

Culture Deck - Solvemate

April 2022

Intro

Why we created this document

To make our culture **explicit**.

To **maintain** our culture.

To **nurture** our culture.

BHAG

“Solving 1 million customer requests per day”

A [Big Hairy Audacious Goal](#) (BHAG) is a strategic business statement similar to a vision statement which is created to focus an organization on a single medium-long term organization-wide goal which is audacious; and likely to be externally questionable, but not internally regarded as impossible. It can also be seen as what we want to achieve.

Core Purpose

“To save people's time.”

A Core Purpose is the *why* behind what we are doing. It represents what we stand for and inspires us. It should be valid until we reach the BHAG.

Product Vision

We imagine a world where customer service teams can support a scaling business without the need to continually hire, onboard, and train new agents.

A world where agents have the time to offer meaningful conversations and a service experience that delights customers while creating true value for their business.

A world where there is no messy jumble of tools and data, and navigating customer behaviors is simple.

To get there, we're building a Conversational Automation platform that:

- Navigates and unifies the technology landscape of customer service tools,
- Uses insights to predict user behavior, and
- Enables customer service teams to independently automate parts of their workflow and focus on creating lasting value for their customers and their business.

As a software company, our product helps us achieve our goals. Thus, the Product Vision is about *how* we are about to achieve our BHAG and core purpose. The Product Vision should be inspiring and helps us consider what we *could* be doing and decide what not to do.

Customer centricity but colleagues first

“We serve our customers.”

This means that all our decisions and actions should be driven by our customers' needs and our first priority should be to serve them as they (not other stakeholders or investors) are the basis of our business.

“But we also serve ourselves.”

While being customer centric we always need to keep in mind that all our decisions must ensure the long-term sustainability of the organization. Without a happy team, there can be no happy customers and thus no long-term existence of the organization. So ultimately, we need to serve ourselves first.

Teal Management

Teal management is a term that was shaped by Frederic Laloux in his book “Reinventing Organisations”. The term describes a new way of running an organization that goes beyond titles, hierarchies and the typical work-for-life attitude, which is, in his eyes, the next evolutionary step in organization management.

The three main principles are:

- **Self-Management** - everyone makes decisions and bears responsibility
- **Wholeness** - work is a fundamental part of everyone's life and not just a duty
- **Evolutionary Purpose** - the organization gets shaped over time by its members

In his book, Laloux describes these main principles in detail and gives examples of concrete implementations. In general we believe the three main principles are a good approach to build an organization that brings our core values into life.

However, the whole concept needs to be seen as a base operating system for an organization. Implementing real world processes in our organization is a long-term task. Also, if you are familiar with teal management, you will see that we didn't adopt the concepts “one to one”; instead, we interpreted the concepts in our own way.

To learn more about teal management you can check out the [website](#).

Wholeness

Wholeness describes the general idea that no one should leave their selfhood behind when going to work because work is a fundamental part of life that should provide the possibility to realize one's full potential.

At work you are encouraged to grow both personally and professionally. You can bring your ideas forward, you can take ownership, and you can be proud of what you've achieved. You learn together with your colleagues and in teamwork you can understand and tackle seemingly impossible challenges.

On the other hand, wholeness means that private and professional life go together in many cases. If you need time for private affairs, if you feel burned out or if you just need some time, speak up and tell your colleagues. In this way your colleagues can show consideration and support for you.

Culture vs. Strategy

A strategy can and will change given customer feedback, technological innovation or market changes. Our culture underpins the way we work and interact as well as the way we plan and execute our strategy. Our culture is our [First principle](#) how we develop strategy should always align with it.

Applicability

This document applies to **all decisions** in day-to-day work.

We will **hire and fire** given these rules.

New colleagues will **sign this document on the first day**.

Living document

Every colleague can ask for a culture deck change at any point in time. In addition we have a culture retrospective twice a year in which we iterate the culture deck all together.

All change requests are discussed transparently and taken to a vote. They are accepted if 2/3 of all colleagues agree.

Golden Rule

“One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself.”

We believe that the [Golden Rule](#) shall be a guiding ethical principle for decisions. It will prevent us from making decisions that only favor one party and ensure long-term relationships within the organization and with other stakeholders.

