



Organizational Culture for Performance Consultants

Organizational Culture:

- What it is
- Why it matters to performance
- Tools for assessing it—without a lot of time and money

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What is Organizational Culture?

Organizational culture is a metaphor that can be used to understand and explain organizational life as complex interdependent, ambiguous and malleable sets of practices, relationships, perceptions, and identity.



Why We Need to Understand Organizational Culture

- It defines leadership for the organization
- It can prevent any intervention from succeeding
- It can be an enabler to facilitate change
- To understand the organizational culture is to understand the nature of the organization



The Paradox of Organizational Culture

“Organizational culture determines the success or failure of all interventions yet there is no intervention that directly changes organizational culture.”

--James Pepitone



Intuitive Differences

“Here at Apple, we even smell different.”

--John Sculley, former CEO

Think of two organizations you know well. In what ways do these organizations *feel* different from each other? Don't describe how the organizations are physically, structurally or measurably different—focus on the intuitive and perceptual differences.



Elements of Culture

- Values
- Unspoken patterns of interaction, rituals or tradition
- Special language
- Power
- Symbols
- Workstyles



Values Components

- Group norms
- Aspirations and hopes of members
- Who has the most influence on values?
- Situational values (how situations determine values)
- Real (vs. stated) priorities



Interaction/Tradition/Ritual Components

- Nonverbal behavior
- Standard greetings and interaction patterns
- Celebrations
- Acknowledging and managing conflicts
- Topics that are “undiscussable” and situational components
- “The way we do things around here”



Language Components

- Jargon or slang
- Metaphors unique to the organization
- Transactional analysis (hidden messages, appeals to different ego states)
- Linguistic precision and perceptual acuity (Saphir-Whorf hypothesis)



Power Components

- Acquisition and retention of power
- Formal and informal authority
- Peer pressure and how people are ostracized or “sent to the woodshed”
- Traits that are most respected, feared, or emulated
- The ability to compel or deter



Symbol Components

- Organization heroes and villains
- Company mythology
- “Moments of Truth” within how things get done
- Artifacts and valued objects (both official and unofficial)



Workstyle Components

- Flow of communication
- Timeliness and orientation to time
- Reaction to crises
- Work pace, order and structure
- How formal and rule-based work is
- What is considered “clutter”
- How decisions get made



Q&D Tools/Methods For Assessing Organizational Culture

- Reward and Punishment analysis
- Tom Peters' "10 Rules"
- Stories
- Critical Incident methodology
- The Business Idea
- The "Failed Intervention" analysis
- Assimilation



Reward and Punishment Analysis

- Ask the following questions: What gets rewarded around here? What are the big “no-no’s”? How do you get ahead? Who are the most influential people? Who doesn’t fit in? Around here, what is *really* important? What does management pay attention to? What gets measured?
- Identify social networks, organizational values, and incentives/disincentives
- Reward/punishment may be too abstract for many performers—ask about specifics (why didn’t *you* get the promotion? What does it take to be on the fast track?)



Tom Peters' "10 Rules"

- Ask performers to identify 10 unwritten rules that explain how things generally get done around here (engineering wins all debates, quality is important except in a crisis, if we didn't think of it then it's no-good, everyone needs to have their say before we can do anything)
- Variation: what 10 words best describe this place?
- Ask others to react (Likert scale) to these "rules"
- Beware "ideal" rules (work hard, tell the truth, respect your co-workers,) and try to avoid cliches
- Do it individually (not with surveys or focus groups), dig/give time/examples, and confidentiality is essential



Using Stories

- Identify/collect shared stories. To identify, start with “the problem is...”. Have characters, a plot, and a sequence (ie: don’t jump to conclusions)
- Stories are part of the organization’s culture—so stories tap directly (not indirectly) into the culture
- Once identified, go to the source of the story to see how it has changed over time
- Cultural stories almost always have hidden messages—and are easy to misinterpret



Critical Incident Methodology

- “Events that show how your culture is truly practiced” Dr. Larry Mallak, W.Mich.U.
- Think “Moments of Truth” or actions versus words or process breakdowns
- Surveys don’t work (not open-ended enough)
- Alternative terminology creates confusion
- “Heroes happen because somebody makes a mistake” Battalion commander in Desert Storm



The Business Idea

- Use to identify organizational mental models: What is your winning formula? Why are you uniquely situated for success (versus your competitors)? Why is this “our time”?
- Interview performers--use answers to find organizational blind spots and ingrained assumptions. What don't people see?
- Excellent for determining cultural impact on thinking, strategy and mindset. Requires access to numerous players



The “Failed Intervention” Analysis

- “One can best understand a system by trying to change it.” --Edgar Schein
- Look for several intelligent (face value) diverse interventions that failed and determine why
- Beware resource conflicts and “organizationally correct” responses—dig down for honest answers
- Don’t examine initiatives from just one source
- Don’t focus on blame or scapegoats—but institutional responses and barriers



Assimilation Analysis

- Culture also exists to integrate—how do “new-comers” acquire the culture?
- Initiation rites and graduation points
- Treatment of “newbies”
- Role, perception of and value of new entrants



Applying It

- Choose one of these approaches for analyzing organizational culture.
- Choose an organization you're going to use the tool on (ideally, one you know well).
- Sit near others using the same approach. While you'll work individually, after your results you'll compare insights and impressions.



Case Study Application

- Read through the case study on hand-washing hygiene initiatives and MRSA.
- To what extent did organizational cultures affect the hand-washing initiatives?
- To what extent did management successfully anticipate issues with organizational cultures?
- What are the “lessons learned” from this?



Closing Thoughts...

- The degree of alignment (or dispute) about cultural rules within the organization is telling
- Beware old habits—just because it's around doesn't mean it's valued
- Beware subcultures within the culture



Additional Resources on Organizational Culture

- Managing Strategic Change, Noel Tichy
- Organizational Culture and Leadership, Edgar Schein
- The Corporate Culture Survival Guide, Edgar Schein
- “Corporate Culture/Organizational Culture: telling the CEO his/her baby is ugly” by Richard Hadberg and Julie Heifetz, HCG, 2000



Presenter Rapsheet

Joe Willmore is a performance consultant and President of the Willmore Consulting Group. He has served on the Board of Directors for ASTD, has been a presenter at ISPI, ASTD, TOC, AQP and ASQ International Conferences, facilitates ASTD's HPI workshop series and is the author of several books and many articles in this profession). He can be reached at: 703-855-4634 or Willmore@juno.com.

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