviews

Sources: Davis (2018), Cameron and Quinn (2011), and questions I developed.

**Introduce myself:**

- Personal connection to company leadership
- Currently Director of Leadership and Development at Boston Beer
- Doing research for Peabody EdD to understand Brava's organizational culture and how culture influences the way work is done.
- I've looked at employee engagement survey data and chatted with leadership… and am curious about a few themes, especially related to decision-making, Covid, and burnout.
- Confirm that our conversations will be confidential and that they are comfortable with my recording the interviews.

**Question flow:**

1. Tell me a little about your work at Brava. What is your role, what team are you on, and how long have you been there?

2. What five words would you use to describe Brava -- the organization, not the app?

3. What do you love about this organization?

4. What Brava values resonate most for you? Why?

5. Can you give me a tangible example of how these values come to life in the day-to-day work environment?

6. Tell me about "people first" -- what does that mean to you, and how does that influence how work is done at Brava?

7. How does Brava's culture impact the way decisions are made? Walk me through how a recent decision was made that you were part of. If possible, select a decision that involved more than one group. What were the steps, how long did it take, what felt good? What do you wish could be done differently?

8. This has been an extraordinary time in many ways  (Covid) -- how has Brava's culture enabled the team to keep going? What has gotten better? What has become more challenging?

9. If you could do one thing to improve the culture, what would it be?

**Additional questions that were asked when themes emerged:**

10. Tell me about how tenure at the organization impacts decision-making.

11. What is the meeting culture at Brava like?

12. The CultureAmp surveys describe a duality regarding work-life balance -- some people say it's amazing, while others point to workload overload, aggressive pace, meeting overload, and/or an inability to take advantage of the w/l balance options. What are your thoughts about this?

13. What motivates leaders? The rest of the organization?

14. How is success rewarded? How is failure addressed?

15. Is there anything else you want to share with me that I have not asked about?

## Dominant characteristics

| | |
|---|---|
| The organization is a very personal place. It is like an extended family. People seem to share a lot of themselves. | 0 |
| The organization is a dynamic and entrepreneurial place. People are willing to stick their necks out and take risks. | 0 |
| The organization is very results oriented. A major concern is with getting the job done. People are very competitive and achievement oriented. | 0 |
| The organization is a very controlled and structured place. Formal procedures generally govern what people do. | 0 |
| Total | 0 |

## Organizational Leadership

| | |
|---|---|
| The leadership in the organization is generally considered to exemplify mentoring, facilitating, or nurturing. | 0 |
| The leadership in the organization is generally considered to exemplify entrepreneurship, innovation or risk taking. | 0 |
| The leadership in the organization is generally considered to exemplify a no-nonsense, aggressive, results-oriented focus. | 0 |
| The leadership in the organization is generally considered to exemplify coordinating, organizing, or smooth-running efficiency. | 0 |
| Total | 0 |

## Management of Employees

| | |
|---|---|
| The management style in the organization is characterized by teamwork, consensus and participation. | 0 |
| The management style in the organization is characterized by individual risk taking, innovation, freedom and uniqueness. | 0 |
| The management style in the organization is characterized by hard-driving competitiveness, high demands, and achievement. | 0 |
| The management style in the organization is characterized by security of employment, conformity, predictability, and stability in relationships. | 0 |
| Total | 0 |

## Organization Glue

| | |
|---|---|
| The glue that holds the organization together is loyalty and mutual trust. Commitment to this organization runs high. | 0 |
| The glue that holds the organization together is is commitment to innovation and development. There is an emphasis on being on the cutting edge. | 0 |
| The glue that holds the organization together is the emphasis on achievement and goal accomplishment. | 0 |
| The glue that holds the organization together is formal rules and policies. Maintaining a smoothly running organization is important. | 0 |
| Total | 0 |

## Strategic Emphases

| | |
|---|---|
| The organization emphasizes human development. High trust, openness, and participation persist. | 0 |
| The organization emphasizes acquiring new resources and creating new challenges. Trying new things and prospecting for opportunities are valued. | 0 |
| The organization emphasizes competitive actions and achievement Hitting stretch targets and winning in the marketplace are dominant. | 0 |
| The organization emphasizes permanence and stability. Efficiency, control, and smooth operations are important. | 0 |
| Total | 0 |