Core Values

The following five core values are our internal “Terms & Conditions”:

- #Teamwork**
- #Transparency**
- #Candor**
- #Commitment**
- #Curiosity**

They are unordered and of equal importance.

In the following sections we define each of the five values and describe in detail how we live and act on them within our organization.

Teamwork

Teamwork is the process of working collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a goal. Teamwork is often a crucial part of a business, as it is often necessary for colleagues to work well together.

Teamwork means that people will do their best to cooperate, using their individual skills and providing constructive feedback, despite any personal conflict between individuals.

Cross-Team Collaboration

As the team grows and we start forming multiple sub-teams, it's important to remember that at the end of the day, we are all **one** big team.

- All teams are committed to reach the overarching company goals in addition to their team goals
- Company goals are always of higher importance than team goals
- if team goals of different teams are in conflict with each other, then we follow our
- Decision Process to resolve the conflict
- If we can help other teams achieve their goals, we will do so!

Project Management

Projects are a large part of how we get work done and as such, we have values and rules of engagement for effective collaboration and teamwork.

We agree on the core values of:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Responding to change over following a plan.

We want to emphasize these rules:

- No one owns the output. This means that we don't protect our work from others and that we're open for ideas and remarks from colleagues. We celebrate successes as a whole and not just as individuals, the same way that we accept and take responsibility for failures.

- No place for ego. You are not the best and there are always many ways things can be done.
- We are not selfish with our time. We do not push tasks “over the wall” to one another as a means of decreasing our own workload.
- Diligent and positive reviews. Reviews are a fundamental part of teamwork because everyone makes mistakes. That’s why we never blame anyone - instead, we give candid and constructive feedback to support, and ultimately improve each other.
- Do not assume ineptitude or bad faith. It is better to ask questions about the Why of an action than to assume your colleague doesn’t know what they are doing.

Decision Making Process

We follow the so-called Advice Process for making decisions because it is a very practical and powerful process that supports our core values. Furthermore it empowers everyone by allowing everybody to seize initiative.

Advice Process means that any person can make any decision after seeking advice from

1. Everyone who will be meaningfully affected
2. People with expertise in the matter

Advice received must be taken into consideration. It’s not about finding a compromise that accommodates everybody’s wishes; it is about accessing collective wisdom in pursuit of a sound decision. With all the advice and perspectives the decision maker has received, they choose what they believe is the best course of action.

[Source and further information](#)

Give a helping hand

Nothing builds better team spirit than knowing somebody has got your back. We foster a “psychologically safe” environment by creating a supportive atmosphere where sharing ideas, taking risks, and exploring solutions together is encouraged. This is how we do it:

- Be aware if someone else might need help or is struggling, and offer your help
- Be confident that we can ask for help without being shot down or criticized
- Support when you think you can and you think it’s needed
- Blame is not assigned individually or personally, it is the responsibility of the whole team and company that things go right
- Openly talk about failures and problems with the aim to learn and grow from them

This is not only true for helping out if someone needs urgent help, but also in a more positive, long-term oriented way:

We believe that coaching and mentoring between colleagues is a very effective way to learn and grow over time. For example, one colleague could help another one in:

- Efficient and structured work
- Clear and peaceful communication • Handling priorities and daily tasks • How to write good IT tickets
- How to use a specific software

...or any other topic where colleagues believe they can coach one another. It is like feedback, but in a more positive and even more supportive and long-term-oriented way.

This coaching and mentoring requires two things: firstly, you need to be open to it, and secondly, your colleagues need to care about you.

Efficient Meeting Culture

Meetings are needed in an organization to work together effectively. There are many different kinds of meetings in our work: the meeting topic could be a team stand-ups, an all-hands, or an ideation workshop; it might take place in-person, on the phone, or online; and it might be with fellow mates, external partners/customers, or both.

With so many possible types of meetings, we want to make sure that each meeting is as productive as possible. For this reason, we follow three general guiding principles:

1. **Respect everyone's time.** From avoiding meetings that “could have been an email”, to following a team’s meeting-free days, to being on-time, to sticking to the agenda - the most important part of an efficient meeting culture is that we always treat time as a precious resource.
2. **Prepare.** Be it organizers sharing a clear goal and agenda up-front, or attendees adding comments to a document in advance - a well-run meeting is a well-prepared meeting. Always go into a meeting knowing what your role is and what your goals are.
3. **Be transparent.** Sharing relevant documents beforehand as well as follow-ups/to-do’s afterwards will help keep everyone in the loop and avoid misunderstandings.

