

Organizational Culture Reflection

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We are completely surrounded by things that are visible, but that are constructed from things that are invisible. Much of the worldly matter we interact with daily owes its debt to atoms, oxygen, energy, magnetic and gravitational fields, momentum and gravity. Even speaking of ourselves, we are comprised, at base, of trillions of cells which cannot be seen by the naked eye, but which form the vehicles that we travel life through. And these vehicles that we travel in are fueled by emotions. Although also invisible, these passions dictate our daily directions and life courses for better or worse. There are many times where the most important components of a thing are not the visible ones. Such is the case with organizational culture. Organizations are often defined by visible things such as their products or services, their logos or symbols or even their customer and client experiences. But the invisible motor behind these visible results lie in the strengths and weaknesses of that organization's culture. And I am learning a lot about this.

Organizational culture means different things to different experts. In a general sense, it can be defined as the "values, underlying assumptions, expectations, and definitions that characterize organizations and their members." (Cameron and Quinn). The ingredients that create an organization's "feel" are contingent on both the organization itself and its members. Brief, Guzzo and Schneider (1996) interpret that "feel" as being the dichotomy of both culture and climate. They believe that the climate is the part that is most inferred by the members and centers around the two basic questions of how daily business is conducted at the organization as well as what goals are being pursued by the organization (Brief, Guzzo, and Schneider). This is cultivated largely through the procedures, practices and routines that are expected from members as well as observing which ones get supported or rewarded. These are the things that constitute what members believe and what they believe about what an organization values. It is these beliefs and values that then create an organization's culture according to Brief, Guzzo and Schneider.

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It is likely because these elements are all-consuming and so greatly factor into each aspect of an employee's experience that culture has been reductionistically summed up as "the way things are done around here" (Deal and Kennedy). Although it may be an organization's symbols or slogans that identify them to customers and clients and distinguish them from their competitors, organizational culture includes these artifacts while simultaneously transcending them. The culture finds its footprints in the thousands of elements that work their way into their daily climate. It is so pervasive that Edgar Schein, one of the foremost experts on organizational development and culture, likens it to "personality or character for an individual" noting that "once you've learned to be a certain kind of person, that is you in all aspects of your functioning and you don't want to be any differently, which is why culture is hard to change" (Kuppler).

When we truly understand the myriad components of climate as well as how the daily interactions among the members of an organization shape it, a better understanding can be gathered about what the central focus of an organization might be based on those beliefs and values. Iconic brands give us a glimpse of what their internal organizational culture might be from their external messaging. Apple, for instance, makes it clear that innovation is one of its core beliefs and values. Nike informs us through its slogan of "just do it" that a powerful resilience is at the core of its beliefs and values. Google makes it clear that information, and the collection and dissemination of it, is what is most important to them. But while the marketing that creates these images is a part of the culture, it only forms the artifacts, according to Schein.

Schein created a model of organizational culture that is trichotomous, consisting of three levels. Those levels are an organization's artifacts at the top, which is visible, its espoused values at the middle, which is less visible and its basic assumptions at the base, which is invisible in that members are largely not conscious of it (Burkus). This model creates a formula around culture.

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At the tip of the iceberg is where artifacts lie. The artifacts, according to Schein, constitute many of the visual elements that are commonly associated with that organization. Elements such as the company's building, interior design, dress code and logo find their home in this level. This level is visible in that much of it is physical and they provide a visual insight into how the organization wishes to be perceived by others. The next level of the pyramid is the espoused values. This is where the stated norms and values of the company form the framework of the organization. Things such as the website, brochures and reports find their home on this level. This level is less visible in that it is not always seen by the naked eye of an onlooker, but these values are firmly rooted in the members of the organization who serve there. At the base of the pyramid is the basic assumptions of the organizations. Here you find many of the norms that define the organization, such as what time the members work, how they work and what is expected of them daily. This level is one that Schein considers to be invisible in that it is not often noted, but followed, nonetheless. This is the level where culture's real power can be seen.

Changing organizational culture, then, can be very difficult because it is in the nuances of these basic assumptions, which correlate with the climate of the organization, that the culture stands. In order to change organizational culture, then, each member of the organization must be willing to change individually. True change cannot take place simply because a consultant or consulting firm was hired to create new technology or tool. Brannick and Fyock (2002) explain that in order for any new changes to cement, they have to blend into the existing organizational culture and elevate it from there. In this process, considerations about what define the current organizational culture center around the degree of hierarchy in the company, as well as the degree of urgency in which things are expected to be done. The people/task orientation as well as the functional orientations need to also be considered. Lastly, the organizational personality and

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the values also have to factor heavily into finding the right strategy to change an organization's culture (Brannick and Fyock). Learning from this, as well as the work of Schein and the article about climate and culture helps to create an understanding as to why some organizations that may create the same products or services vary so wildly. Culture really is a distinctive fingerprint and one that creates all the visible elements from those elements which are not as visible. In order to change culture, this fingerprint needs to be studied and strategized for carefully.

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