

Transformational Leadership in the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century: Understanding the Culture  
of Your Organization

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*Culture does not change because we desire to change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed; the culture reflects the realities of people working together every day.*

-Francis Hesselbein, Former CEO of Girl Scouts of the USA

*Maintaining an effective culture is so important that it, in fact, trumps even strategy.*

-Howard Stevenson, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University

Leadership and organizations are linked together by culture. An organizations culture is predominately developed by its leaders, while culture can also profoundly affect the development of leadership, negatively or positively, once it is formed. Leaders, are ultimately responsible for the cultural dynamics within organizations, and should they become toxic or dysfunctional, it is the leaders moral or ethical responsibility to implement organizational change, to foster new growth, increased production through establishing a green or inspiring organizational culture. Through secondary sources and observation, this paper articulates an understanding of the culture of this writer's work organization by first defining culture, then understanding the potency of organizational culture, and its effects both positively and negatively on both the leaders and followers. However, "organizational culture is rooted in history, collectively held, and complex enough to resist attempts at direct manipulation" (Gustafson, Pomirleanu and John-Mariadoss, 2018, p.144), for change.

**Transformational Leadership in the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century: Understanding the Culture of Your Organization**

*If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development.*

-Aristotle, Greek Philosopher and Scientist

*“I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn’t just one aspect of the game, it is the game. In the end, an organization is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value.*

-Louis Gerstner, IBM

## **Introduction**

Every organizational culture differs, as organizations and their sphere of influence differs. Since the inception of time, cultures have been evident, wherever human kind have participated; in families, on the school playground, and college campuses; from organized crime groups, to for-profit, and non-profit organizations, alike. During the beginning of civilization, “leaders and followers were influenced through social patterns” (Foster, 2016, p.15) that became the norm for their society. Cultures evolved, as systems and structures in organizations evolved, and as scholars continuously adapted theoretical models to explain the processes of systems, of leadership and organizations. From the evolution of the “Caste Systems in 1500 B.C. and monarchies to the Great Man Theory” (Foster, 2016, p.15), to the leadership approaches of today, the culture varies from one organization to another, as it does from one sphere of society to another.

## **Definition of Culture**

According to Anderson & Anderson (2010), “Culture is to an organization as mindset is to an individual. Culture is the way of being of the organization; its character or personality. Culture infuses how work gets done and how the organization behaves in relation to its customers” (pp. 184-185). A more vivid definition is:

Culture is an invisible force made up of beliefs and behaviors that operate “beneath the surface” and impacts how individuals unite, respond and move forward (or backward)

behind a common purpose. Such shared beliefs and values provide unspoken boundaries that affect nearly every aspect of business; including how employees (and managers) dress, perform their jobs, make decisions, take initiative, and interact with each other, customers and the community at large. (Marco, 2017)

Johnson (2018) defines culture as “the total way of life of a people, composed of their learned and shared behavior patterns, values, norms, and material objectives” (p. 377). Chand (1984) concurs, but explains that “culture determines the receptivity of staff and volunteers to new ideas, unleashes or dampens creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, and creates a sense of pride or deep discouragement about working or being involved there, ultimately shaping morale, teamwork, effectiveness, and outcomes” (p.11).

Because “culture is the most powerful factor in any organization, trumping vision and strategy” (Chand, 1984, pp. 10-11) at every turn, a negative culture will dictate the course or direction of an organization, despite and in spite of the vision or strategy, never allowing the full potential of productivity and greatness to be achieved. Schein (1985) concurs, “organizational culture is one of the most critical factors that influences the organization’s response to its external environment, therefore survival, growth, and adaptation in their environment and internal integration that permits daily functioning and the ability to adapt” (Dahner, 2016, p.1), are major concerns that an organization and its culture must remain cognizant of.

### **History of Organizational Culture**

Tracing back to the late “nineteenth century, organizational culture was rooted in the field of anthropology.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified 164 different definitions of culture with two perspectives: the *functionalist tradition* that focuses on the group, the organization, or the

society as a whole, and considers how the practices, beliefs and values embedded in that unit, function to maintain social control. The *semiotic tradition*; language, symbols, and rituals are the principle artifacts by which the native's point of view is described.