Roles Over Titles

We believe that job titles are only useful as a proxy for the main role someone is working in. This makes it easier for us to set expectations with each other and with outside stakeholders.

Internally, we also have roles that best describe what we do and we have a list that we constantly keep up to date. A role can be the majority of your daily work, but also a very granular task that someone is responsible for. Examples are:

- frontend engineer
- telephone contract administrator
- data privacy coordinator
- account executive
- project lead (or member) of project XYZ

Properties of roles:

- One person always has multiple roles
- Colleagues can switch roles, take new roles or hand over roles
- Taking a new role or giving it up is a decision that needs to follow the Decision Making Process and should be communicated transparently
- The sum of all roles of all employees constitutes all the responsibilities within the organization

Diversity

Our organization is a **place where every colleague feels they belong**. We truly believe that diverse and open minded teams achieve better results.

We are dedicated to providing an **inclusive experience** for everyone of any gender identity and expression, age, pregnancy and marital and parental status, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, diet, race, ethnicity, religion (or lack thereof), etc. In addition we support efforts that **foster more diversity** in our team (e.g., during hiring).

Respect

At any time, we treat everyone with respect and it's important that jokes and expressions do not demean or objectify others. Any type of harassment including verbal or non-verbal, ridiculing and teasing are unwelcome conduct. Not everyone might notice if someone feels uncomfortable in a situation. Bringing such behavior to attention helps establish a common awareness, whether you experience or observe it.

Team Performance Over Individual Outcome

Whenever possible, we measure and optimize team performance, not individual outcome. Team performance is more important than personal success. We are a rockstar team, but not a team of rockstars.

For example, we measure the amount of work that can be tackled during a single sprint by the team and not by the developer. In the end, it is about optimizing the team's outcome, not personal story points done.

We always try to find a team-incentivizing goal.

Team Events

We believe that it is important to work with friends, not anonymous colleagues. Getting to know your colleagues and feeling comfortable around them is a foundation for candid communication and a pleasant work atmosphere.

We reflect this in our hiring process and also in our day-to-day work lifestyle. Be it suggesting spontaneous guessing games or a virtual coffee with coworkers, we encourage team members to try to bring some fun and spontaneity into their daily work routine.

We recognise that it is difficult to find time to foster workplace friendships outside of office hours and are committed to hosting regular team events for just this reason. Examples are sporadic success celebrations, wine and cheese evenings, cross team lottery lunches, cruisy summer parties on lakes, and inspiring offsites focused on team building and driving Solvemate forward as a whole. If you have an idea for an activity you would like to take the team for, don't be shy to take action and do it!

Core Working Hours

Our core working hours are between 10am and 4pm CET in which everyone aims to be available for work, unless otherwise agreed upon within the team (except for lunchtime and external business meetings). Whenever possible, we aim to avoid group meetings outside of core working hours.

For any other (private) appointment, just follow the Decision Making Process.

Please put your absence into the relevant calendars so that everyone knows about it and inform the team if it's on short notice.

Working Remotely

We believe in wholeness and want to have the freedom to always be at our best.

As a company, we are remote first, we will however endeavor to support mates regardless of where they want to work. Decisions around work policy follow the Decision Making Policy, and might vary by team/role.

As a company, we commit to minimize the differences between working from any location, to make sure employees' experiences are as similar as possible, regardless of where they are.

Right To Disconnect

Just because we have the choice to work from home, does not mean we have to be available outside of our working hours. Everyone is encouraged to have 'no-engagement' principles depending on their role and personal preferences.

Meeting-Free Days

Teams work on very different schedules, based on the nature of their respective work. To software developers, designers, and writers, distraction-free and continuous working periods are essential to be productive. This is different for other teams who work on a more fragmented schedule.

That's why our different teams set up their own processes to make room for meeting-free days or times, as is required by the nature of their work. It is the responsibility of the respective team to communicate their schedule transparently, so cross-team meetings can be planned while keeping the negative impact to productivity minimal.