## Criteria of Success

| | |
|---|---|
| The organization defines success on the basis of development of human resources, teamwork, employee commitment, and concern for people. | 0 |
| The organization defines success on the basis of having unique or the newest products. It is a product leader and innovator. | 0 |
| The organization defines success on the basis of winning in the marketplace and outpacing the competition. Competitive market leadership is key. | 0 |
| The organization defines success on the basis of efficiency. Dependable delivery, smooth scheduling, and low-cost production are critical. | 0 |
| Total | 0 |

# Appendix D: Comprehensive Code Book

| THEME | Definition of theme | Example (real or imagined) quote |
|---|---|---|
| **Assumptions** | | |
| Ambitious | Showing a strong desire to succeed. | "positive competitiveness, people are willing to push to achieve more. high achieving…" |
| Athleticism | Commitment to the athlete experience and/or athletic lifestyle. | "I also want to see more people represented that are not hardcore athletes. I'm not a Brava power user, but I love working at Brava" |
| Caring | Displaying kindness and care for others. | "I think there's just so much care and appreciation for human beings…the company is trying to do the right thing in a really genuine way." |
| Entrepreneurial | Link to Brava's start-up roots. Lack of hierarchy, opportunistic, creative, focused on creating a great product, as a team. | "…opportunity finding and forward looking. Think of a great idea, put it on paper, build momentum around is encouraged. I haven't seen doors close." |
| Fixed/risk-averse | Resistant to change. Prefers what is known. | "There are a few situations in which colleagues can be extremely rigid in their ways and difficult to work with." |
| Flexibility | Willingness to change, to meet people where they are. Schedules, work location, other benefits. | "Being flexible during Covid by becoming a remote-first company which I hope will continue." |
| Inclusive | Actively working to make all voices heard and to make different people feel included. | "Brava as a whole is dedicated to listening to opinions, specifically new opinions, and is compassionate about becoming a more equitable, safe, accepting environment." |
| Mission-driven | Passionate focus on bringing the company mission to life. | "Everyone has SO much passion for making the athlete experience better." |

| People first | Making choices that put people and their needs (employees and customers) before profit. | "When faced with a challenge, or an opportunity, we will slow down...it is a reminder that even if the intent is to do well, we may be prone to taking approaches that aren't actually considering the people that we think are most important in our lives." |
|---|---|---|
| Smart and intellectual | Intelligent, thoughtful. | "Being thoughtful... provocative, pushing teams to be more thoughtful." |
| Trust | To have (or not) faith and confidence in each other and in each other's abilities. | "Brava is the first company that I've come to where they trust people immediately when they're hired, you don't have to earn trust...we're going to trust you until we know different." |
| **Behaviors** | | |
| Accountability | Being responsible and/or giving responsibility to others. | "...very clear accountability structures. So, you know we're doing X, and Y person owns it. I think it's like, what am I being asked to contribute." |
| Benefits | Payments or gifts made by an employer. Health care, time off, stipends, etc. | "Great benefits: home stipend, Gear & Events Stipend, Health Stipend, health and pension insurance." |
| Collaboration | Working with someone to produce or create something. | "Building out teams that value camaraderie and teamwork. We don't seem to hire people that are looking out for themselves and stepping on other folks to get ahead." |
| Conflict averse | Prefer to avoid disagreement or to address challenging issues head-on. | "I think we're also very kind. Nice culture, but I don't see much conflict friction pushback. To the extent that sometimes I think things go unsaid in a public forum." |
| Consensus | Agreement by all stakeholders. An approach to decision-making. | "I'm going to talk to every single individual that is affected by this and get their |

| | | perspective/consensus on how we're going to move forward" |
|---|---|---|
| Feedback | Information used as a basis for improvement. | "Our culture tends to shy away from open and honest feedback. When we give or receive it, there is always a strong chance that it will be taken the wrong way (i.e., personally) or that it will be viewed as a personal failure and therefore a "ding" on someone's record of work/accomplishments." |
| In-person work | Work that requires people to work in a shared office space. | "I'm sure hoping this changes once I'm back in the office, but I feel disconnected from other teams at Brava." |
| Meetings | An assembly of people for a discussion. Can be in-person or virtual. | "Sometimes meetings pile up and even eclipse other meetings. It's not terribly unusual to have a meeting booked on top of another one that's already blocking that time in my calendar, as if the attitude is that *that* meeting must be more important." |
| PTO/STO | Paid Time Off policy and/or Summer Time Off policy. | "The STO program was a great step towards reducing the risk of burnout." |
| Remote work/WFH | The ability to work from anywhere and/or to work from home. | "I don't feel connected with my team when we're working remotely and communication is remarkably difficult." |
| Transparent communication | Freely sharing good and bad information up, down, and across levels. | "I love the transparency with all hands, it's really awesome to hear everything going on in the company." |
| **Decision-making** | Anything that is related to the process of making decisions. | "Decision making lacks clarity. Who gets to make what decisions? How can decision makers be supported and empowered to make tough calls without full consensus?" |
| Process | Descriptions of a set of steps and actions to achieve a specific outcome, | "As we grow (and grow fast), I think we should focus on making |