(Dahner, 2016, p.2)

Ouchi and Wilkins (1985) found that during the 1950s and 1960s, organizational sociologists sought to explore the informal relationships that regulate organizational life. However, Weber's (1968) ideas of bureaucratic administration were the focal point of organizational life. They sought to understand how informal relationships and beliefs modified the demands of the formal system or provided a means to cope with its pressures. (Dahner, 2016, p. 20)

"Hofstede (1998) developed a classification of organizational practices related to attitudes, values, and perception which provided other researchers tools for developing measurement instruments" (Gustafson, p.148).

In all its complexity, other organizational culture researchers developed perspectives, in their attempt to develop frameworks of important dimensions of organizational culture within the sociological foundation.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined two main factors that determine the type of culture: the risk level and the speed of feedback. Handy (1984) developed a model of four types of cultures, based on the source of power. By integrating the concept of organizational culture with marketing function, Arnold and Capella (1985) propose another two-dimensional matrix, based on the strength of culture (strong/weak) and direction of its focus (open/closed). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) differentiate two other cultural dimensions – person/task-oriented and centralized/decentralized structure.

Another two-dimensional model, derived from the group dynamics, was presented by Goffee and Jones (1996), suggesting a combination between sociability and solidarity in organizations. (Stanislavov, & Ivanov, 2014, p.23)

Schien (1992) defines three sources from which organizational culture stems:

1. The values, beliefs and assumptions of the founders.
2. The knowledge acquired during the development of an organization.
3. The values, beliefs and assumptions brought in by new leaders and members, with which the culture exist on three cognitive levels, resembling an iceberg.

“Barnard (1938) emphasized the overwhelming ambiguity of organizational life and suggested that it is the role of the executive to provide the overarching point of view that brings meaning and order to corporate life” (Dahner, 2016, p. 20). “The founder of a company socializes the organizational members, enabling the founder’s values to be disseminated throughout the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2009). According Schein (1996), the founder’s personality is a fundamental component of the organizational culture” (Park & Kang, 2014, p.212).

### **Leadership**

*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.*

-Aristotle, Greek Philosopher and Scientist

The term leadership is loosely defined, which leads to many different meanings of leadership as there are styles, but according to Northouse (2015), “leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p.3).

Durbin (1997), defines leadership as:

1. Leadership is an act that causes others to act or respond in a shared direction.
2. Leadership is the art of influencing people by persuasion or examples to follow a course of action.
3. Leadership is the key dynamic force that motivates and coordinates the organization in the accomplishment of its objectives. (Noriega & Drew, 2013, p.36)

It is imperative that leaders are self aware and know how to manage themselves and the process of leadership. Leaders choose how they want to influence others, ethically or unethically, however, without followers, there is no leadership. Therefore, it is the follower's context of understanding leadership that determines and contributes to the social construction, climate and culture of an organization. However, leadership is antecedent to culture, while culture also impacts leadership. According to Simosi and Xenikou (2010), "transformational leadership and transactional contingent reward were more salient predictors of culture than culture was of leadership" (p.1603).

As leaders, it is not only imperative that we are competent, but ethical responsible in our conduct, to achieve effective, long-term success and productivity. In casting light as an ethical leader, the toxic, and exploitive manipulations demonstrated by unethical behaviors, to fulfill personal and selfish desires, at the expense of their organizations and their followers are exposed, allowing for ethical, inspirational and transformational cultures to prevail. Toor & Ofori (2009) concurs, stating that "ethical leadership is more likely to engender leader effectiveness, willingness of employees to put in extra effort, and satisfaction of employees with the leader" (p. 543), indicative of a positive, inspiring culture.

According Aristotle, Leadership is more than a skill, more than the knowledge of theories, and more than analytical faculties. It is the ability to act purposively and ethically as the situation requires on the basis of the knowledge of universals, experience, perception, and intuition. It is about understanding the world in a richer and broader sense, neither with cold objectivity nor solipsistic subjectivity. (Toor et al., 2009, p.534)

### **Types of Cultures**

As was discussed earlier, culture trumps vision and strategy at every turn, because culture is focused around people, “who are the most valuable asset in any organization” (Chand, 1984, p. 12). When cultures are strong, and trusting, respectful and encouraging, people will go above the call of duty to support each other, their employers and the organizations as a whole, to work towards a common goal and to excel beyond measure.

With culture existing as the very fiber of the organizations existence, it is not something that is usually thought about, spoken of, or even noticed until negative events arise and experienced, or when new a follower joins the team and see the culture for what it is, secondary to the lack of habitualization.

