



Why Organizations Do What They Do: Part II

Corporate Culture and the Need for Leadership

Culture: The Role of the Leader

A leader's primary purpose is that of shaping, maintaining, and changing an organization's culture. How do leaders shape, maintain and change their cultures?

Step 1: Uncover the assumptions.

Resist the impulse to *survey*. Survey questions can only measure individual attitudes and beliefs. They may help you understand values, and their efficacy, but because assumptions are the core of an organization's culture and by definition unseen, it is next to impossible to design questions to determine them. Remember, you are trying to see below the water's surface and look at the iceberg in its entirety, not just that which is easily visible.

Armed with your list of artifacts and your current understanding of your organization's values, compare them against one another. Look for inconsistencies between the two lists. For example, if an organizational value is *Personal and Professional Development at all levels in ABC Organization*, look at your organization's training programs to determine if they reflect a holistic approach to human resource development. The inconsistencies between what's visible and values should begin to give you some insight into the assumptions that either create the inconsistency or contribute to a correlation between artifacts and values. To illustrate the above approach further, after close scrutiny you may determine that the organizational value of *Personal and Professional Development* is not reflected by your organization's training programs. I recently spoke with an HR director who told me that he faces significant challenges in

convincing corporate management that it pays minimal attention to training its technical workforce although corporate value statements emphasize a highly trained and skilled workforce.

Once you have identified a list of inconsistencies, you will begin to understand the assumptions embedded deeper within your organization that cause these inconsistencies. Assumptions are the *reasons* why organizations do what they do. Patterns or several similar inconsistencies should allow you to begin to formulate some assumptions about your organization. For example, you may discover similar inconsistencies between the physical level of culture and the level of values that revolve around financial issues. Ask yourself these questions:

1. What do these inconsistencies tell me about assumptions pertaining to how the organization sees itself in relation to its members?
2. What do these inconsistencies tell me about assumptions pertaining to how the organization sees itself in relation to other organizations?
3. What do these inconsistencies tell me about assumptions pertaining to how the organization sees its members in relation to each other?
4. What do these inconsistencies tell me about assumptions pertaining to how the organization sees itself in relation to its understanding of the source(s) of reality and truth?
5. What do these inconsistencies tell me about assumptions pertaining to how the organization sees itself regarding the nature and value of work?

Step 2: Test the assumptions.

Once you have developed a list of assumptions, circulate the list among the organization's members. Determine if the inconsistencies are valid and if your list of assumptions is shared by a number of members. In most cases, there will not be total agreement; this is to be expected. It may be helpful at this point to solicit the assistance of a trained outsider, someone who understands the cultural model and can assist with continued exploration of assumptions. This outsider need not be a consultant, but should be familiar with the cultural model and able to act in a provocative manner so as to continue to uncover assumptions. Once you have developed an understanding of the assumptions that drive your organization, you can begin using them to shape, maintain, and change your organization's culture.

Step 3: Shape, maintain, and change culture.

Opportunities to influence, reinforce, or alter an organization's culture present themselves most frequently when problems or organizational challenges are faced. The numerous investigations into the scandals surrounding charges of pedophilia at Penn State University are undoubtedly going to reveal a culture that was inconsistent with the values of the university (one of which is the very publicly and oft-stated, "Success with Honor"). Organizations with values statements that are noble are often caught off guard and surprised when things happen like what's happened at Penn State, yet when they

dig deeper and uncover the real, underlying reasons why it happened, their reaction is, *"We should have seen this coming. The signals were right in front of our faces."*

Leaders, real leaders, must have the moral courage to recognize these events for what they are: indications of the cultural core of the organization. And then, that same moral courage must be mustered to change the assumptions that led to the breakdown, the disconnect, between what should be and what *is*. There should not be actions without consequences, both positive (for desired and wanted actions) and negative (for undesired and unwanted actions). I think I'm one of the few writers in the field of leadership who writes about this. Most only emphasize the encouraging role of the leader but there are times (though they should occur relatively infrequently) when leaders have to make tough decisions that result in sanctions, fines, and terminations.