Almost invariably, when I’m discussing customer experience (CX) with utility professionals, the topic of culture comes up:

- “If we really want CX principles to take hold at Friendly Power, our culture has to change.”
- “I’d love to get some traction with journey mapping at Exciting Electric, but it just won’t happen in our culture.”
- “If the culture here at Gusto Gas were more customer-centric, I’d be able to get this live chat pilot off the ground.”

Does it feel like I’m quoting you? Are you frustrated by a utility culture that stands in the way of your CX visions? I hear you, and I feel your pain. I, too, have been a CX change agent, pushing sand uphill in what felt like an impossible cultural context in which I was doomed to fail.

Why do we blame culture for holding utility CX back? In many cases, culture is the ideal scapegoat, because we don’t understand it, we don’t know how to manage it, and we don’t really know what it is. Like the shadowy werewolf in a schlocky horror film, culture is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. And because we can’t pin it down, we’re helpless to change it. It’s the perfect CX bogeyman.

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But if we sit around complaining about a vague, fuzzy, poorly understood concept like culture, we’re not going to make any progress. What are we really talking about when we say “Culture is holding us back”? Usually, if it’s related to advancing CX principles in a utility, when we say “culture,” we mean manageable things like:

- Attitudes and behaviors—of leadership, management, and front- and back-office employees
- Company policies and processes
- Mission statements, vision statements, and core values

So let’s get real. Let’s stop talking about culture as if it’s a movie slasher, and start talking about it as something we can—with a structured approach, the right skills, and the right tools—manage, control, and even capitalize on. An accessible and quick way to get started is to break this amorphous thing called customer-centric culture into four organizational layers (leadership, management, front office, and back office) and three organizational dimensions (cultural artifacts, espoused values, and tacit assumptions).

That’s why we’ve recently published the E Source Utility CX Health Check, a simple-yet-sophisticated tool that moves the conversation about culture forward in terms that lead to productive action. Print out the health check assessment and share it with your peers, your team, and your boss. Ask several individuals to complete it and then bring everyone together to discuss the results. Use it to change the conversation about culture at your utility, transforming the term from a vague, fuzzy, poorly understood concept into something everyone can understand and affect.

Let’s stop talking about culture, start doing something about it, and banish the culture bogeyman.