Change of negative cultures first begins with leaders facing the reality of the problems that lie dormant in their organizations. Though leaders may appear oblivious to challenges and crisis that storm through their organizations, their followers are well aware of the dynamics that are brewing, and can clearly articulate all that they know, think, see and feel, about the organization and leadership. The change of culture is never an easy or quick process, but it is possible, when both leaders and followers take intentional steps to becoming change agents.

## Culture Killers

### Stagnant Cultures

- Followers are not valued or respected as people, but a means for production.
- Followers do not trust or respect their leaders, but tolerates them.
- Complaining becomes the mainstay of the staff, while they become clock watchers and check cashers only. They become lethargic, doing just enough of work to get by.
- Leadership tries anything from anger, threats, rewards, ignoring to micromanaging to increase production and enthusiasm, but nothing works.

### Discouraging Cultures

- Focus is on the leaders, their power and prestige.
- People spend time trying to survive the power struggles, protecting themselves from hurt and analyzing the pathology of their leaders.
- As success declines, leaders become authoritarian and threatening, demanding compliance and loyalty. They defy anyone who disagrees with them or offers another opinion.
- The leadership team attempts to fix the problems but with wrong analysis and solutions. They blame an incompetent and unmotivated staff for the issues at hand, rather than looking into the proverbial mirror.
- When a new vision is communicated, the followers are not interested, for lack of trust. They feel we have done this before, nothing ever changes.

### Toxic Cultures

- Leaders create a “closed system” so any advice and creative ideas from the outside are suspect from the start.
- Leaders believe they own their staff. The rights and dignity of individuals are surrendered to the powerful, elite leaders.
- Fear becomes the dominating motivational factor.
- Turf battles are accepted sport of the organization, and open warfare becomes normal.

- Leaders delegate responsibility but fail to give authority to people to fulfil their roles.
- Creativity and risk taking have vanished. Pathology is rewarded, health is punished.
- Ethical, financial, or sexual lapses are likely to occur.

### **Accepting Cultures**

- The atmosphere is positive but with a few topics that are taboo or incompetent leaders who have stayed too long.
- Generally, staff are supportive and trusting of one another, communication is their strength.
- People love and are motivated to do their best when they have a blend of clear goals and strong relationships.
- Leaders invest in developing their people and the culture, but could be more assertive in tackling problems in the culture.
- With strong reputations, they attract numerous application, but when new hires are placed under incompetent leadership, disappointment sets in.

### **Inspiring Cultures**

Inspiring organizations are just that, inspiring. They encourage, trust, and reward people to be creative, innovative, working together to produce the unthinkable, yet astonishing results.

- Leaders give clear direction, the value each person in a decentralized, open system.
- Leaders cultivate trust and respect.
- Expectations are high but realistic.
- Creativity is rewarded, failure is used as a stepping stone. Goals are high, people are trained, resources are provided which enables a continued process of learning, which leads to success.
- Communication is fluid. It flows up and down, which alleviates turf battles.
- Leaders regularly celebrate success through out the organization, and they celebrate lose when one leaves and find success elsewhere.

- These organizations are job magnets, picking from the best and brightest. (Chand, 1984, pp. 29-46)

### Seven keys to Culture

It takes a leader, through consistent self development, which leads to self- awareness to courageously look in the mirror, to see the nature of self and of his organizational culture, to identify and address the behaviors or attitudes that contributes to the culture for which one lies.

The seven keys to culture are:

1. **Control-** People function most effectively if they are given control (authority) with responsibility. However, that control should not be disseminated to one person only, as there needs to a free flow of information and ready access to resources.
2. **Understanding-** Each person must be able to clearly articulate the vision, both specifically and globally, their role, the gifts and contributions of the team members and the way the team functions.
3. **Leadership-** Healthy teams are pipelines for leadership development. The actively seek to discover leadership potential, develop resources to equip and inspire leaders and carefully deploy them in roles that inflame their hearts, challenge them to excel, and propel the organization to new heights.
4. **Trust-** Mutual trust among team members is the glue that makes everything good possible. Trust grows in an environment that is HOT: honest, open and transparent, with a foundation of integrity and consistency.
5. **Unafraid-** Courage, support, and innovation go hand in hand in inspiring cultures. Great leaders welcome dissenting opinions, as long as they are offered in good will and with an eye toward a solution.
6. **Responsive-** Develop a consistent process of collaboration, with communication lines that are wide open. The larger the organization grows, the greater the amount of energy that needs to be invested in being responsive to people inside and outside the team.
7. **Execution-** Many meetings are held, with decision being made, but never implemented.