No Brilliant Jerks

Very intelligent persons who are also arrogant and ego-driven might be - individually - super efficient, but ruin the team's outcome and morale due to their rough personality and low ability to work in a team. Being brilliant is not enough - the ability to work in and contribute to a team is a more essential character trait.

This [article](#) is a good explanation of a 'brilliant jerk'. The phrase cultural terrorists in there nails it, too.

Conflict Resolution Process

While living Transparency, Candor, and Teamwork, conflicts of any kind between colleagues can rise. A conflict can range from a violation of the culture deck to just something very day-to-day like desk-tidiness.

First of all the general rule: Disagreement is private. Then, we follow this process:

1. The colleagues set up a 1-1 meeting and try to sort it out.

2. If a solution cannot be found, both colleagues together nominate a colleague they trust as a mediator. Then they set up a meeting and sort things out.

Exceptions to the Conflict Resolution Process may occur, for example in cases where the colleagues do not feel comfortable setting up a 1-1 meeting. Modifications to the Conflict Resolution Process are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, following the Decision Making Process.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

SOPs are processes that we repeatedly go through during our daily work life outside of our standard duties, but not often enough to remember them in detail. For instance, we have SOPs for how to book travel, how to make purchases, how to use our calendars and organize meetings and how to communicate internally, etc.

SOPs have the clear ambition to make us more effective in the way we organize ourselves outside of our core work. Also, they clearly support our core value of Transparency as they are equally distributing knowledge.

As internal company processes change over time, SOPs are subject to change too - any change needs to follow the Decision Making Process and needs to be communicated properly.

Transparency

Definition

[Transparency \(Wikipedia\)](#) [...] implies openness, communication, and accountability. Transparency is operating in such a way that it is easy for others to see what actions are performed.

It guides an organization's decisions and policies on the disclosure of information to its employees and the public, or simply the intended recipient of the information.

Celebrate successes and embrace failure

Success: We share and enjoy great team achievements together. For example we have the 🙌 virtual cheers 🙌

- Set a 15-minute zoom appointment and invite the team min. 3 hours beforehand
- Anyone who is available will join
- Share your achievement/news!


Failure: Failure is an unavoidable part of our work. We try things and break things, openly talk about failures, and learn from them:


- If needed, we fix the issues caused by the error or support the responsible colleague fixing it
- We inform everyone meaningfully impacted by the incident
- We inform people that have contributed in the Decision Making Process


- The type of communication should be appropriate to the magnitude of the incident and follow our internal communication guidelines
- We learn from our mistakes so that they can be avoided in the future; so, in some cases, it could help to have a documented reflection


Shared information


The general rule is: Default to transparency. In organizations, knowledge is power. We distribute this power democratically. As per the rest of our culture, it belongs to everyone in the company. This means that all information is stored in a place accessible to everyone. Furthermore, we do all-hands meetings in which we actively inform colleagues from all departments about important developments. Specifically we mean:


 **Transparency on goals:** We have shared wiki pages where we write down the company goals and departmental goals. Everyone can see the successes, failures and upcoming projects. Everyone can ask for the progress of a goal or a project.

 **Transparency on KPIs:** KPIs are accessible. If you are interested in a KPI number, then you can have access to it.

 **Transparency on projects** (-progress): We plan each business project thoroughly, assign ownership, and follow-up on the project plan. We save project plans in a way that they are accessible for everyone.

 **Transparency on decisions** (-processes): We actively communicate the decision criteria and outcome to the affected parties. Everyone has the right to question why any decision was taken (and gets a candid answer).

 **Transparency on files:** We work with cloud storage and save files in our company space. This means files, folders, and documents are transparent and available.

 **Restrictions:** Access to information is only limited if there is a good reason. We have decided to make the following information not transparent:

- Compensation of colleagues
- Discussions about (potentially) letting someone go
- Confidential financial information (e.g., yearly accounts or full financial results)
- Contracts with shareholders or investors
- Personal/private information that you just don't talk about in public

Expense Policy

Everyone can make or request purchases with the company accounts, and all purchases are transparent.

The rule is quite simple: We all act in the company's best interest. Buy what you think is necessary. If in doubt, follow our Decision Making Process. Give a receipt to bookkeeping.