| | a desire for more process, or concerns with existing processes. | things much more simple. Things like schedules (recurring large meetings) and processes." |
|---|---|---|
| **Employee sentiments** | These themes emerged time and again in the surveys and interviews. They are ways employees describe the nature of work at Brava and/or areas requiring attention. | |
| Aggressive pace | Brava's tendency to work at a rapid speed to achieve outputs. | "Brava runs at an unsustainable pace. I'm often (near weekly at times!) asking myself how long I can really do this and not regret the toll it sometimes takes on me and my family to deliver excellence at work." |
| Heavy workload | A feeling that the amount of work is burdensome. | "We are still trying to do too much at once. People and teams are overloaded. We need to focus on fewer things at once." |
| Need more staff | A feeling that there are not enough people to get the volume of work done at the pace required. | "...our department needs more headcount (we are all stretched pretty thin)." |
| Stress | A feeling of emotional or physical tension. | "If I take time off, projects can stack up and result in more stress thereafter." |
| Exhaustion & burnout | The state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. | "I feel stretched really, really thin and I work what feels like constantly." |
| **Espoused Values** | | |
| Anti-racism | We reject racism. We pursue antiracism in our culture, our products, and our community. | "...concrete example of Antiracism...adding new board members from different backgrounds to our board is motivating and exciting." |
| Authenticity | Version a: People can show up as who they are -- ** how employees defined it.<br><br>Version b: We put the athlete first and build what they will use. ** how it is explicitly defined as a value. | "We allow people to, to come as they are"<br><br>*I did not see this come through. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Balance | We practice what we preach: there's always time for a workout. There's always time for family. | "A sincere interest in supporting work-life balance...one of the core tenets that gets talked about in how the company was founded is the idea that there's always time for a run or ride...what that's translated to over time is there's always time to do the thing that feeds you as a person." |
| Camaraderie | We're equals, united by common goals. Our teamwork and respect for each other fuels our success. | "I think that relationship building is more important to the works at Brava than it is at other companies where I have been in the past, there's kind of a need to emotionally check-in ...almost an expectation that you're looking out for them as much as you're trying to get your own work done." |
| Commitment | We thrive on wholehearted efforts and the spirit of competition. We're dedicated to our values, our work, our athletes and our team – no halfway, no hesitation. | "...you don't see a lot of people coasting. It's everyone's in the trenches together constantly doing stuff" |
| Craftsmanship | We strive for excellence through iteration and a determined pursuit of mastery. Perfection is a never-ending journey. | "how we build it and trying to make it as good as possible" |
| **Other** | | |
| Covid-19 | Anything that relates to working during the pandemic. | "Brava truly feels like a family and working here during the pandemic has felt so safe and caring" |
| Founder influence | References to how founders have influenced the way things are done. | "I attribute a large portion of the culture that is Brava now to M and M...I have never met a CEO or a co founder, like M or M ever, like they're so humble." |
| Oldtimer vs newcomer | Things that relate to the difference in experience for someone who has long tenure versus someone who is new to the team. | "...you get people who are fresh, who come in with a lot of ambition or ideas or energy...and you have people, especially folks |

| | | who've been through layoffs or like harder times, there is like residual sort of like just tiredness and...I tried that before, it didn't work, here's why.' |
|---|---|---|
| Optimism vs negativity | Glass half-full thinking versus glass half-empty. | "I think the antidote to the status quo problem I was describing is a sense of optimism and willingness to push forward even when I'm not sure what's going to happen like and bring more of that" |
| Rapid growth | Comments that relate to the explosive growth at Brava since January 2020. | " I don't think I've met more than half of the 100+ people we've hired in the last year, and I've worked with several working groups in that time. I feel like I should have run into more of them just from my line of work." |
| Two sides of a coin | Observations that highlight how each strength has a corresponding weakness or challenge. | "It's sort of the other side of the coin of the people first side of things but I think we're extremely paternalistic as a company in terms of dictating to employees what they should do instead of helping people feel like they can autonomously make the right decision." |
| US versus global | Mention of the tension between US-based employees and those outside the US. | "There is still a fairly strong US bias to some of the company processes and culture." |