

# COMPLIANCE VS. ADOPTION: WHY CHECKING THE BOX WON'T BUILD YOUR CULTURE

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There's a dangerous myth lurking in the halls of many organizations:

If people comply, we've succeeded.

But here's the truth: Compliance doesn't mean commitment—and it definitely doesn't mean culture. In fact, it often breeds a culture of fear.

This idea has been rattling around in my head since a recent conversation with Isabella Kosch, who brilliantly planted the seed for this topic.

It made me reflect on how often I see well-meaning leaders confuse rules followed with values embraced.

It's easy to track policy adherence.

It's much harder and far more valuable to inspire adoption: where people believe in what they're doing, not just doing it because they're afraid of the consequences.

## **COMPLIANCE: THE FLOOR, NOT THE CEILING**

Compliance is about minimums:

- Following rules
- Avoiding penalties
- Checking the box

It's essential—but transactional.

Compliance tells people what not to do rather than inspiring them toward what's possible.

In CX and EX, you see compliance-driven approaches all the time:

- Agents forced to read rigid scripts that frustrate customers
- Mandatory training no one remembers or applies
- Values posters on the wall, but no lived behaviors in the halls

These might satisfy a regulator or an audit.

But they don't create loyalty, engagement, or innovation.

Compliance can even breed cynicism and fear:

"We're only doing this because we have to or else."

## **ADOPTION: WHERE BELIEF MEETS BEHAVIOR**

Adoption is different.

It's voluntary.

It happens when people understand, believe, and internalize what is being asked of them.

Adoption is when:

- Frontline employees choose to go the extra mile for a customer because they care—not because a metric demands it
- Teams speak up about broken processes because they're committed to improving the experience
- Leaders model values in challenging moments, proving they're more than words on a website

Adoption unlocks discretionary effort, trust, and genuine alignment, the true building blocks of a positive culture.

## **WHY COMPLIANCE ALONE CAN'T DRIVE POSITIVE CULTURE**

Here's why checking the box falls short:

- ✓ Compliance is externally enforced. Culture change must be internally owned.
- ✓ Compliance creates fear of consequences. Adoption fosters belief in purpose.
- ✓ Compliance stops at "good enough." Adoption drives continuous improvement.

In CX, this shows up when companies believe gathering customer feedback satisfies "listening" obligations—but never act on the insights.

In EX, it's when engagement surveys become annual rituals with no visible change.

Employees and customers know the difference.

They can feel when actions come from genuine commitment versus just legal necessity.

And when fear underpins compliance, it erodes trust, stifles innovation, and suppresses the very culture organizations claim to want.

## **A STORY FROM THE FIELD**

I once worked with a company deeply committed to building a customer-centric culture.

Over the course of four years, we helped them rise from middle-of-the-road industry rankings to number one, achieved by creating genuine belief and engagement among employees.

A few years later, they relocated their headquarters to another state and lost over half their tenured team.

New leaders stepped in, eager for metrics to prove success, and built processes focused on compliance.

On paper, the move looked smooth: new offices, new hires, new plans.

But somewhere in transit, the culture got left behind.

Programs that once empowered employees to solve customer problems became rigid checklists.

People grew hesitant to speak up, worried about sticking to scripts rather than doing what was right for customers.

What had once been a thriving, adopted culture turned into a compliance-driven organization struggling to find its footing.

## **HOW TO SHIFT FROM COMPLIANCE TO ADOPTION**

So how do you move beyond compliance to real adoption in CX, EX, and culture?

1. Tie it to Purpose.

Explain the “why” behind policies, standards, or new behaviors. Connect them to business outcomes, customer impact, and human values.

2. Make It Practical.

Instead of vague mandates, show people how to live the desired behaviors in their day-to-day roles.

3. Involve People in Co-Creation.

People support what they help build. Engage employees and customers in designing solutions, processes, and experiences.

4. Reinforce Through Leadership.

Nothing kills adoption faster than leaders who talk the talk but don’t walk the walk.

5. Measure What Matters.

Move beyond compliance metrics (e.g., training completion) to adoption indicators like behavior changes, experience outcomes, and trust levels.

## CULTURE CAN'T BE MANDATED

Compliance protects you from risk.

Adoption propels you toward possibility.

If you want a culture that drives customer loyalty, inspires employees, and fuels innovation, you have to reach beyond rules to belief, ownership, and action.

Because no great culture was ever built on checking boxes or on fear.

Fear might keep people in line, but it never unlocks their best work.

[Let's talk](#) how we can help bridge the gap between compliance and actual adoption. ●

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## About the Author

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Ed has achieved a very successful career by building relationships and providing innovative solutions to meet clients' needs. With over thirty years as a global researcher, management consultant, and business leader, Ed brings his experience, expertise, and passion to every consulting assignment.

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