Every purchase is ultimately **an investment** you are making on behalf of the company, so ask yourself whether it is a **smart investment** that will **pay off** in the foreseeable future.

We live **#frugality**, which doesn't just mean buying only things we really need, but also choosing the best tools for the job, as ultimately, they end up paying for themselves with increased productivity. Going above any more than that is wasteful. Being aware of this

enables a mindset of smart investing and frugality, which brings maximum benefit to both the company, as well as oneself.

Vacation Policy

We believe that work and 🌴, 🏔️, or just time away from work, go together. It is a fundamental part of maintaining a healthy work-life-balance.

We don't limit days off as we don't count the time spent working.

We have a "no ask" policy. This means you can plan your vacation without asking for permission as long as you follow these rules:

1. For one to two days off, plan and communicate it 1 week in advance
2. For more than two days off, plan and communicate it a few weeks in advance
3. If there is a phase with many colleagues being on vacation or a critical time for your team, arrange your vacation with your colleagues following our Decision Making Process
4. Hand over your tasks and responsibilities to your colleagues before you leave and name a substitute
5. Make sure you don't leave scheduled tasks open
6. Put your days off into the appropriate calendars so that everyone is informed

Long Vacations: If you are planning to have more than 15 work days off in a row, discuss the timing with your colleagues so that it doesn't conflict with the general planning.

Candor

[Definition dictionary.com](#): The state or quality of being frank, open, and sincere in speech or expression; candidness.

Universal candor

Candour isn't just a thing between colleagues. We carry this value with us in every aspect of our work, no matter who we're dealing with.

That means we are candid with all stakeholders (colleagues, candidates, customers, investors, etc.). Some examples:

- Being honest with deadlines and expectations between departments
- We don't tell customers that something is on the roadmap if it isn't
- We don't say that a prospect's use case is the perfect fit if we think it won't work out

However,

- We can still sell our product and services in a positive way.
- We should not tell anyone our opinion impolitely or inappropriately.

Communication

We do talk openly with each other and respect each other.

Given the previous point, talking behind someone's back is something we don't do. We give the other person the chance to explain their point of view. Therefore please avoid 'office politics'.

Don't be egocentric or selfish. Like in team sports, the team is much better if the individuals work for the team instead of only for themselves.

Apologize. Everyone makes mistakes, apologizing shows you appreciate the other person.

Clear and concise communication in the right communication method, audience and format is critical, especially in a remote world. That's why we have a detailed guide on how to communicate internally in our SOP: Internal Communication.

On-demand and Honest Feedback

Feedback is an integral part of our culture. Feedback can involve both telling someone what they are doing well, or telling someone how to improve. Both types are equally important.

Delivering feedback

Be candid, but be kind. Telling it like it is is not to be confused with being rude. We encourage people to say when something isn't right - the only thing that makes a difference is how we do it. Be constructive and offer a way to improve if possible.

Taking feedback

On the flipside, it is also important to take feedback well. Listen to what your colleague has to say and think about it (even if you end up not agreeing with their feedback). Feedback is a great way to learn and to grow.

When listening to feedback, keep in mind that we are all in the same boat and have the same goals, even if we have different points of view or different ways of achieving those goals. Keep an open mind and try to empathize with the person sharing their feedback with you.

Time & Place

When exchanging feedback, timing can be important. Sometimes it is good to give feedback in the moment, when the experience is fresh in everyone's mind. But sometimes, moments go by fast, or feedback is private, or emotions are running high. In these cases (and others), it is good to wait to deliver feedback. You should use common sense, both when you are delivering and receiving feedback (it is completely ok to tell someone you would rather hear this feedback another day if you aren't in the state of mind to listen to it right now).

Finally, feedback can be shared through anything from a quick chat on-the-spot to a Slack message to a planned session - use common sense to figure out which method is best (e.g., you wouldn't discuss big changes to a colleague's working style over Slack).

No Blaming

There's no benefit from pointing fingers. Everybody makes mistakes and fails from time to time, and it's beneficial for learning and further development. We foster an environment where people feel confident to assume liability for their actions.

- We do not blame as it is backward-oriented, but talk openly about failure
- Delicate situations are never discussed in front of the whole team
- We analyze what happened to learn and focus on finding solutions

- A negative result is still a result and how one uses that information is what finally matters
-

Commitment

Commitment (wikipedia): Organizational commitment is the individual's psychological attachment to the organization. [...] The employee experiences a 'sense of oneness' with their organization.