Therefore, decisions should be articulated and delegated clearly, with target goals, deadlines, access to resources and a budget in place, to get the job accomplished in a timely manner.

(Chand, 1984, pp.47-64)

### **How Vocabulary Defines My Work Organization's Culture**

*Dispirited, unmotivated, unappreciated workers cannot compete in a highly competitive world.*  
-Francis Hesselbein, Former CEO of Girl Scouts of USA

When growing up, children teased each other, while parents tried to comfort their children by saying, "sticks and stones may hurt my bones but names never hurt." How many of us recognize that names do hurt, they have the potential to damage our psyches and shape our choices which impact our lives for years. Likewise, in organizations, leaders impact followers by their words and actions, or by their lack there of. Often times it is not always what is said but they tone and context in words are spoken, which creates an entirely different meaning, thus defines our culture.

Upon joining this writers work organization, on the first day of employment, this writer was asked, "What do you think about the systems in place? What do you think needs to be changed? Taken back, I stated I needed more time, ask me in about four months, and I will be able answer such questions. In retrospect, the leader asked rhetorical questions, for he was not looking for honest answers, based on the culture that has been revealed in the first month of employment.

This writer will divide her work organization into three departments, (1) the front office staff, (2) the back office or clinical staff (dental hygienist and assistants), and (3) the owner/manager, and his associate or partner, both of whom are dentist and active clinical practitioners.

### **The Front Office**

Though front office staff are considered a team, they work with an individualistic mindset. Each person has their own way of doing the same procedures such as checking in patients in, confirming insurance, scheduling appointments, confirming patients, and every other conceivable front office procedure. When assigned to one procedure, they will not venture from their role to help out another person on the team. When questioned, their answer is the same, Dr. M. told me do it this way, he told me to perform these duties today. When mistakes are made, excuses or blame is the order of the day.

When new systems and front office managers are put in place, the natives resist change and sabotage the new hires, by telling the owner they do not like them or need them, and he follows the natives lead. The new hires leave, because though they have been given a responsibility, they have no real authority to execute change.

When patients complain about the unprofessionalism of the front desk, their rudeness and long wait times (45min to 75min), the blame is always put on the patient. In addition, there is no communication, between departments, especially hygiene. Their only concern is schedule as many patients, with no rhyme or reason. With no official leader, and no one compelled to step into the leadership role, the front office staff is complacent, with the attitude that this is the way we have always done things, therefore we will continue to function in such a manner despite of complaints from patients and other staff members,

### **The Back Office (Dental Hygienist and Assistants)**

There are three hygienists, two have been employed for more fifteen years. This writer is

the most recent hire, now approaching seven months. Upon my hiring, both hygienist embraced my presence, but they were cautiously optimistic as they protected their turf. One hygienist would steal my patients, while the other would reluctantly share some of hers, with conditions.

Again, though we are a team of hygienist, a culture of distrust runs deep. Upon employment, this writer quickly realized the hygienists had no communication with each other. To bridge the gap, this writer would dialogue with them both, to gain a deeper understanding of organizations culture. They would reluctantly reveal information on some things, while other topics were taboo. Now that this writer's patient load has increased, there is no communication amongst us as a team. The only words spoken is good morning and thank you, polite commonalities, which is quite sad.

The leader pits the hygienist against each other by favoring one over the other because she produces more money for him. However, the other hygienist has his ear and stated that if "things don't go her way, then no one will have their way (March, 2018). After hearing this and the angry manner in which it was delivered, this writer realized the resentment, anger, lethargy, and turf wars that exist are real. Unethical clinical practices are being exposed, yet continuously overlooked, since this writer's hiring.

The hygiene department has had one meeting with the leaders, at which time this writer was the only one to voice concerns that were already discussed. The leader abruptly ended the meeting, with no solutions with scheduling patients, expediting patients to the back office, ethical clinical practice standards, production goals and bonus incentive programs. The other two hygienist appeared fearful of speaking out, having nothing to say. The leaders only concern was that his flow of money (production) was not being interrupted by anyone or anything.

## **The Leaders**

The associate dentist, is very easy to talk too, receptive to concerns, and listens attentively. However, when speaking to him about changing the systems in place, his authority is limited. He cautiously speaks to the owner, but refrains from assertively pressing issues and change implementation with the owner.

As for the owner, everything is about production; money, money and more money, and his elite position of control. He dictates how to book patients. On any given day, with each hygienist having two chairs, 14-16 patents can be scheduled for each hygienist, which impedes on the standard of clinical treatment that can be provided. Also, because of the repetitive motion of one's hand in dentistry, injuries can occur, especially when the appropriate tools are not provided and clinical chairs are broken.