Why Commitment?

We chose commitment as one of our core values because we believe that everyone needs to feel attached to the organization in order to contribute to it. It is a positive concept that is based on meaningful work and an environment in which your voice is heard and appreciated.

Commitment towards the organization

Our commitment towards the organization originates from our belief in its core purpose and desire to achieve the BHAG. This means that our daily work should always support this vision rather than personal interests and benefits. We do not support egos, selfishness, or politics. Only in this way can we build a value-driven organization that empowers its members while striving to achieve its vision.

Taking Ownership

Taking ownership is an important part of implementing commitment in day-to-day life. To take ownership means to bring your own ideas forward, to take over responsibilities, and to be accountable for the results.

Everyone gets the possibility to form the future of the organization and to give a voice to their ideas. Ownership can be taken by individuals as well as by teams, e.g., by bringing a product idea into a feature and eventually releasing it to our customers.

Ownership needs to be taken and it needs to follow intrinsic motivation. If you see colleagues struggling, or general shortcomings in the organization, use your initiative and take the first step.

For more details, this is a good read on principles that help employees take ownership.

Going the Extra Mile

Sometimes it is necessary to go the extra mile, which means that we have to make a special effort to achieve something. Such a situation could occur, for instance, if there is a high-integrity commitment that we need to meet, if one of our customers needs help, or if we are behind on our goals.

In these times we need to strengthen our focus, re-prioritise other things, and work harder than normally. These days are inevitable but should never become the normal work mode.

Curiosity

[Definition vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/curiosity): Curiosity is the urge you feel to know more about something.
Why Be Curious?

We chose it as a core value because we believe that curiosity is a basis for lifelong learning that helps everyone constantly develop themselves. Curiosity urges us to scrutinize things, to challenge ideas, and to grow both as people and as an organization.

We actively encourage a mindset based on curiosity. Curiosity drives learning, experimentation, and the further development of skills and knowledge. It means being skeptical and challenging things - trying to find new approaches and questioning existing processes and procedures. This leads to constant innovation for our product, our teams, our minds, and even our culture.

Since curiosity is an inner motivation that needs to be fueled, we provide an inspiring and supportive environment.

Long-Term Curiosity

The organization encourages new ideas and participation in shaping its direction.

Unlike traditional companies, we don't have specific training events that you need to attend in order to climb the career ladder. We foster skill growth and have an environment in which all colleagues can learn.

For example it is ok to join meetings of other teams at any time just out of curiosity about the topic.

It is expected that colleagues take time to learn to be curious, for example, about new technologies, processes, work styles or any other topic that could, in the short or long term, become a valuable, complementary skill for them.

As said above, there is no top down teacher telling a colleague what to do. If you plan to spend a significant time to learn something, then:

- Follow the Decision Making Process
- The team is encouraged to foster your curiosity
- The learning colleague shall provide a summary or feedback with their key learnings and potentially even give a #solvecademy about the subject

We do not have specific learning budgets that one can spend - but it is ok to spend money (e.g., to pay for an online course or go to a conference) - just follow the Expense Policy.

Solvecademy

We like sharing and we like learning, and #solvecademy is a cool way to combine both. It's a way we prove some of our core values: Teamwork and Curiosity. Turning yourself into a knowledge silo with the hope it will make you irreplaceable is a dangerous path to take - this turns colleagues away from supporting you as you become a solo-flyer. Share your knowledge and your colleagues will be thankful, and it will drive them to do the same.

- A #solvecademy is a short and crisp presentation
- Any colleague can offer a #solvecademy on a topic of their choice

- There's no restriction on the topic, as long as other colleagues are interested • everyone is invited, no one is obliged to attend

For Solvecademies, there is not a set time frame. Every Solvecademy organizer can pick when they would like to present. Just pick a time spot on the team calendar and invite everyone!

Closing Words

Dear potential new colleague, if you have read until this point, then first of all:



If you feel like this culture is not a good fit for you, it probably won't work out with us, so please consider whether you want to be part of this organization.

In case you truly understand this culture deck and feel intrigued: Please apply.