From personal experience, the leader has failed to deliver on promises such as wages, monthly bonus system, vacation. He minimizes an individual value to production, respecting money over people. He speaks when he feels like it, but is quick to point out mistakes as he walks by, but never encourages or celebrates an individual or the team as a whole.

Communication lines are closed, therefore, dissenting opinions and optimal solutions are not welcomed. On one occasion, during a monthly meeting, where no offers their opinion, I was put on the spot by the leader about a monthly goal, which was never discussed or explained to this writer as a new hire. When it was brought to his attention, that this was never explained, in an irate voice he lied, stating that it was explained. Therefore, this writer's response was, no matter how many people are scheduled on my book, I will not compromise my standard of clinical practice. I will not do what, so-and- so does. He got angry, the room became silent, as if it was

taboo to speak the truth. Since then, he barely speaks or looks at me. When he does say anything, it is to pick apart something he thinks this writer falls short on.

Needless to say, the tension in the atmosphere is thick, staff constantly complain amongst themselves about leadership. They have become resentful and lethargy secondary to the toxicity of controlling behaviors, lack of open communication; unethical behaviors and financial immorality are practiced against themselves, and patients alike. Some staff fear leaving, as they have become habitualized to the dysfunctional toxic culture, while the truly good staff are consistently looking for employment elsewhere. Trust and respect has been completely eroded away, creativity and innovation is non existent, for “pathology is rewarded, and health is punished” (Chand, 1984, p. 38) or ignored.

### **Changing, Redefining and Reinventing Culture**

Changing and pursuing a healthy and inspiring organizational culture begins with each individual in the organization, especially the leader. However, as followers, we can become effective change agents, by first accepting our limitations and what we can control, by being “transparent, positive, honest with warmth and humor, and a courageous willingness to reflect reality” (Chand, 1984, p. 96); by consistently taking responsibility for all of one’s behaviors, while respectfully communicating with leaders and peers to establish trust.

When redefining a culture through change, resistance and conflict are inevitable, as some of the old systems, ways of existing, that is, the old culture will be demolished.

Change comes with grace. Leaders need to understand what’s at stake in the hearts of those who treasure the past. They may not be thrilled to change vehicles! We can’t

improve anything without changing it. The conundrum of leadership is this: people want improvement, but they resist change. Our task is helping them learn to embrace change.

(Chand, 2017, p. 111)

It is not only important to change negative cultures, but to reinvent optimal cultures to maintain relevancy as the “diversity, complexity and uncertainty of unpredictable environments” (Dotlich, Cairo, & Rhinesmith, 2009, p.6), continue to emerge.

### **Summary**

Successful transformation and breakthrough results require competent attention to three critical focus areas: content, people and process. All three areas must be integrated into one unified change strategy that moves your organization from where it is today to where it choose to be in the future, but leaders must first, correctly perceive the signals for change to accurately scope the change needed and the outcomes it needs to produce.

(Anderson et al., 2010, pp. 26, 31)

### **Conclusion**

Though “culture is the most powerful factor in an organization, culture is about people, the most valuable asset in the organization” (Chand, 1984, p.10-12). Therefore, investment in people should be a priority, that they can do and become the best that they can be, reaching the goals for which God have purposed them.

Additionally, as leaders become more self-aware, they realize that authenticity is attributed to you by others rather than being created by you. With authenticity being positively correlated to “sincerity, integrity and honesty, people need to see alignment between your beliefs and your head, heart, and guts. They want to see leaders with a strong reality orientation, who is

sensitive to the needs of others, and has the self-discipline and courage that turns vision and values into true authenticity” (Dotlich et al., 2009, p. 156), which is translated into an inspiring, ethical organizational culture, casting light, rather than the shadows of darkness.

As the dawning of a new day draws near and new life springs forth, “a leader must use their head to anticipate, understand, analyze, and respond to new strategic directions, their heart to see the world from the perspective of a diverse range of stakeholders, and their guts to make tough decisions based on clear ethical values (Dotlich et al., 2009, p.13), while forever learning and growing; expanding their capability and capacity to lead an organization into greatness.

Additionally, with an unwavering resolve, as a leader does all that needs to be done to lead their company to greatness, and with the right people intertwined in the midst of an inspiring organizational culture, the horizons are but a finger tip away; triggering long term growth and success, sustained greatness, with a succession plan for future generations.

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